

## **TWILIGHT OF THE TOFFS: FALL OF A CASTE, RISE OF A MYTH**

**Carlos Sanchez Fernandez**

**M.A. by Research**

University of East Anglia - UEA

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing (LDC)

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**Dissertation ABSTRACT:**

This dissertation deals with the representation of the interwar upper classes (above all, the aristocracy) in the contemporary English novel. I have chosen three novels for my study: Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945).

My main critical perspective is a structuralist one, namely that of Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies* (1956). I show how, notwithstanding the period in which they were written, their aesthetic orientation, or their authors' personal stand concerning their society, the chosen novels, spanning six decades, can be analyzed by applying the same 'figures of myth', according to Barthes's terminology.

To facilitate a better understanding of this literature, I have also connected it with a common historical and ideological background, that of the interwar period. Moreover, as Barthes's ideological stand is a Marxist one, if heterodoxically so, I will be relating the novels to a number of Marxist concepts, such as hegemony, dominant and residual cultures, or false consciousness. Concepts from other fields of contemporary intellectual history, such as psychoanalysis, will also be featured for the same purpose. Finally, I have also given a prominent role to social history in my analysis.

My main conclusion will be that myth has superseded factual representation of the traditional landed aristocracy, turning it into a category that is still operative in the domain of fiction, informing the international reading public's views of British society and culture, even after the historical demise of that social class.

- GERALD: Harfords, Lord Illingworth?
- LORD ILLINGWORTH: That is my family name. You should study the Peerage, Gerald. It is the one book a young man about town should know thoroughly, and it is *the best thing in fiction the English have ever done*.

Oscar WILDE: *A Woman of no Importance*, iii<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of no Importance*, in *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, ed. by Peter Raby, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford English Drama Series (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1998; first publ. 1995), pp. 93-157 (p. 134, emphasis mine).

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- **ACR** Spurr, *'Anglo-Catholic in Religion': T.S. Eliot and Christianity*
- **Aton.** McEwan, *Atonement*
- **BF** Linehan, *British Fascism*
- **BR** Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*
- **BR60** Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, rev. edn, 1960
- **CH** Stannard (ed.), *Evelyn Waugh: The Critical Heritage*
- **CUP** Cambridge University Press
- **DAF** Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the English Aristocracy*
- **EKS** Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*
- **FII** *Film Index International*
- **HEART** *Holocaust Education and Archive Research Team*
- **JIM** Jameson, 'Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan'
- **JPM** Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Capitalism'
- **KI** Wong, *Kazuo Ishiguro*
- **KIRD** Wong, 'Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*'
- **LM&F** Louvel, Ménégaldo, and Fortin, 'An Interview with Ian McEwan'
- **MUP** Manchester University Press
- **MW'sC** Kermode, 'Mr Waugh's Cities'
- **Mythol.** Barthes, *Mythologies*
- **NATC** Leitch (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*
- **OD** Felluga, 'On Desire'
- **OSP** Felluga, 'On the Structure of the Psyche'



- <b>ODNB</b>	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
- <b>ORO</b>	<i>Oxford Reference Online</i>
- <b>OUP</b>	Oxford University Press
- <b>POH</b>	Blake, 'The Proverbs of Hell'
- <b>RD</b>	Ishiguro, <i>The Remains of the Day</i>
- <b>RFC</b>	Cannadine, <i>The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain</i>
- <b>RPL</b>	Kristeva, <i>Revolution in Poetic Language</i>
- <b>SEP</b>	<i>The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i>

## INTRODUCTION

A box-office hit in 2007-2008, the film *Atonement*, directed by Joe Wright after a screenplay based on the novel by Ian McEwan, may be considered the latest major title in the British upper-class, period film.<sup>2</sup> This cinematic genre and its impact on the public, known by some as the *Ivory Merchant syndrome*, had as its initiator the Oscar-awarded *Chariots of Fire*, released in 1981.<sup>3</sup> That very same year, British audiences could enjoy the Granada TV production of *Brideshead Revisited*, an adaptation of the novel by Evelyn Waugh, now a legend (Childs, 'Heritage', 212).<sup>4</sup> Since then, this kind of cinema and TV series has captured the imagination of massive audiences the world over, inevitably attracted by a bygone world of caste and privilege: the world of the English ruling classes of the late Victorian, Edwardian, Georgian and inter-war periods.

Starting to recover from the troubled 1970s, the British public seems to have developed a fascination, partly out of nostalgia, partly out of sensationalist allure for this still relatively recent, but by then seemingly defunct world of the traditional ruling upper classes, the *toffs*. Overseas, especially in America, the young, democratic society without an aristocracy proper, a strong demand has made it possible for these fictional accounts of the *toff* world to develop into a characteristic genre with its own distinctive iconography and discourse.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Childs, 'The English Heritage Industry and Other Trends in the Novel at the Millennium', in *A Companion to the British and Irish Novel 1945-2000*, ed. by Brian W. Shaffer, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 210-24 (pp. 211-12).

*Atonement*. Dir. Joe Wright. Universal. 2007, in *FII* <[http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res\\_ver=0.2&res\\_id=xri:fii&rft\\_id=xri:fii:film:00821062](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:fii&rft_id=xri:fii:film:00821062)> [accessed 28 June 2012]

<sup>3</sup> Susie O'Brien, 'Serving a New World Order: Postcolonial Politics in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 42.4 (1996), 787-806 (p. 787).

*Chariots of Fire*. Dir. Hugh Hudson. Enigma Productions, 20th-Century Fox, Allied Stars. 1981, in *FII* <[http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res\\_ver=0.2&res\\_id=xri:fii&rft\\_id=xri:fii:film:00060706](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:fii&rft_id=xri:fii:film:00060706)> [accessed 29 May 2012]

<sup>4</sup> *Brideshead Revisited*. Dir. Charles Sturridge. Granada TV. 1981.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Martin Stannard, 'Waugh, Evelyn Arthur St John (1903-1966)', in *ODNB*, ed. by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004), online edn by Lawrence Goldman, May 2011 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36788>> [accessed 28 May 2012] [para. 23 of 39] Childs, 'Heritage', p. 212.

The reasons for this fascination, both in the UK and abroad, might be put down to the glamour of refined photography, costumes and atmosphere, with gorgeous country and stately houses galore, immaculate lawns, dinner jackets and gleaming white frocks, while having tea and scones in a rose garden or roast beef and port in a neo-Gothic dining hall. Beyond these formal attractions, there beats the heart of a legendary creature, the English gentleman, the typical specimen of a race of empire-builders, athletes, soldiers and sometimes even aesthetes. A caste of morally superior men, brought up in a spirit of Christian humanism, their task is to manage and rule the greater part of the Earth's surface under the Union Jack; sometimes, however, it is also to oppose this righteous programme by secretly living homosocial desire or homosexual love in an exclusive, all-male world of public school, Oxbridge college, London club and officers' mess. In any case, this is a world of long-running traditions, secret codes and odd habits now become one of post-imperial Britain's few solid sources of prestige, ideological influence and even revenue through the culture industry.

### *A Modern Mythology*

Running strong for thirty years, this branch of the culture industry has given birth to a whole corpus of mythology. By *mythology*, I am referring to what Roland Barthes describes in his *Mythologies* as a second-order semiological system, whereby what he calls *form*, a sign whose nature is that of an *image* and whose structure consists of its own signifier (for example, a stately house in the English countryside or sitting down to dinner after Latin prayers in a 15<sup>th</sup> century Oxford dining hall) and signified (e.g., belonging to a certain social, academic and or economic caste or class), becomes in turn the signifier for a second signified, both ultimately constituting a second sign, *myth* proper, a mode of signification.<sup>6</sup>

What lies behind the transfer from form to signification is a certain motivation, a *concept*, both historical and intentional. This conceptual intention defines myth, and is revealed by its potential repetition through almost an infinity of possible forms or

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<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972), pp. 111-15, 107 (emphasis mine).

embodiments, which allows recognition and interpretation through *reading* or *deciphering*. This interpretation is all the more necessary since in myth the concept always distorts and alienates the meaning, making what is historical and situational pass for something natural, pre-ordained, necessary, ineluctable, unchangeable (*Mythol.*, 116-17, 113, 121, 128, emphasis mine).

Thus, in the mythology of the modern English upper classes, the main signified would be the following: the English upper classes are a special human category, adapted and evolved to be the most natural and humanely desirable group of military, political and economic rulers that the world has ever known or will ever know.<sup>7</sup> The literary critic should therefore be alert to recognize this discursive operation, understanding the distortion, unmasking the myth, denouncing it as an imposture, making a stand against its *expansive ambiguity* (*Mythol.*, 123, 127, emphasis mine).

The fact that Barthes's book was first published in 1957, under the sign of then ragingly fashionable Structuralism and from a certain left-wing perspective, typical of the continental intelligentsia of the time, cannot detract from its value as an insightful, thought-provoking analysis of many half-hidden meanings that still inadvertently pass for flesh-and-bone realities in everyday life. Not in vain, myth's ultimate aim and essential function is the *naturalization* of the concept it signifies, the pretension of transcending itself into a factual system. The fact that, in our little *toff* domain, this is achieved through the wrapping of ideas in the most polished and glamorous forms, being experienced as *innocent speech* (in our case, for instance, by the evocation of languidly decadent, homoerotic idylls experienced by the age-old stones of transplanted Italian baroque fountains), only enhances myth's power to reach and corrupt anything (130, 132-33, emphasis mine).

From our historical, post-modern vantage point, substituting wealthy, cultured, upper-class for oppressors, and lower-class, unaware and uneducated for oppressed, we could assert what Barthes, from a Marxist point of view, puts this way: the oppressors' speech is 'plenary, intransitive, gestural, theatrical'; that of the oppressed

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<sup>7</sup> For the rule of the landed upper classes as a part of 'the *natural order of things*', see David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), p. 15 (emphasis mine).

can only be 'poor, monotonous, immediate'. If we substitute 'English upper classes' for 'bourgeoisie' (the privileged social agent of historical change in modern France and Barthes's main social target in his analysis of myth), we can also share his warning against the dangers of mythical glamour: we are dealing with a social formation that is 'constantly absorbing into its ideology a whole section of humanity which does not have its basic status and cannot live up to it, except *in imagination*' (148, 150, 140, emphasis mine). Mythology can be the opiate of the people in a similar way to religion.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly, myth is stronger than rational explanation and much likelier to develop into a full-blown iconic, aesthetic system whose potentialities reach beyond its original social function: ideological control of the many by the few (*Mythol.*, 128-29). Thus understood, the signifying power of the *toff* myth has projected well beyond its historical moment, to the point of surviving the original social formation of which it was a predicate well into our times. Literature has been instrumental in this.

### ***Nature Imitating Art***

An explanation for this might be that the signifying processes unchained by a mythical corpus as the one analyzed here, as long as distributed and supported by formal, aesthetic institutions of great social and ideological significance such as literature and cinema, can be revived in every single instance of reading or viewing, deepening time's proper dimensions as a limiting coordinate of human experience. Hence, we can still let ourselves be drawn into the ideological and discursive universe of, for instance, a bunch of young, upper-class athletes training for the 1924 Olympic Games, jogging along an English beach, the Union Jack on their immaculate white shirts, sons of Oxbridge and Empire. It does not matter if we know that this is just a representational illusion or if we realize the anachronistic character of the synthesizer soundtrack emotionally underlining the elitist values and ideals of

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Wolff, 'Karl Marx', in *SEP*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, online edn, Summer 2011 <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/marx/>> [accessed 7 January 2011] [para. 8 of 48]

these young men. Thus, we pass from athletics to essential Englishness through Parry's musical rendering of Blake's *Jerusalem* as appropriated by the *toff* establishment.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, what we have to face in cases like this is quite simply that, as Barthes puts it, a social formation, as an ideological fact, can obliterate its name in passing 'from reality to representation, from economic man to *mental* man', at no risk at all. In his words, 'everything in everyday life is dependent on the representation' that the upper classes (or any other influential, socially distinct group) 'have and make us have of the relations between man and the world.' (*Mythol.*, 137-39, emphasis mine). Literature has thus eventually managed to invert the terms of the equation whereby it purports to reproduce reality by mimesis, according to an age-old theoretical tradition. Snugly installed in the literary canon, regardless of the recent date of some of its exponents, *toff* literature has been able to re-create history, making life adapt to literature rather than the other way round. Literature has transformed the reality of a bygone world, turning it into an *image* of the world, history transformed into an unchangeable nature, a world of essences and types (140-41, 156).<sup>10</sup> Stately houses, whether or not under the aegis of the National Trust, are all part of a metaphysical realm of quintessential Englishness as defined by aristocratic ideals and rituals. A whole worldview is thus contained and conveyed by this literature and subtly smuggled into the minds of several generations of readers and viewers.

### ***The Inter-War Period: Nostalgia, Suspicion, Doom, Spectacle***

Attitudes towards this social group vary among the authors whose work has provided the quarry for the media monuments erected in the past thirty years. Basically, with a different proportion of either component, they range between nostalgia and even veneration on the one hand, and suspicion, criticism or downright biting satire on the other. In this study, the first trend will be exemplified by Evelyn Waugh's

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<sup>9</sup> *Chariots of Fire* would be an outstanding example of the corrupting powers of myth, whereby history, either travestied or ignored, is turned into 'idealization or archetype' in favour of rather dubious ideological interests: Ed Carter, 'Chariots of Fire: Traditional Values/False History', *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 28 (1983), 14-17 [para. 26 of 49]

<sup>10</sup> Thus, this literature would signify 'no longer that which is handed down from the past, but that which is superimposed on the past by a present generation.' (Childs, 'Heritage', p. 212)

*Brideshead Revisited*, an elegy to a lost world of aristocratic innocence, corrupted by that other mythological and ideological monster: progress.<sup>11</sup> The second tendency will be represented by Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*.<sup>12</sup> Both major attitudes are evidently interconnected, however, and present in all three novels: Waugh the satirist is often recognizable, if submerged, in Waugh the apologist, while Ishiguro's novel is also full of a certain uneasy nostalgia for a time that, hailing from Japan, he could never have known first-hand.

It is highly significant that many of the titles in this ruling-class literary subgenre are set in the period between both World Wars. This time exudes the glamour of doom, the splendour and the decadence of a set of changing values and attitudes, as well as forebodings of a cataclysmic confrontation to end many western social institutions and structures. This *Götterdämmerung* atmosphere has probably made it possible to take advantage of a certain sensationalism, whereby readers and cinema audiences have grown more and more prone to accept all sorts of clichés (e.g., the philo-Nazi nobleman, or the homosexual Oxbridge undergraduate). Larger-than-life scenes, like those depicting warfare (e.g., the Dunkirk evacuation in McEwan's *Atonement*), have also been prominent, which may even have led to, according to some opinions, dishonest or undignified literary practices (yet again McEwan, who has been charged with plagiarism in *Atonement*).<sup>13</sup> The road of excess may not necessarily lead to the palace of wisdom in some cases, after all; rather, it might lead on occasion to a new kind of (cheap, pastiche) epic narrative tradition with a penchant for the 'pictorially indulgent'.<sup>14</sup> In fact, this is a common postmodern, narcissistic narrative trait that, beyond much theoretically praised intertextuality, unashamedly borrows from archival research and popular fiction to build vivid episodes of virtual reality.

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<sup>11</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945).

<sup>12</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989); Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, Future Classics (London: Vintage, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> See below, p. 33, n. 56; p. 37, n. 61.

<sup>14</sup> See Brian McFarlane, 'The English Novel and the Rise of Film and Video: Adaptation and British Cinema', in Shaffer, *Companion*, pp. 194-209 (p. 208).

'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom': William Blake, 'The Proverbs of Hell', in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *Selected Poetry*, ed. by Michael Mason, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1998; first publ. 1996), pp. 76-80 (p. 76).

For pastiche, see below, pp. 41-45.

More important than this sensationalist and affectedly *grand* spectacle, therefore, is the fact that the inter-war period genre presents to the audiences of today a country that no longer exists, Britain before the People's War, the unexpected Labour landslide of 1945 and their modest experiment in socialism. This was the country that, despite serious social and economic tensions and military inferiority, faced Hitler when the rest of Europe had bent their knees before him; it was the same society, however, whose ruling classes, in a not insignificant proportion, felt an irresistible attraction for some forms of fascism, among other undesirable reactions to the tough challenges of the troubled 1930s.

### *Upstairs, Downstairs*

These narratives, whose object is these unstable years between two overwhelming catastrophes, also open up a perspective only slightly exploited by fiction until then, at least to the point of giving it a protagonist role; namely the servants', an especially invisible and subjected section of the working class. In this way the butler, the Other of the ruling gentleman, a gentleman's gentleman, has come to us as another powerful myth, an alternative embodiment of essential Englishness whose main concerns are not Empire, Civilization, King and Country or Profit, but rather to support the ruling classes and to try to survive emotionally and preserve a dignified, human identity while polishing silverware or emptying chamber pots. Of course, some especially intense figures emerge, like Ishiguro's Stevens, the ultimate butlering *virtuoso*. His peculiar professional and vital aims will provide us with a privileged standpoint from which to observe how a true Englishman, a gentleman, a nobleman and a Don Quixote of fair play, Lord Darlington, turns his ancestral home and paradigmatic stately house into a platform for the secretly inevitable *Blitz*: Eton, Oxbridge and the One-Thousand-Year Reich making strange bedfellows under the sign of political conservatism, social snobbery and cultural prejudice.

For the aforesaid reasons, this historical period and its literary representations and recreations are more and more relevantly present in our time. Gone as the Empire is, and metamorphosed under the preponderance of professionalism, finance and technology in our competitive and materialistic world, the mythologization of this



social group makes them more alive than ever in the collective imagination of the entire world: driving Rolls Royces and Hispano-Suizas, playing croquet after tea, or dressing in gorgeous evening gowns for cocktails after dinner by some baroque fountain in a nobleman's parkland. Borrowing from film critic Roger Ebert's review of the cinematic version of *Atonement*, this literature appears to be 'a demonstration of the theory that the pinnacle of human happiness was reached by life in an English country house between the wars.'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Roger Ebert, 'Atonement', in *Rogerebert.com: Movie Reviews*  
<<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071206/REVIEWS/712060301>>  
[accessed 06 December 2011] [para. 2 of 9]

## Chapter 1

### Ian McEwan's *ATONEMENT*

The most recently published (and adapted) among the three novels studied in this essay, *Atonement* is probably the most widely known by the public (if above all because of its highly successful film adaptation). *Atonement* reworks certain themes and motifs already present in previous instances of the inter-war *toff* subgenre. In fact, despite huge sales, the novel must certainly have remained one for the aware minority. This is a complex narrative, a self-conscious text where a personal drama of betrayal, guilt and implacable destiny is less central than formal, strictly literary concerns, commanded by its intricate structure. Yet, according to the author and a number of critics, there is a moral concern pervading the entire work; in my opinion, this is arguable. I will proceed by looking at the work's formal features first, then study its ethical subtext, which will link to the imprint that a certain social mythology has left in it. In this last respect, we ought to think of McEwan as exemplifying an attitude of suspicion towards traditional narratives of British social organization.

#### ***Structure: Form and Ethics.***

The formal complexity of *Atonement* is apparent in its tripartite structure and mixing of genres: first, a country-house story, in which a certain event determines the immediate narrative future through a scene of 'failure or pathetic achievement', namely the narrator, Briony Tallis's mistaken assumptions about a sex scene she is a witness to, while a thirteen-year-old, between her elder sister Cecilia (Cee) and her lover, Robbie Turner, and a subsequent rape, shaping the narrative perspective for the rest of the novel. This is followed by a war memoir in two parts, where the point of view shifts from that of a BEF retreating soldier (Robbie) on the eve of the Dunkirk evacuation, to that of Briony as a young training nurse; these are 'episodes of carelessness and deflated triumph', in which the author develops a vocabulary for 'the pathos of unimpressive or unspectacular achievements'.<sup>16</sup> Finally, a home-front

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<sup>16</sup> Rebecca Walkowitz, 'Ian McEwan', in Shaffer, *Companion*, pp. 504-514 (pp. 504-05).

story of failed reconciliation involves the three main characters in the novel.<sup>17</sup> A major twist comes at the end, when in a final coda, an unexpected first-person narrator reveals explicitly the imaginary nature of the failed-reconciliation tale, since, we are told, Robbie and Cee have both died during the war. Their meeting with Briony has never taken place. The latter implicitly and retrospectively appears to be the intradiegetic, third-person narrator throughout the novel.<sup>18</sup> This is a final postmodern feature portraying McEwan as ‘the most technically accomplished of all modern British writers’ (Walkowitz, 504). It questions the whole artifice of storytelling: what is truth and what fiction in this narrative woven by one of the characters, who unashamedly wields the powers of a literary demiurge, only to confess herself impotent to achieve her ultimate atoning goal during almost six decades of (re-) writing? (*Aton.*, 369)

Our real interest, however, having myth as our ultimate object, does not lie in these overall structural and technical issues, but in the novel’s ethical concerns and its author’s moral responsibility to his readership and society. Besides, and in direct relationship with these ethical issues, I will focus on the myth-making potential of fiction, exposing it as a construct, just in the same way as history itself (Head, 162). As far as ethics are concerned, it is my conviction that *Atonement* appears to be a failure.

McEwan, departing from his earlier macabre, highly sexed and violent narratives, from a fictional universe that notoriously seems to be devoid of any moral authority or reference, appears to make an ethical stand in *Atonement*, where fiction is presented as centrally having to do with moral questions (although without necessarily being able to resolve them: 160). McEwan, along with his contemporary Kazuo Ishiguro, has been said to resuscitate the link between morality and narrative fiction (1, 7). Coinciding with appreciations, among others, of Iris Murdoch on the advancement of an ethical worldview by means of the novel, he states in an unambiguous way that fiction is a deeply moral form in that it is the perfect medium

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Childs, ed., *The Fiction of Ian McEwan: A Reader’s Guide to Essential Criticism*, Palgrave Reader’s Guides to Essential Criticism (Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 143.

<sup>18</sup> Dominic Head, *Ian McEwan, Contemporary British Novelists* (Manchester and New York: MUP, 2007), p. 164.

for entering the mind of another (8).<sup>19</sup> An atheist and a critical voice against the claims of totalizing worldviews based, in terms coined by Iris Murdoch, on the givenness of soul or self, McEwan tentatively proposes a morality based on empathy.<sup>20</sup> In a press article on the 9/11 attacks on NYC, he states that, in his opinion, the terrorists' crime stems from lack of empathy, a failure of imagination.<sup>21</sup> There is no Nietzschean celebration of *anomie* in *Atonement* (or so he implies), but rather a conception of ethics as a challenge: we need a common moral frame, even if *invented* and based merely on thinking ourselves the other(s), on imagining our own self as similar to that of our fellow human beings (McEwan, 'Only Love', para. 16 of 17).

As I see it, this is similar to the lack of an objective foundation for the notion of human rights as a universal category: if not materially existing, we have to assert them in everyday life and political praxis as something necessary for humankind to survive.<sup>22</sup> From a strictly logical point of view, it is absurd to affirm what, in practice, is but a lie: namely, that all human beings are born and remain free, possessing equal rights. Nevertheless, in our post-modern era, deprived of the unchanging certainties and consolations of religion and its moral corollaries, how could we judge the Holocaust, to begin with, without this idea? Like this, we arrive at what I would call an ethics of minimal consensus, based on a respect for the contingent, as the cornerstone of McEwan's moral conception in this novel.<sup>23</sup> Here, we have a first road leading us to criticism of myth in *Atonement*, through the study of its real protagonist: Briony, the tragic literary criminal.

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<sup>19</sup> Liliane Louvel, Gilles Ménégaldo, and Anne-Laure Fortin, 'An Interview with Ian McEwan', in *Conversations with Ian McEwan*, ed. by Ryan Roberts, Literary Conversation Series (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), pp. 67-78 (p. 70).

<sup>20</sup> Iris Murdoch, 'Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch', in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury, as quoted in Head, p. 159.

For McEwan's atheism, see Head, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Ian McEwan, 'Only Love and Then Oblivion. Love Was All They Had to Set against their Murderers', *Guardian*, 15 September 2001

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/sep/15/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety2>> [accessed 17 November 2011] [para. 17 of 17] See also LM&F, p. 70.

<sup>22</sup> For ethics, the self and human survival in McEwan, see Head, pp. 19-20, 29, 15-16.) Ultimately, strictly literary concerns will prevail over moral ones in McEwan's work: LM&F, p. 70.

<sup>23</sup> For 'respect for the contingent' and an 'ethics of minimal consensus' in a postmodern discursive context, see Head, pp. 159, 2.

## ***Briony Tallis: Authorial Ethics and Myths of Order***

In a postmodern context in which religion or fully blown, all-comprising, categorical ethical systems can only be decried and rejected as metanarratives, we can only build this minimal yet necessary ethics by relying on a voluntaristic affirmation of what may avert violence and suffering by imaginatively approaching other people's feelings, namely empathy.<sup>24</sup> Briony, however, stands for the hubris characteristic of the tale-weaver, the artist of words: the author. This hubris, this guilty excess, consists of the passage from imagination to fantasy, in which the real drive is not empathy, the wish, will and ability to understand others, but rather the will to use words to build up 'myths of order' (*Mythol.*, 150). These will attempt to shrink the infinite, to reduce it to a 'known and enclosed space', in order to 'live in comfort', dispelling any threat that the flux of life may pose to our need for clear points of reference and orientation, for the feeling that we are ourselves, that we remain ourselves (66).<sup>25</sup>

A young teenager and her embittered mother's favourite child, brought up in social prejudice, Briony will fail to respect the contingent as the immediate object of both perception and moral conduct. Still unaware of 'the dirty little secret of sex', and of other little secrets that life has in store for thirteen-year-olds, Briony enters a path where story-telling is but a form of self-explanation and self-justification against a universe that threatens our sense of self as given, unified, solid, unchanging.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For the difficulty of the foundations of ethics in a postmodern context, see Nicholas C. Burbules, 'Lyotard on Wittgenstein: The Differend, Language Games, and Education', in *Lyotard: Just Education*, ed. by Paul Standish and Pradeep Dhillon ([London and New York?]: Routledge, 2000) <<http://faculty.ed.uiuc.edu/burbules/papers/lyotard.html>> [accessed 5 June 2012] [para. 37-39 of 55] For McEwan's scientific, biological, evolutionary conception of morality, see Patricia Waugh, 'Science and Fiction in the 1990s', in *British Fiction of the 1990s*, ed. by Nick Bentley, as cited in Head, p. 141.

<sup>25</sup> A fateful attitude, for 'to extinguish hubris is more needed than to extinguish a fire.' Stasis of one's self would be the fundamental form of hubris: see Heraclitus, *The complete Fragments*, trans. by William Harris <<http://community.middlebury.edu/~harris/Philosophy/heraclitus.pdf>> [accessed 21 July 2012], p. 41, fr. 88; p. 51, fr. 110. See also p. 57, fr. 122.

<sup>26</sup> Geoff Dyer, 'Who's afraid of influence?', *Guardian*, 22 September 2001 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/sep/22/fiction.ianmcewan>> [accessed 17 November 2011] [para. 7 of 14]. Here, the 'dirty little secret of sex' is an expression attributed to D.H. Lawrence, without any further precision. See also *Aton.*, pp. 113-15. For sexual repression and fear of sex and sexual knowledge in interwar Britain, see Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford: OUP, 1998), pp. 296-331. See also below, 'Repression, 1: Love and Sex', pp. 81-83.

Her early works also show a fixation with social propriety and a peculiar sense of poetical justice under the sign of social orthodoxy. Marriage is an obsession she constantly uses to pull together the different threads of human experience into something homogeneous, solid and socially admissible. More than marriage, in fact, she seems to be thinking of wedding as an outward ritual gathering that which was dispersed in the world, tightly harnessing what was meant never to roam free and intermingle against the dictates of good society and its avowedly rational ethos (*Aton.*, 9).

This brings us to the English narrative tradition in the form of Jane Austen's celebration of traditional values through marriage and domestic happiness. Here, a number of reassurances of the moral superiority of English *good society* are provided within a general frame of static, self-contained and caste-defined certainties. Living by soothing myths and other (not so) little white lies, Briony resembles the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*: a quotation from this book adroitly introduces McEwan's novel. In this quotation, no less than education and Christianity are mentioned as elements of essential Englishness, another myth directly linked to the upper classes. For Briony, in the same way as for Catherine Morland abbeys could only be theatres of ancient, grievous crimes and unreasonable, dark occurrences, dark libraries in affluent country houses are meant to shelter sexual aggressions perpetrated by conceited sons of cleaning ladies; and run-down temples in squirearchical parklands are the necessary stages on which working-class Cambridge graduates are bound to disclose their insurmountably base instincts by raping equivocal, freckled, red-haired Lolitas. Her accusing Robbie is therefore 'almost inevitable' (Walkowitz, p. 509).<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, Briony develops a manipulative character directly linked to the power she discovers in words, in combining them to build up mighty architectures commanded by a sense of symmetry. This will lead her on a track of intolerance of irregularities in life's tissue, rich in textures and nuances, which she aspires to homogenize. It is essential for her to know everything and, being able to describe everything, to fashion the world in words (*Aton.*, 113; Childs, *Guide*, 135). Overwhelmed by what adult life seems to be as it unfolds before her otherwise

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<sup>27</sup>*Common sense* and social *convenience* are also behind this (*Aton.*, pp. 169-70, emphasis mine). Her elder sister is biased by class issues, too (pp. 89, 104, 181).

sensitive and intelligent eyes, she falls in the trap of a certain idea of literature: a way to impose order on that which she cannot fully imagine, a way of ordering the universe (ibid).<sup>28</sup> As Barthes remarks, ‘myth [...] could not care less about contradictions, so long as it establishes a euphoric security’ (*Mythol.*, 70).

After post-structuralism, this can be a rather delusive temptation, though. First of all, because we are (or should be) aware that our own self stands at the centre of a net of discourses, being an effect of language (Head, 13).<sup>29</sup> Secondly, because fiction, contrary to what Briony thinks, can never be just a neat, limited and controllable form (*Aton.*, 37). Unfortunately, Briony was born too early to understand that the very raw material of literature, words, language, can never be totally mastered by the author, the text therefore being open to multiple, unpredictable, uncontrollable meaning deviations and disseminations.<sup>30</sup>

In her willing self-delusion after a sense and a need for personal righteousness, and with an ultimate purpose of order in mind, what Briony does is the equivalent of trying to damn Heraclitus’s river, something leading to utmost disorder and utter disaster: two young lives thwarted in the turmoil of the war, after years of complete unhappiness (Heraclitus, 11, fr. 21). Her fictional hubris is the platter on which she serves tragedy in the fashion of Robbie’s head, displayed to the *toff* world. In falling prey to the disease of *thinking in essences*, moreover, she marches into a labyrinth of her own cons/destruction: almost sixty years of endlessly writing and rewriting the helpless account of her inner life, forever tethered to the plight of her own sister and her wronged lover (*Mythol.*, 75; *Aton.*, 170).<sup>31</sup> This is the time she spends shouldering the unbearably heavy rock of guilt up the very steep hill of Sisyphus,

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<sup>28</sup> See also Hermione Lee, ‘If Your Memories Serve You Well’, *Observer*, 23 September 2001 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/sep/23/fiction.bookerprize2001?INTCMP=SRCH>> [accessed 9 January 2012] [para. 11 of 14]

<sup>29</sup> For ‘discourse’ and its effects, see ‘Michel Foucault’, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Vincent B. Leitch and others (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), pp. 1615-21 (pp. 1618-19). Further references to this article are given in the text or footnotes as made to ‘Foucault’-Norton’.

<sup>30</sup> For language as an elusive system of differences, writing as a trap, the ‘exorbitant’ terms in every text and the ‘undecidables’ in every act of reading, see the following: Jacques Derrida, ‘The Exorbitant. Question of Method’, in *Of Grammatology* (extracts), trans. by Gayatri Chakravortti Spivak, in *NATC*, pp. 1824-30 (p. 1825); ‘Jacques Derrida’, in *NATC*, pp. 1815-19 (pp. 1818-19); Jacques Derrida, ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’, in *Disseminations* (extracts), trans. by Barbara Johnson, in *NATC*, pp. 1830-76 (p. 1875).

<sup>31</sup> ‘It is weariness to keep toiling at the same things so that one becomes ruled by them.’ (Heraclitus, p. 42, fr. 89)

rising at the centre of this labyrinth. What she eventually achieves is the security and reassurance of death and moral misery.

### *Literature as Myth, 1: Naturalization*

Its extensive range of literary influences, Austen included, makes *Atonement* an especially rich intertextual work.<sup>32</sup> Along with Briony's use of literature as a way to understand and to protect herself against the chilly winds blowing through the gaps in the world's edifice, this intertextuality introduces us to a significant element in the treatment of myth in the novel: the awareness of the myth-making power of literature, fiction as a myth itself (*Mythol.*, 133).<sup>33</sup> McEwan's avowed concern with ethics takes centre stage once again. This should not surprise us, if we still understand myth as an ideological entity at the service of an ultimate signifying intention, with ethics commonly implied.

Literature, as a myth itself or, rather, a myth-making and myth-deconstructing institution, has the outstanding, potential quality to make things look innocent. Myth, as conveyed by literature, gives them a *natural, eternal* justification. It fixes a world without contradictions and, therefore, without depth (*Mythol.*, 143, emphasis mine). In their time, this was for the benefit of the British upper classes, which made Britain the metropolis of the biggest Empire on Earth. Thus, in the same way as the French bourgeoisie (the social agent behind France's own empire, as analyzed by Barthes in his *Mythologies*), they implanted their own ideology and value system in English literature from the late Victorian period onwards, making it pass for the precipitate of a metaphysical essence common to the whole British nation as naturally ruled by them. Thus, they fixed a standard of identity and expectable behaviour from every

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<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., Juliette Wells, 'Shades of Austen in McEwan's *Atonement*', *Persuasions*, 30 (2008), 101-11. See also Earl G. Ingersoll, 'Intertextuality in L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 40.3 (2004), 241-58

<sup>33</sup> 'A voluntary acceptance of myth can in fact define the whole of our traditional Literature. According to our norms, this Literature is an undoubted mythical system.' (*Mythol.*, p. 133) Heinrich Heine, 'The Return Home', in *Pictures of Travel*, in *The Poems Of Heine*, trans. by Edgar Alfred Bowring (London: Bell and Daldy, 1866), p. 218.



single son of the Imperial metropolis.<sup>34</sup> This was the literature that the historical likes of the upper-middle class Tallis family could take advantage of to become and be considered a peripheral component of the ruling elite during the interwar period. This was achieved by allowing themselves to be subsumed under a representational world of sound, country-lived Englishness, closer to the traditional aristocracy and their landed lifestyle than to their own non-aristocratic reality. For the Tallises, this reality involves their fake country house, their fake paternal surname, their background of common-law marriages and the old-fashioned, petit-bourgeois views on almost anything that the mother, a woman presumably from the gentry, holds.<sup>35</sup>

The more these representations became propagated in society, the more naturalized they became (*Mythol.*, 139). The ultimate consequence was the *natural* justification of what was clearly a historical intention, making a contingency (the British empire, its caste structure and its defining institutions) appear as eternal: the historical duty of Matthew Arnold's *barbarians* (along with many of those whom he scornfully termed *philistines*) as deputies of Civilization and champions of Decency and Christian Humanism all over the world. Thus, this literary discourse ultimately achieved an immobilization of the world, suggesting and mimicking a universal order and an unchanging hierarchy of possessions (156).<sup>36</sup>

### ***Literature of Void and Blindness***

Briony's first submission of a mature work to be reviewed by Cyril Connolly, the renowned and influential literary critic, despite her active literary militancy in the ranks of Woolf-like modernism, which emphasized the elements of flux and fragmentation in reality, falls fully within that mythical paradigm, if in a negative way, by omission (*Aton.*, 281-82, 312). The text in question is a perfect example of

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<sup>34</sup> 'England expects that every man will do his duty.' N. A. M. Rodger, 'Nelson, Horatio, Viscount Nelson (1758–1805)', in *ODNB*, May 2009 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19877>> [accessed 5 June 2012] [para. 43 of 51]

<sup>35</sup> For Emily Tallis's social prejudices, pointing to her likely gentry origins, see, e.g., *Aton.*, pp. 178, 146, 151-52, 50, 64. On the thematically related 'passing of the squires', see *DAF*, pp. 126-27.

<sup>36</sup> See Matthew Arnold, 'Barbarians, Philistines, Populace', in *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*, in *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, ed. by Stefan Collini, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1999; first publ. 1993), pp. 53-211.

an inane sort of formalist literature, a 'fantasy of geometrical achievement' (Walkowitz, 511). In it, the stylized avatar of the dramatic scene by the house fountain between Cecilia and Robbie that she witnessed as a child becomes a frozen gesture where nothing social, historical or ideological is questioned, despite the one fact that conditions the relationship between its two agents, most clearly while in Cambridge: the great social distance between them.<sup>37</sup> Briony's later experience of (tragic) real life as a nurse does not seem to change anything in her: she does not see. For her, literature and the social mythology it conveys are, as Barthes would put it, *agents of blindness*, since they mask her characters' real life conditions, a historical reality that they try to make pass for nature or necessity (*Mythol.*, 76, emphasis mine).

Connolly has to remind Briony of the fact that a story needs more than self-contained geometry and perceptual vagaries. An underlying pull of simple narrative is lacking, some original representation of something genuinely vital, some development of something which is inevitably to affect the lives of two adults one way or another. She forgets completely about this, though, as about the incongruity of the sort of liaison she imagines between two people so wide apart in the social scale, as Connolly himself remarks (*Aton.*, 312-13). After all, she has depicted and constructed Cee and Robbie as two nameless, clumsy puppets, who would be more at home in one of the ballets by Diaghilev than in a fictional narrative.<sup>38</sup>

In a (probably imagined) letter written by Cecilia to Robbie on this submission, she refers to her sister's writings as her 'wretched fantasies' (*Aton.*, 212). Indeed, Cecilia may be quite right about her sister's wretchedness, in that her own letter to Robbie is rather probably an atoning fantasy of Briony's itself (apart from the fact that it is inserted in a fictional work written by one Ian McEwan, yet unborn in the 1940s), and probably a desperately wretched one: Robbie does not have much time to write letters to Cecilia or to get her replies, since he dies of septicaemia while in France

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<sup>37</sup> Yet again, an intertextual link to L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*: Pilar Hidalgo, 'Memory and Storytelling in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 46.2 (2005), 82-91 (p. 85).

<sup>38</sup> The author is aware that the same charges may be levelled against him: Jonathan Noakes, 'Interview with Ian McEwan', in Roberts, pp. 79-88 (p. 86).

during the Dunkirk campaign, as we retrospectively learn after reading the novel's coda (370). These are the dangers of mythically *toff* literature.

### ***Literature as Myth, 2: The Poverty of Literature***

We should not be too optimistic about the potential effects of myth-aware criticism during a time of social and ideological change, though. Not only does Connolly avow at the end of his rejection letter to Briony that artists are politically impotent, but also Robbie himself, who loves literature and holds a Cambridge first with distinction in the subject, decides to enroll in another discipline, medicine, on his coming back home (*Aton.*, 315, 38). The Leavis lectures he attends at Cambridge do not seem to impress him to the point of changing his mind about the need for a man to come by skills far more elaborate than those of practical criticism.

Although he imagines himself being a better physician on account of his humanist education, there might be some irony in these musings, as coming from such a brilliant young man about to quit the field in which he has excelled in academically exclusive Cambridge. He might have grown very critical of another mythical dimension of literature, related to its role and function, as proposed by F.R. Leavis and his Cambridge followers: the presumption that literature will make us better human beings, literature as a means of moral improvement. Indebted to Matthew Arnold and backed by such relevant thinkers as J.S. Mill, this conviction of Leavis's that literature is the 'most vital pursuit of an enquiring mind' might trigger Robbie's suspicions. To him, the study of literature might be just a sophisticated 'parlour game'. As the young man ruminates, reading books and having opinions about them cannot be the core, but just a desirable adjunct to a civilized existence (91, 93).<sup>39</sup> 'Opinions' is the word to notice here. Plato comes to our mind and his epistemological distinction of *doxa* (opinion) and *episteme* (knowledge, science).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 1996; repr. 2006; first publ. 1983), pp. 21-24, 27-30.

For the humanistic assumptions behind Leavis's idea of literature, see Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 1966), p. 489.

<sup>40</sup> Charles L. Griswold, 'Plato on Rhetoric and Poetry', in *SEP*, Summer 2011  
<<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-rhetoric/>> [accessed 7 January 2012] [para. 39, 51 of 80]

In the end, what is behind this fantastical alchemy, capable of refining human nature? Yet again, a concept, an intention: ideology.<sup>41</sup> In this case, middle-class values, distilled from a long tradition of English writing, envisaging the replacement of decaying religion in the role it plays in a world perceived by the circle around Leavis and his *Scrutiny* as sold to the idols of the market, to the ledgers of the philistines (Eagleton, 21). This school of criticism being committed to a number of hazy ideals such as *life*, Robbie may have realized, probably because of his awareness of not belonging to the world that proclaims these lofty ideals while treating him as a resentful pariah, that life is something else, prior to and beyond words and their aesthetic combination (*Aton.*, 22). In fact, these forebodings and yearnings may have been confirmed in the Tallises' library, with Cecilia.<sup>42</sup> Rimbaud's long shadow falls on the narrative, being the model for all those who dropped literature for slave-mongering, arm-smuggling, gardening or medicine, for that matter, out of tedium and the conviction that full, exclusive commitment to literature is not something fitting an adult life. Surely, if literature is what Briony does and its relationship with life is that of Briony's work, Robbie may have felt tempted to repeat Rimbaud's dictum on his period of 'literary drunkenness': '*merde à la poésie*'.<sup>43</sup> In fact, even Briony feels that temptation during her nurse training (*Aton.*, 305).

Robbie may also have felt, along with Connolly, that literature is helpless to change life, politically or otherwise (315). As a Communist, if for a short time, and therefore with some knowledge of Marx, he is not very unlikely to have felt that philosophy (or literary theory, or any doctrine) should not try to describe or interpret the world or life, but to change them.<sup>44</sup> Medicine might be a more useful tool for that task - at any rate, one less dependent on myth than literature.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> According to Althusser: 'the imaginary - as opposed to real, i.e., material - relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.' 'Louis Althusser', in *NATC*, pp. 1476-79 (p. 1478).

<sup>42</sup> For 'life' in Leavis and the Leavisites, see Eagleton, pp. 36-38.

<sup>43</sup> Philippe Sollers, *Le Fusil de Rimbaud* <<http://www.philippesollers.net/Rimbaud.html>> [accessed 5 November 2011] [para. 3 of 5]

<sup>44</sup> Wolff, para. 13 of 48.

<sup>45</sup> A likely allusion to the National Health Service should not be overlooked. Its creation was one of the recommendations of the Beveridge Report, published in 1942. Maybe Robbie has some knowledge of the report due to his Cambridge experience and contacts. The report was widely distributed among WWII servicemen, too: John Stevenson, *British Society 1914-45*, The Pelican Social History of Britain Series (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 455-56.

There may be some relationship between this shift in Robbie's interest from the humanities to science, and McEwan's attempt to find an alternative grounding for ethics in science rather than elsewhere.<sup>46</sup> It all could come down to suggesting that literature may manage to offer no more than a form of consolation (Head, 173).<sup>47</sup> In the context of the novel, it may not even achieve that, once we get to the final revelation about the young lovers' destiny, with a devastating twist to the average reader's expectations.

Seen in this way, many doubts arise as to the idea of literature as an ennobling influence on human life. It is certainly incapable of achieving anything that might pass for atonement to almost anyone except Briony.<sup>48</sup> We may come back to Plato to consider his condemnation of poets as mere imitators of imitations, proposers of vain shadows and copies of true reality, liars.<sup>49</sup> One would feel the temptation, though, to oppose to this idea Sir Philip Sidney's thesis in his *Apology of Poetry*, namely that the poet is no imitator and that he can make things better or in any case different from nature's models. As the narrator reminds us, she is under no obligation to the

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<sup>46</sup> See LM&F, pp. 70, 72. In a previous novel, *Enduring Love*, there is an exploration of morality as based on neurology, evolutionary psychology and innate social instinct, rather than on traditional, discursive, language-based ethics: Ian McEwan, *Enduring Love* (London: Vintage, 1998). See, e.g., pp. 14-15.

<sup>47</sup> In my opinion, the only consolation that can be seen in *Atonement* is Briony's, as actuated by her constant rewriting, both penance and self-soothing practice, lasting for the rest of her life (Head, p. 174). In her case, moreover, atonement is 'at-one-ment', building and keeping up the sense of moral permanence of her own self: Kate Kellaway, 'At Home with His Worries', *Observer*, 16 September 2001 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/sep/16/fiction.ianmcewan>> [accessed 10 January 2012] [para. 26 of 26] I read this as something ethically infamous, a 59-year-long morally onanistic endeavour, mere navel-contemplation. It is one of the signs of the morally failed nature of McEwan's novel.

See also Iris Murdoch, on novels consoling readers with '*myths and stories*' (Murdoch, 'Against Dryness', as cited in Head, p. 159, emphasis mine). In my opinion, that is precisely what not only Briony, but also McEwan are doing in *Atonement*. All of the author's *ex post facto* rationalizations in articles and interviews cannot change this fact.

<sup>48</sup> Frank Kermode, 'Point of View', *London Review of Books*, 23.19 (2001), pp. 8-9 <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n19/frank-kermode/point-of-view>> [accessed 3 December 2011] [para. 10 of 14]; Anita Brookner, 'A Morbid Procedure', *Spectator*, 15 September 2001 <[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3724/is\\_200109/ai\\_n8983911/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3724/is_200109/ai_n8983911/)> [accessed 26 November 2011] [para. 6 of 6] John Lanchester hits the target regarding this issue: 'Atonement is an ethical rather than an aesthetic idea; it doesn't make sense to talk about atoning to a fictional being'; John Lanchester, 'The Dangers of Innocence', *New York Review of Books*, 49.6 (2002) <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2002/apr/11/the-dangers-of-innocence/>> [accessed 5 November 2011] [para. 29 of 29]

<sup>49</sup> Poets are removed 'two generations away from the throne of truth'. Indeed, a poet 'understands only appearances, while reality is beyond him': Plato, *Republic* (extracts), trans. by Robin Waterfield, in *NATC*, pp. 67-80 (10.597, p. 70; 10.601, p. 73; see also 10.602, p. 75). They deserve to be called 'myth-makers', and must be refused 'admission into any community' (Griswold, para. 29, 39, 40 of 80; Plato, 10.603, p. 76; 10.605, p. 78).

truth (*Aton.*, 280).<sup>50</sup> Literature is the one space for myth-making and for the deconstruction of any possible myth, too.

In fact, *Atonement* can be understood as a problematized signifying system in which many cultural-mythical meanings are exposed and revealed to be underhand constructs. At the same time, we are given clues and keys to their decoding. Be that as it may, and free as Briony is either to erect ramparts against the past or to bury herself in shame with the aid of her writing, one will finally agree with the old Greek master to exclude poets from the government of the Republic.<sup>51</sup> Not even in their own realm of language and imagination do they seem able to bring forth happiness to their creatures, nor even to secure atonement for themselves.

Indeed, an arbitrary tyrant and an irresponsible demiurge, Briony commits a final crime against Cee and Robbie's wasted and sacrificed (fictional) lives: she lacks the courage of her pessimism to let them rest in peace, to let them be two more victims of a conflict that swept fifty million people off the surface of the Earth (*Aton.*, 371). She must still make up an undignified lie that will not achieve anything, arguably for her own peace of mind and as a pretext to lay down a number of her principles concerning the writing of fiction, its nature, its function and its relationship with both reality and its understanding. In other words, *metafiction*.<sup>52</sup>

### ***Figures of Myth***

This lie that Briony perpetrates could be subsumed under one of the *figures* that Barthes contemplates in his *Mythologies* under the epigraph 'Myth on the Right', namely *neither-norism*: neither are the lovers allowed to live their love freely in a Shropshire-cottage idyll, before moving to London, because they are (fictionally) dead, nor can they be depicted as dead, as they really (really?) are (this only comes at

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<sup>50</sup> 'The poet [...] nothing affirms, and therefore he never lieth.' He is not concerned with 'what is or is not', but with 'what should or should not be.' In other words, he is concerned precisely with ideal reality, with Platonic *archetypes*. Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, in *NATC*, pp. 326-62 (pp. 348-49, 337).

<sup>51</sup> The poet is a born enemy of any republic: Plato, 10.595, p. 67; 10.605, p. 78; 10.607, p. 80; see also 10.605, p.78; 10.607, p. 79.

<sup>52</sup> Briony calls this 'a final act of *kindness*, a stand against oblivion and despair' (*Aton.*, p. 372, emphasis mine). Personally, although I am aware that this is only fiction, I find it scandalous.

the very end of the novel: *Aton.*, 370).<sup>53</sup> In other words, they must go on living their frozen, fictional lives in a chapter of one novel we suspect to be called *Atonement*, written by one Briony Tallis, who in fact is a fictional character of one Ian McEwan (whom we can reasonably presume to exist as a mortal and to have some responsibility for this). Between two unbearable and unassumable options, the myth-maker the novelist is chooses the third, *magical* solution that balances both of them in a strictly formal way (*Mythol.*, 154).

In the book's coda, the final chapter set in London, 1999, Briony makes her crime even more loathsome by resorting to another mythical figure, *immunization*, where a little evil is acknowledged in order not to have to own up to quite a lot of hidden evil (41). I am referring to the final family reunion in honour of the by-now renowned author, who is paid tribute by several generations of her relatives. To put the icing on the cake, this takes place in what used to be her family house in Surrey, now transformed into a hotel, in the same way as the park is now a golf course. While her sister and her lover do not rest in peace (how could they?), this is somehow put aside by informing the reader that, well, they are dead, but the Big Boss of that imposture, the Novelist, has reserved for them a worthy tombstone, so that their socially groundbreaking love may go on forever in a little, rented flat in a fictional London.

This is a (willingly) obscene ending, with the great matriarch being cheered by her grandchildren as the adults drink champagne and get ready for a final performance of the first of her exercises in literary mythology: *The Trials of Arabella*. Her only merit is to recognize her duty not to disguise anything (*Aton.*, 369). But of course, this is confided to her readers only, not to the forgetful members of her family (one of Briony's twin cousins involved in the rape incident, still alive, included), who go on drinking and remembering the *good* old days.

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<sup>53</sup> This is one of the weakest points in Briony's narrative: first, they are denied their little cottage freedom, only for its actual fulfillment to be hinted at later on (*Aton.*, pp. 210, 347-48).

### *Literature as Myth, 3: Self-Mythologies*

Mythology, for Briony, beyond her own expectations and despite her initial controlling and defensive purposes, may turn out to make her not only a literary criminal, as already remarked, but also, somehow paradoxically, a tragic, flawed heroine, through her failed fictional attempts at making sense of her own self through atonement. Since this atonement can only aim at its object through fiction, she self-mythologizes herself, as any significance her attempts might aspire to have will depend solely on her work, and will not be remembered without it (*Aton.*, 41). In fact, after her own (real) death, she will not be anything but a character in a tentative, ultimately unsuccessful atoning novel (Noakes, 86).

This lack of success is categorically necessary, because, despite her culturally acknowledged status of author as absolute monarch and goddess-like tyrant, she is ultimately the lowly subject of a mightier, unchecked overlord: language. In this way, literature itself might prove to be another myth, although by a different route, as it can be understood as a double semiotic process in which an apparent meaning points to a hidden one, trying to make pass for mimetic, reality-like, *natural* and immediate what in itself is just linguistic and therefore virtual, constructed, protean and ultimately undecidable.<sup>54</sup>

### *The British Nurse*

Following our analysis of Briony under the microscope of mythology, her first atoning attempt is her (fictional) experience as a training nurse during WWII, following her sister's example. In this, although such experience was not historically uncommon among young women of her age and social background, she must resort to another literary myth, that of the British nurse or matron.<sup>55</sup> A consequence of Florence Nightingale's life-long work on and off the field, this myth of the righteous,

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<sup>54</sup> Christopher Norris, 'Deconstruction, Postmodernity and Philosophy', in *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, ed. by David Wood (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 167-92 (pp. 174-76): 'meaning is strictly undecidable in any given case' (p. 175). See also above, p. 23, n. 30.

<sup>55</sup> Monica E. Baly and H. C. G. Matthew, 'Nightingale, Florence (1820–1910)', in *ODNB*, Jan. 2011 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/35241>> [accessed 6 Nov. 2011]  
See also *Aton.*, p.49; *DAF*, p. 75.



assiduous, self-sacrificing, emotionally restrained, prudish, self-suppressed British nurse and her universe of ‘uniform, discipline and orderly procedures’ developed as the main practical outcome of the Crimean war, along with Lord Tennyson’s jingoistic elegy on the charge of the Light Brigade, both directly linked to Empire and essential Englishness (Baly, para. 11 of 35).

One of the risks of using such a mythical type, such a cliché, so often frequented by literature and film, is being charged with plagiarism. McEwan has incurred this controversial criticism.<sup>56</sup> More specifically, it may be argued that he used the personal account of a nurse’s service during the war as an entire ready-made narrative building block to fill in this part of the novel. A myth being for all seasons and contexts, why care about the tedious details of a credible character? The idea of pastiche starts to show its pointed ears on the horizon.

Anyway, what seems clear is that Briony cannot understand herself except in mythical terms. As her sister, a nurse herself, too, writes to Robbie, she has taken on nursing as a sort of penance (*Aton.*, 212). She will not be disappointed: for once, reality is faithful to the major outline of the myth. With the exception of her little compassionate flirting with a dying French soldier, to whom she tells her name, she will not have an identity beyond her badge, under the absolute authority of the ward sister (275-76). What delicious pleasures, those of escapism and moral masochism...!<sup>57</sup> After all, is she not *unforgivable* (*Aton.*, 285, emphasis mine)?

Meanwhile, her true self (she must remain and retain a self at all costs, as we said before, lest she might get lost in life’s flux) is quietly accumulating as she secretly goes on writing during the few moments she is not sacrificing herself in study and nursing work (280). There is no substitute for the hard drug of fiction, its

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<sup>56</sup> Maria Margaronis, ‘The Anxiety of Authenticity: Writing Historical Fiction at the End of the Twentieth Century’, *History Workshop Journal*, 65.1 (2008), 138-160 (p. 141).  
Ian McEwan, ‘An Inspiration, Yes. Did I Copy from Another Author? No’, *Guardian*, 27 November 2006 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2006/nov/27/bookscomment.topstories3>> [accessed 5 November 2011]

See also Alan Cowell, ‘Eyebrows Are Raised Over Passages in a Best Seller by Ian McEwan’, *New York Times*, 28 November 2006  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/28/books/28aton.html?pagewanted=all>> [accessed 30 November 2011] [para. 14, 7, 23 of 25]

<sup>57</sup> Lee [para. 11 of 14]: ‘Is [fiction] a form of escapism [...] just another form of false witness?’ Quite clearly, Briony’s (and McEwan’s in *Atonement*?) is.

incomparable symmetry and the comforts it provides. *De la lettre avant toute chose...* even if it prevents us from ever having a single moment of real, genuine empathy with anyone, your own sister included, taking people for what they really are or should be: human beings with real needs and feelings.

### ***The Unknown Warrior: A Privation of History***

A second instance of mythical merchandise directly related to Briony comes across our reading in the fashion of the unknown warrior. In this case, we have to deal with a slight variation on the archetype: the pitiful, innocently naïve, delirious teenage French soldier whom Briony comforts for a while before he passes away, his brains hyperrealistically showing through his broken skull, under the scarce covering of a few filthy bandage rags (*Aton.*, 305-10). This is a fictional exercise in *pathos*, brought about by the addition of some extra ingredients to the base recipe for the original English myth: the young man fallen for King and Country, preferably in Flanders and among the poppies.

Here, the exotic spice, Briony's little school French included, along with adolescent charm and flirting sensuality, will give her a chance to shake off some of her burdensome discipline (she tells him what her name is, something expressly forbidden by the very British service regulations). Nevertheless, the distinct element in this scene is the evocation of another myth, especially powerful from an iconographic point of view, later to be embodied by Cecilia. We could call this the *Pietà* myth, or the doleful, nurturing female presence sheltering in her arms the last sigh or the tears of the charismatic male hero, be that a dying immortal God who is also a human or, more pragmatically, a luckless private soldier seeking active military service for the sake of dodging prison.<sup>58</sup> We can also see Cecilia in such a role during Briony's visit to the loving/suffering couple in London, calming down indignant Robbie, doubtful about either breaking Briony's neck or throwing her down the stairs (*Aton.*, 341).

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<sup>58</sup> For the archetypal example of this iconic myth of Western art, as interpreted by Michelangelo Buonarroti, see 'Chapel of the Pietà', in *St. Peter's Basilica* <<http://saintpetersbasilica.org/Altars/Pieta/Pieta.htm>> [accessed 19 July 2012]

All in all, and dramatic rather than ideological here, we wonder if Briony's circumstantial embodiment of this myth, the French soldier dying in her arms, atones in any possible degree for her sin of early adolescence. We suspect everything might be yet another fantasy, a fictional gauge for an inextinguishable feeling of guilt. This makes the scene rather lame in terms of narrative efficacy. In fact, charges of showiness and needless sensationalist spectacle have been levelled against it, as against others of a similar nature also taking place at the hospital.

I will dare subsume this under another category in Barthes's catalogue of mythological figures: privation of history (*Mythol.*, 152). In this scene, the fact that the young soldier is French does not look that innocent when the detail is paid attention to. His rather metaphysical Frenchness accomplishes a function: he is as conveniently French as it is necessary to make the scene as pathetic as it could never have been had the soldier been British. Conventionally dying British privates are not expected to be so gallant and charming, nor could they have provided such an exotic, evoked setting as the bakery where the soldier and his family seem to be baking baguettes and croissants all day long (how could it be otherwise? They are French!). We learn that his sister can play Debussy on the piano, too: how delightfully and stereotypically *French*... However, the historical plight of France, defeated in just a few weeks after having paid more than one and a half million deaths barely twenty years before, only to be overrun by the old enemy, now become a ruthless human-flesh-eating machine, is only mentioned in passing (*Aton.*, 201). Briony can moreover use her little school French, which conveys some idea of our young, troubled nurse's accomplishments. And somehow, she becomes a bit of a heroine in the process.

### ***Flagrant Constructedness, Prefab Narratives***

For all that has just been said, there could be a very different reading of this archetypal construction of character according to myth and the use of archival material as ready-made narrative building blocks. It could be that, precisely because of his commitment to the novel as form and his awareness of the shortcomings of post-realist assumptions concerning character construction, McEwan would be

indicting this... precisely by doing it in a flagrant way.<sup>59</sup> That is, he would be depicting a certain character in the way he should according to facile expectations.

There is one element that destabilizes this depiction, though: the teenage soldier is precisely French, instead of the heroic British soldier that mostly *toff*, patriotic literature on WWI had set up running by the time the action takes place, 1940. This constructedness was moreover duplicated by social discourse and praxis in several forms, such as massive cenotaphs, melancholy gardens of remembrance and other monuments commemorating the unknown warrior from Whitehall to the Western isles of Scotland, not to mention the austere plaques dedicated to the fallen old boys in every single public school and university college in the country. Could it be that McEwan is merely illustrating these weak points of traditional war literature by no other than, quite post-modernly, using these renderings of the horrors of war as ready-made narrative material? Is he challenging his readers, giving them some implicit clues as to this kind of reading, debunking old overarching narratives on manly, brave, patriotic sacrifice, *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*?<sup>60</sup>

Another argument in this sense could be McEwan's questioning of what Barthes calls the 'intermediate myth of the transparence and universality of language'. This, in a dangerous cocktail with some essentialist psychology on personality or the soul, has contrived to produce the reification or commodification of other men (or novel characters) as objects, only to immediately judge them as consciences, that is as free subjects (*Mythol.*, 44-45). This could be the case, if we think that, beyond what Derrida has suggested concerning the expansive potentialities of linguistic meaning and the final undecidability of language, Briony and the soldier are speaking different languages, leading to the grossest misunderstanding: one of them speaks real French in the idiolect of the delirious, dying teenager, his brains half outside his head; the other speaks some little school French in the idiolect of the horrified upper-class young woman posing as a nurse, experiencing everything as raw material for novel-writing and fearing the ward sister will punish her for telling the moribund her name... which, by the way, illustrates our point: the charming, anticipated corpse

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<sup>59</sup> See Head, pp. 1, 9; Noakes, p. 88.

<sup>60</sup> See Noakes, p. 88, for his interest in showing the other side of the sentimentally patriotic myth of Dunkirk.

takes her English surname to be her first name, just before starting to ramble on about his bakery, etc. This is not communication; this is a very sad and moving thing that, interpreted in this way, takes us miles away from all croissants and baguettes in this world.

In conclusion, the fact that we are doubtful as to the final nature of this scene in terms of mythological analysis might be a credit to McEwan. For once, he might be hitting the target in the form of an ambiguity that is narratively enriching. Our final assessment, however, as will be argued, is that, on the whole, he perpetrates pastiche in his ultimately failed account of the war.

### ***Violence and Suffering: That's Entertainment***

The larger-than-life scene of the retreat towards Dunkirk raises the same question, even amplified. If anything, there is another factor that kindles the critical debate on the author's use of history, on account of the 'highly graphic scenes of violence' (Noakes, 87). As I see it, something has to be born in mind when thinking about this second structural narrative block (the war block, as opposed to the peace one, revolving about the Surrey country-house and the fountain scene), namely the author's moral responsibility, implicit in the relationship between his imagining an all-out war scenario, full of violence, of which he has not been a direct witness, and the painful, historical truth of the death and suffering of tens of thousands, British, French, Belgian and German.<sup>61</sup> For other elements paramount in this part of the novel, such as *toff* leadership, we will assume McEwan is trying to be factual, both by means of his style, deliberately sharp and economical, Hemingway-like, and, in Briony's own words, his cumulative, documented, pointillist detail (*Aton.*, 359).<sup>62</sup> At least, he uses authoritative, archival material: non-fictional renderings of the personal

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<sup>61</sup> For his main source, see Head, pp. 166, 176.

<sup>62</sup> Which I do not mention as a compliment. Briony refers to this as 'these little things [...] that gives such *satisfactions*.' (*Aton.*, p. 359, emphasis mine) Everything seems, therefore, to revolve around the same notion of literature as a formalist, onanistic activity serving above all Briony's little, personal aesthetic concerns and her self-consciously demiurgical experiments. Here, rather more clearly than elsewhere, Briony exemplifies the belief that 'the novelist always exercises a responsibility to his or her art that must overshadow personal or *ethical* questions.' (Head, p. 171, emphasis mine) Such ethical concerns should include 'the propriety of Briony's use of other characters' *lives* in her lifelong project' - in this case, the lives and the suffering of the historical counterparts of the fictional soldiers (p. 168, emphasis mine).

experience of direct witnesses, as we already saw. But the problem is not what; it is rather how, the way the author represents the facts.

Regarding the first issue, the imagined war scenario, along with the impersonal, detached delivery of violence, I will refer to my previous reflection; accordingly, either this is outright pastiche (there has been a flood of novels on WWII in the English-speaking world, generally written by authors born after 1945 and cumulatively contributing to the growth of an entire arsenal of clichés) or, because of its very flagrancy, it is the opposite (Margaronis, 138). My final opinion has already been expressed.

Concerning the second issue, the suffering of the historical participants, McEwan does not dodge the question in his interview with Jonathan Noakes, expressly stating that he is aware of the charges levelled against him concerning violence in this part of the book. When showing violence, he says, when writing about it, it is just a question of whether you do violence or you sentimentalize it (Noakes, 87). The point of view through which the whole scene is shown, the ordinary soldier's, seems to make it very clear which McEwan's option is (although I deny this premise: someone who is the best man in his class in Cambridge is not a common soldier, despite being ranked as a mere private because of the sentence he has been serving for three and a half years by now: *Aton.*, 90).

Anyway, the author's seeming position becomes clearer if we consider the subsumed narrator, which, retrospectively, is none other than Briony. In quite an androgynous way, she engages a traditionally male narrative subject or genre (war fiction) as imagined by a female writer through an explicitly impersonal and genderless narrator, there being 'nothing to distinguish between them' (Lee, para. 10 of 14). Both narrators, implicit and explicit, are dominated, because of both their social and educational backgrounds and their personalities, by a feeling of moral horror and disgust for what war really is.

McEwan, the son of a soldier who happened to be among the soldiers evacuated at Dunkirk (providing his father with a flitting cameo on a side-car motorbike), and being born after the end of the war, avowedly imagines the scene from a self-

conscious moral vantage point, in the light of the horrors of the wars in the ex-Yugoslavia (*Aton.*, 159). Exerting his public persona of established author and frequently media-featured sage, he refers to his principles in dealing with this scene: seriousness and lack of sentimentality, showing the consequences of violence, and (as we have just seen) trying to recreate reality according to the ordinary soldier's experience (Noakes, pp. 87-88). This dismisses any complacency on the part of the author... unless, taking advantage of the idea of the death of the author as proclaimed by Barthes, our guide into the circles of this historical-mythological inferno, we prefer to claim our sovereignty as readers, co-creators and interpreters of the text, suspecting that this might merely be an allegation *ex post facto*, following the mainstream of criticism and political correction.<sup>63</sup>

This is a central point as to a final critical assessment of this novel. There is always a problem concerning writing about history and the depiction of violence. Although violence as the object of aesthetic fruition is as old as our culture, the moral responsibility of the author as to the purposes and processes of the telling of historical violence is even heightened precisely after WWII (Margaronis, 138, 140). Irrespective of whether lyric poetry should be written or not after Auschwitz, the fictional rendering of mass violence, death and suffering should always imply a number of ethical concerns often rather sadly forgotten, or at least disguised and manipulated, in our post-modern context.<sup>64</sup>

In an article prompted by charges of plagiarism, the author speaks about his 'obligation to strict accuracy' and 'respect for the suffering' in his recreation of Dunkirk (McEwan, 'Inspiration', para. 4 of 25). He tries to convey this by means of cumulative detail and imaginative empathy. Indeed, in yet another interview, he sets his descriptive ideal as linked to the 'particular details', always as a way to get at 'the emotional truth of the thing'.<sup>65</sup> Apart from the fact that, as usual, McEwan seems to be speaking *ex post*, in a pre-emptive attempt to defend himself from any charge that

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<sup>63</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', trans. by Stephen Heath, in *NATC*, pp. 1466-70 (pp. 1469-70).

<sup>64</sup> 'Theodore W. Adorno Quotation: "To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric"', in <<http://marcuse.org/herbert/people/adorno/AdornoPoetryAuschwitzQuote.htm>> [accessed 7 December 2011]

<sup>65</sup> Paul Crosthwaite, 'Speed, War, and Traumatic Affect: Reading Ian McEwan's *Atonement*', *Cultural Politics*, 3.1 (2007), 51-70 (p. 53).

might affect sales or his public persona of well-meaning sage and canonical author, one has the feeling, after reading his Dunkirk scene, that the opposite is true: there is no emotion in McEwan's prose.<sup>66</sup> What one experiences through this stretch of formally detached, snappy prose, is a *prêt-à-porter* cinematic quality that places us directly in the realm of the spectacle, of the culture industry.<sup>67</sup>

In fact, when talking about verisimilitude, McEwan avows his fascination precisely with the 'visual detail' (Crosthwaite, 53, emphasis mine). The opening scene of *Enduring Love* is a case in point; not surprisingly, it was made into an impressive film sequence.<sup>68</sup> Was this a coincidence, or were there any expectations of McEwan's as to his novel's adaptation? <sup>69</sup> In any case, the *visual* detail debunks his avowed ethical concerns, at least as a priority when writing about violent, historical fiction. We should interpret in this light his penchant for scenes where blood and bowels are paramount as descriptive elements.

Rather than constituting an instance of an 'aesthetic of the abject' through which the Lacanian Real would surface over the historical and conceptual discourse of the Symbolic Order, this blood-dripping imagery is here just for the sake of backdrop and setting, maybe providing the background for a failed attempt at private, poetic justice. In this respect, world war itself does not seem to make much sense as such, that is, as a historical event directly affecting the life and human dignity of millions. In the very post-modern absence of satisfying overarching metanarratives filling up the gaps in reality, there is literally nothing to sublimate mass butchery and forlorn love. In the end, this colossal Dunkirk fakery takes us by the hand, under the

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<sup>66</sup> See Head, pp. 6, 161; Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, as cited and referenced in Head, pp. 7, 27.

<sup>67</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 1.146 (1984), 53-92 (pp. 54, 66).

<sup>68</sup> *Enduring Love*. Dir. Roger Michell. Pathé Pictures, Paramount Classics.2004, in *FII*

<[http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res\\_ver=0.2&res\\_id=xri:fii&rft\\_id=xri:fii:film:00784574](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:fii&rft_id=xri:fii:film:00784574)> [accessed 5 June 2012]

<sup>69</sup> For McEwan on the existence of big money in the publishing industry during the 1980s and his personal attitude to this, see LM&F, p. 76. See also JPM, p. 56; Griswold, para. 49 of 80. It would be interesting to find out how much money McEwan has made and is still making out of the cinematic adaptation of his novels.



auspices of Hollywood, to the world of grand show and, yet again, the industry of entertainment.<sup>70</sup>

Quite clearly, McEwan's ultimate commitment, like Briony's, is a formal one. Its principal object is 'the wild and inward journey of writing' (*Aton.*, 159). In the Dunkirk episode, I certainly sense far more concern with style and what a critic calls 'amorous, slightly lethargic descriptions' (a case in point being the unbearable, descriptive anecdote of Robbie's party chasing a pig for three and a half pages) than about content proper.<sup>71</sup>

### ***Pastiche: Plato's Cave and the End of History***

If pastiche is defined as the ineffectual imitation of a particular style as mere allusion, forgetting about referent and function, then this is a clear case thereof (JPM, 65-66). In writing like this, McEwan is serving his own purposes as prestigious author, absolute stylistic master, and reputed *connoisseur* of literary history. The clearest example in *Atonement*, to my mind, is the stylistic leap from Part One to Part Two: from the meanderings of Woolfian style, following the circumvolutions of psychic experience in terms of perception and spontaneous association, to Hemingway's grammatically and lexically simple, and economically descriptive prose. In doing so, he illustrates one of the defining characteristics of pastiche, according to Fredric Jameson: historicism, or the random cannibalization of the styles of the past (65). Random, not in the sense that there is no purpose in revisiting them, as we have already documented; quite simply, whereas for the two mentioned icons of modernism style was a fundamental artistic option, an ideal of expression (which implied political 'ideals' too), to McEwan and his post-modern peers they are available, interchangeable, reified codes. Style is not personal any more in this universe of heterogeneity without a norm or conviction, only an instrument of

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<sup>70</sup> For the Lacanian 'Real', see Crosthwaite, pp. 54-57; for the Symbolic Order, see below, 'Psychoanalysis, 2: The Symbolic, or Desire', pp. 105-06.

<sup>71</sup> Brookner [para. 4 of 6]. In his depiction of the pig-owning gipsy, McEwan wallows in his love of cliché (*Aton.*, pp. 254-55). This would be a clear example of how literature can get 'human subjects [...] transformed into their *images*.' (JPM, p. 61, emphasis mine) It is the same with the transformation of McEwan's father into a numb, fleeting image on board a motorbike on his escape to Dunkirk beach: the entire sequence is like 'a rush of *filmic* images without density' (p. 77, emphasis mine).

tactical convenience, in whose use McEwan excels as ‘the cool, *clinical technician* of contemporary English prose’ (JPM, 63-65; Walkowitz, 504, emphasis mine). As for expression, whose existence requires a subject, given that such a linguistic, discursive and ideological mirage is also dead, who cares? (JPM, 63). Rather than expression, the goal is construction: the *Lego degree* of literature. Let us play... and let us play in peace.<sup>72</sup>

Because of this, McEwan is just following Briony’s path to literary suicide: he is serving the cause of pure formalism and symmetry, aggravated by the fact that he is also trying to pass for someone with earnest moral concerns about his subject matter. Should something go astray in terms of criticism or readership reaction, however, he does not just have the recourse to interviews or press articles to justify himself. Briony is a perfect alibi: in the end, everything related to Dunkirk in *Atonement* hails from *her* imagination or fantasy; the same goes for all the hospital gore, since by then it is crystal-clear that she is anything but a reliable narrator. She may not even have been a nurse; she might have contrived the entire hospital narrative sitting at her desk at the Tallis manor house. In the end, McEwan goes on wearing the immaculate garments suiting his condition of high literary artist and Carlyle- or Tennyson-like sage and literary guru.

Very little semblance of authentic life (or authentic death, despite severed legs dangling from trees or mothers and sons ‘vaporized’ by German bombs) is to be found in this detached, aesthetic prose, lacking edge and emotion (*Aton.*, 192, 239). A relevant issue here is that of fragmentation: in the same way as a severed leg dangling from a tree stands, as a synecdoche, for a whole body and therefore a person, yet reveals itself aesthetically as a disembodied object, the entire Dunkirk sequence seems to have been built up as a collage of isolated, fragmented images, a quilt of many patches. It illustrates what Jameson, generalising about the postmodernist work of art, calls ‘heterogeneity and profound discontinuities’, making it ‘no longer unified or organic’. The result is the ‘inert passivity’ of the writing (JPM, 75).

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<sup>72</sup>Jean-François Lyotard, *The Post Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Theory and History of Literature Series (Manchester: MUP, 1984), p. 131.

Quite symbolically, in my opinion, the mother and son who are blown up in a Luftwaffe attack on a column of fleeing refugees as Robbie and his two corporals try to make their way to Dunkirk, are a numb presence: they talk to Robbie in Flemish, which is the same as not to speak at all, remaining foreign and isolated, not fully human. By the time Robbie can stand up again once the attack is over, they have been ‘vaporized’, a crater newly dug where they stood (*Aton.*, 235-39). Hence, appearing from nowhere, they disappear in the same way in a couple of pages, just one among the many fleeting, rushing images in the sequence. The same can be said about the numb character McEwan acknowledges as his father’s fictional *doppelgänger* and his mate, both wounded and escaping on a motorbike. The RAF clerk that barely avoids lynching does not utter a single word either... why so much silence? This is something quite befitting a post-historical time dominated by ‘image addiction’, the slavery of images, ‘as in Plato’s cave’ (JPM, 85, 71). Tied by the chains of numb image to the walls of our postmodernist literary cave, we learn nothing new about the war and what it really meant for people.

In the end, everything revolves about difficulty, technique, alternation and contrast of style, virtuosity, showiness (Margaronis, 145). We are dealing with virtual reality, with *witness literature* produced as an effect, drawing on previous material, sublimated from pulp into high, Booker-prize-shortlisted literature.<sup>73</sup> Highly documented, the final aggregate is a heap of de-realized photo-realist or hyper-realist *images*, where any sense of real humanity as a referent is smothered, depth being replaced by mere surfaces, archival sources being used as a quarry for images (JPM, 75, 62, emphasis mine). In a word, we are dealing with fake literature, with fake representation, regardless of its attention to detail.<sup>74</sup>

Fiction is not archaeology: *Madame Bovary* was heavily documented, but its worth as a work of art does not lie in how long Emma Bovary takes to die or how realistically accurate the symptoms of her self-poisoning are. In this respect, *Atonement*, or at least Part Two of *Atonement*, is a postmodern, disposable text,

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<sup>73</sup> Or with ‘paraliterature’ as a particular kind of product within a ‘culture of the commodity’ in which anything goes. See JPM, p. 55; Anders Stephanson, ‘Regarding Postmodernism: A Conversation with Fredric Jameson’, *Social Text*, 29 (1989), 3-30 (p. 26).

<sup>74</sup> Margaronis, p. 146. Here, she senses a subversion of the reader-author relationship and the reader’s faith in the author’s motivation: the Dunkirk material, which she describes as ‘painful’, may have been used for some ulterior purpose that has, in itself, no balancing moral value.

where everything comes down to the ‘exhilaration of the gleaming surface’: perfect stuff to be turned into film script or to sell thousands and thousands of copies, filling a few pockets to their full in the process (Stephanson, 24, 5). Widely propagated through cinema, it also represents ‘the effacement of the [...] frontier between high culture and [...] mass or commercial culture’ that corresponds to our moment of uncontested, global, post-historical capitalism and the institutionalized rise of aesthetic populism: the public/audience/readership is always right (JPM, 54). And many of them bought the difficult book after seeing the glamorous movie, so...

In ultimate fact, *Atonement*, most notably in its Dunkirk and London hospital episodes, is an example of the postmodern as a cultural dominant, rather than a mere stylistic mode or representational trend (ibid, 55; Stephanson, 11). It is an exponent of the age of the death of the metanarratives of modernity, of the death of value as an irrenunciabile component of culture (Stephanson, 28). In that they represent historical events, both sequences are an example of what Fredric Jameson calls the ‘loss of history’, collages of purely external images of history rather than the vehicle of a certain discourse on it (18, 26). In the same way as styles are kidnapped from history to render them dead by opportunist combination, history is made eternal by turning a whole world into a catalogue of frozen images referring to nothing behind them or, if anything, to the ill-informed expectations of the general public, already addicted to what Jameson, drawing on Plato, calls ‘simulacra’: identical copies of non-existent models, a collage of disjuncted and fragmented styles, a *pot-pourri* of previous texts (JPM, 66, 76).

If not intentionally or cynically, the function of such a work is ultimately defined by the demand for products that may satisfy a craving for historicity as felt in a global, decentred market served by the media (Stephanson, 18, 7). In this market, everything is defined, quite schizophrenically, in terms of present consumption (JPM, 78, 72). Consequently, history is represented as an eternal Present, with the result that nothing is apprehended as an antecedent or a consequence of anything. Art becomes commodity, therefore, no longer conveying a cognitive or progressive potential (Stephanson, 6, 18, 26, 5).

At a time when the end of history can be proclaimed from the pulpits of the leading American universities and the international press alike, the sum of all these postmodernist features in the sort of literary product we are considering, as well as its ultimate function have an ideological nature (1). In this, it is not very far from myth, being the vehicle of a new, deeply conservative kind of ‘conceptualization’ (*Mythol.*, 117).<sup>75</sup> Hence, McEwan’s *Dunkirk* may be deemed a mythical one, without any depth involved in the recreation of human suffering (*Mythol.*, 143).<sup>76</sup> What he ultimately creates or re-creates is an imaginary and stereotypical construct whose contact with history and the possibility of experiencing it in an active way equals nil (JPM, 68). Paraphrasing the Barthes of *Mythologies*, we could say that *Atonement*, rather than represent *Dunkirk*, constructs, packs and sells *Dunkirkness* (or *War-Hospitalness*, if we think about the second half of Part Two: *Mythol.*, 84, 119). At the end of the day, everything is the outcome of operating a big, ahistoricized literary cocktail-shaker. In the meantime, McEwan can go on publishing in the *chic* leftist press, under copyright, his ethical considerations on the art of writing in our time.

### ***Social Cohesion and History as Myths***

Scattered throughout *Atonement*, social fractures point to the existence of an especially conflictive historical situation, their referent comprising such notorious instances of class struggle as the 1926 General Strike, which is mentioned as part of the background of one of the police officers that arrest Robbie (*Aton.*, 146).<sup>77</sup> These episodes run counter to the mythology of later inter-class co-operation during the war, especially on the home front.

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<sup>75</sup> Considering Jameson’s reflections on pastiche, *Atonement* is somehow a case in point regarding the aesthetic, political and axiological confusion reigning in Western literature in our time, an example of its exhaustion and purposelessness rather than of its *infinite diversity* in the aftermath of the ‘unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism.’ See Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’, *The National Interest*, Summer 1989 <<http://www.wesjones.com/eoh.htm>> [accessed 3 December 2011] [para. 21, 2, 4 of 58] (emphasis mine).

<sup>76</sup> For the depthlessness of mythical signification, see above, p. 24.

<sup>77</sup> For the complex nature, in political and sociological terms, of the 1926 strike, see David Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 135, 140.

See also Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Penguin, 1987; repr. 1991), p. 309.

This first surfaces in the letters that Briony's mother sends to her younger daughter while training to be a nurse. At the Tallises', one of the servants, Betty the cook, who is furthermore a Catholic, has no scruples in acknowledging that she hates all the mothers and the children, amounting to some ten people, sent to stay as evacuees on the estate, despite one of them being a pious church-going Catholic, too. It seems that these poor London people do not like her food, the Catholic woman has been seen spitting in the hallway, and the oldest of the kids, who has broken the house fountain, is exotically undernourished (*Aton.*, 277-78).<sup>78</sup> In this way, the cook, despite her servile condition, embodies paradigmatically one of those prejudices that middle-class-originated George Orwell, for example, was brought up in: the belief that the working classes were 'stupid, coarse, crude, violent' and that they smelt. In other words, the poor are guilty of being so and accordingly they deserve to be despised (*RFC*, p. 139). No matter how many lives this kind of preventing measure may have saved, socially speaking it only appears to have strengthened prejudice and class antagonism. This prejudice went in both directions, as exemplified in the rough attitude of Cee's London landlady towards her posh tenant, whom she will call *Lady Muck* in front of her sister, at the time of Briony's imagined visit to the young couple (*Aton.*, 334).<sup>79</sup>

As opposed to the aforementioned myth of disinterested, patriotic co-operation between classes during the war, manifest in, for instance, the improvised fleet of *little ships* that ferried most of the BEF safely back home from Dunkirk (only hinted at in *Atonement*), another example of how class perception may trigger some very antagonistic and undesirable reactions would be the barely averted lynching of a member of the RAF by a mob of angry soldiers. The Army being manned mostly by the lower classes, these are depicted here as about to assassinate a poor, little spectacled fellow who might not even be a pilot (*Aton.*, 251-52). Nevertheless, as a RAF member, he embodies privilege, which is enough for the soldiers to hate him. In this, there might be an implicit hint at a number of social-ideological elements signified by the myth of the gallant RAF, as perceived by working-class infantrymen, dirty, hungry and exhausted, when not wounded (as Robbie), while trying to escape

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<sup>78</sup> See Stevenson, pp. 140-41; George Orwell, *The Road to Wigam Pier*, as cited in Stevenson, p. 126. See also below, p. 87, n. 90.

<sup>79</sup> See Stevenson, p. 141.

the attacks of the Luftwaffe: public school and its elitist ethos, apart from the middle and upper classes' imperialist, militarist, firearm-loving spirit, associated in the working classes' collective memory and imagination with mass slaughter in the Great War under the command of uncaring, posh officers.<sup>80</sup> This was undoubtedly resented by the retreating infantry, in their perception of a lack of protection from the air in their retreat.<sup>81</sup>

A few additional signs betray social allegiances and affiliations in this very much class-ridden society. Language is not the least important among them. Talking posh and knowing how to fill in a form, let alone speaking a bit of French, will automatically label one as a *toff*, plus a *guv'nor* and a wise old bird who knows the ways of 'them', too (*Aton.*, 192-3, 208, emphasis mine). I cannot think of a more lapidary example in the novel than this pronoun as revealing the existence of a strongly hierarchical class structure in Britain, as well as of its members' degree of awareness thereof, having been brought up in its corresponding mythology.<sup>82</sup>

If one is a *toff* (or passes for one, being perceived as such), regardless of being a private, a convicted rapist and the son of an unmarried charlady, one has to lead. For once, this could be understood as a realist episode, Robbie's two corporals represented as urged to find some practical, authoritative referent in their desperate situation, which they do by automatically resorting to their social *instinct* of following the *toff*.<sup>83</sup> Robbie's reaction, wounded, bitter and doomed, is to shrug off his spurious *toffness* precisely by shedding the very raw material of myth, (posh) language. At the end of the day, U-English has been as useful to him as dressing for dinner was on the last night of his former life, before becoming a breathing corpse in

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<sup>80</sup> By 1939, more than 80 % of officers had been educated at public school (*DAF*, p. 74). For public school as a caste-making institution, see J.P. Taylor, *English History*, as cited in *RFC*, p. 137; see also p. 152.

<sup>81</sup> For all this, such a perception was not very accurate, given the absolute lack of any aristocratic traditions in the RAF, a new Service mostly in charge of the lower-middle class (*DAF*, p. 620). This is a sign of the gradual disappearance of the traditional landed classes from those domains of social life where they had been prominent until shortly before (pp. 276-77). For landed command of army units manned by working-class elements, see below, p. 64. See also David Cliffe, *A Companion to Evelyn Waugh's Brideshead Revisited: American Edition* <<http://www.abbotshill.freerve.co.uk/AmContents.html>> [accessed 4 April 2012], notes to *BR*, pp. 41, 88, 183, 313.

<sup>82</sup> See *RFC*, pp. 137-38, 152. In George Orwell's definitive words: during the interwar period, England was 'the most class-ridden country under the sun' (Stevenson, p. 345).

<sup>83</sup> For social instincts, see below, pp. 62-63.

the house of the living dead (*Aton.*, 88-90).<sup>84</sup> From now on (a short time, anyway), a *fuck* will be a *fuck* for him, not love-making any more, in the same way as *cunt kissing* was good enough to bring him and Cee together and keep them so forever (*Aton.*, 227, 86, 111, emphasis mine).<sup>85</sup>

In the general chaos, Robbie, as intelligent in his Dunkirk distress as he was in hostile Cambridge, sees through all this confusion and voices what one would take for McEwan's final views of History. History is a construct fraught with danger, since it is based on language. It is a literary subgenre, therefore as prone to mythology as any novel. More than any (other) fiction, it grows out of forgetting the detail, the contingent. As Robbie thinks: 'who could ever describe this confusion and come up with the village names and the dates for the history books?' (*Aton.*, 227) Such history lacks empathy, it is an immoral practice and, this being the case, who is to atone for it? For Dunkirk, Stalingrad, Auschwitz, Rwanda, Sarajevo, Chechnya, Iraq? The Lord, the God of Battles? Could it be that He is just a little, flimsy, irresponsible demiurge in Briony's style? McEwan, an atheist, drops this little implicit question for those who may believe in Him. A materialist, he has no answer.

And so, the question comes full circle, making its author arrive indirectly, through the relationship of form and morality, to the social-historical as a real interest, to the critically unexpected novel of society.<sup>86</sup> Not bad for a seemingly post-modern novel charged with pastiche, plagiarism and pornographic violence. Nevertheless, our conclusion is: McEwan's questions are apposite; yet, his answers are not convincing. To begin with, because, as we have already seen, form weighs much more heavily than ethics on his balance. Ultimately, on account of the way he expresses them, we

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<sup>84</sup> For U- and Non-U-English, and the vast linguistic divide between the upper classes and the general middle classes still in 1955, see Nancy Mitford, 'The English Aristocracy', *Encounter*, Sept. 1955 <[http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=189727144417606](http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=189727144417606)> [accessed 16 December 2011] [para. 4, 3 of 30] See also Alan S. C. Ross, 'Linguistic Class-Indicators in Present-Day English', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* (Helsinki), 55 (1954), 113-49.

See also Selina Hastings, 'Mitford, Nancy Freeman (1904-1973)', in *ODNB*, Jan. 2007 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/31450>> [accessed 9 Nov. 2011] [para. 10 of 12]

<sup>85</sup> See Walkowitz, p. 513.

<sup>86</sup> In Dominique Head's opinion: Head, pp. 20, 22.



suspect that his ethical concerns might be, in part at least, staged and probably banal in his balance.<sup>87</sup>

### ***Fake: Country House and Fatherhood***

For all its formal intricacies, and focusing directly on a number of motifs, *Atonement* presents to our mythological analysis, from the very start, an outstanding topic in *toff* literature: the country house. Especially in Part One, the plot evolves mostly round a typical upper-class Surrey country house, if not an aesthetically very distinguished one. In fact, the element of suspicion towards the upper classes and their ruling role in Britain is expressed most clearly through two motifs in this novel: the symbolically ugly (according to Cecilia, to begin with) and recent house (in contrast to the only original feature of a previous Adam-style one remaining on the estate, namely an abandoned, half-ruinous little temple), and the family's spurious, Elizabethan-sounding surname, Tallis.<sup>88</sup> Both features communicate the same meaning: the idea of fake, and the purpose of sham solidity, tradition and social respectability (*Aton.*, 18-19, 102, 125-26, 145, 109).

By the time the novel starts, shortly before the outbreak of WWII, the offspring of a blacksmith of country-labouring origins, having had success in industry and gathered a substantial amount of wealth, have found their little space among the ruling classes (in the final chapter, we will see how one of his great-grandchildren is established at a Scottish castle: 19, 21, 109, 365). At this point, the owner of the house and head of the family, Jack Tallis, has the lifestyle of a professional straddling both the countryside, where he owns, ugly as it is, what can only be described as a mansion surrounded by extensive parkland, a transplanted Italian fountain thrown into the lot

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<sup>87</sup> About to commit her crime, thirteen-year-old Briony wonders 'whether having final responsibility for somebody [...] was fundamentally opposed to the *wild and inward journey of writing*.' (*Aton.*, p. 159, emphasis mine). The answer, having read the novel, can only be 'yes'. It is clear to see which option both Briony and McEwan take, and its practical consequences, too.

<sup>88</sup> The originally Norman surname, e.g., of one of the greatest English polyphonists of the 16<sup>th</sup> century: John Milsom, 'Tallis, Thomas (c.1505–1585)', in *ODNB*, Jan. 2008 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26954>> [accessed 6 Nov. 2011] See also 'Last name: Tallis', in *The Internet Surname Database* <<http://www.surnamedb.com/Surname/Tallis>> [accessed 14 June 2012]

too, and London.<sup>89</sup> If his house represents a new English ideal of suburban rurality, where pastoralism goes hand in hand with all *mod-cons* (e.g., they have a modern swimming pool on the estate), in London, apart from his professional life, he has his own little affairs and, we are told at the end of the novel, will live with his second wife (McKibbin, 529; *Aton.*, 355).<sup>90</sup>

In itself, this London connection, extended later in the novel to the maturation of the narrator and the imagined, consummated relationship between Cecilia Tallis and Robbie Turner, also speaks of the considerable distance between Jack Tallis's world and the traditional aristocratic and gentrified orders'. In a way, by contrast, this adds to the house's fake nature: to his workaholic and adulterous owner, it is less of a home than Whitehall and London. If we think about the other novels studied in this dissertation, London is manifestly absent from *The Remains of The Day*, where the faltering ethos of the traditional aristocracy and his owner's flawed character and tragic downfall are symbolized in Darlington Hall, the paradigmatic stately house and his true home; while in *Brideshead Revisited*, London is identified with the dull world of the middle classes that the narrator, a convert to the aristocratic ethos, hails from, and with the morally and culturally debased world of social conflict, money and politics on the eve of WWII, whereas Brideshead Castle is the sanctuary of an age-long aristocratic and Roman Catholic tradition.

Jack Tallis's success and social standing is evident in the job that he has in the Civil Service. It is a senior enough one to provide him with a positive, matter-of-fact certainty about the coming war, presumably confided directly by someone belonging to the government or Parliament (he might hold an assisting position to the Home or Defence ministers; see, e.g., *Aton.*, 83, 153, 149). He represents therefore the new world of the professional (upper-) middle classes, the state's main support in its ever-increasing interventionist role in a country that is already rearming and preparing for imminent war. His is an ethos of 'full-time work, of probity, loyalty, self-effacement,

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<sup>89</sup> His relationship to the land, however, is completely different from that of the traditional aristocracy, as depicted in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. The Tallises' home is rather a house in the country (if Surrey is 'the country' at all) than a country house proper (see *DAF*, pp. 358-60, 554).

<sup>90</sup> See Walkowitz, p. 510. Christina Berberich, *The Image of the English Gentleman in Twentieth-Century Literature: Englishness and Nostalgia* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), p. 112.

secrecy' (*DAF*, 238, 243)<sup>91</sup>. Walkowitz ventures the existence of a critique of 'rational calculation', of instrumental rationality in this character, his high estimation of casualties standing for 'unfeeling bureaucracy', in a very similar way to Paul Marshall's estimation of war profits on behalf of 'self-interested capitalism'. In an instance of (cruel) poetic justice, her estranged daughter Cecilia dies 'a "casualty"' of the Blitz (Walkowitz, 509, 512).

His daughter's and his charlady's son's education at Cambridge bespeak moreover both strong financial means (he even considers funding Robbie to get a second degree) and, undoubtedly, his own public school and Oxbridge education and contacts.<sup>92</sup> In this little *toff* world, everyone may potentially know and get access to other members of the ruling classes as *old boys* or assimilated to them.<sup>93</sup>

Funding Robbie's exclusive higher education and hailing from the dynamic world of the professions, Jack Tallis sees a new time coming when talented young men will be empowered by Oxbridge to render important services to their country. He foresees and supports the world of, in Evelyn Waugh's coinage, *Hooperism*: the world of technique, business, money and progress where the very idea of gentlemanliness, still acknowledgeable in him, a man of impeccable manners and manly authority when it comes to that, will be forgotten in favour of values such as efficiency and success.<sup>94</sup> He is certainly performing a sort of fake fatherhood of a bright, promising, confident, ambitious young man that clearly outdoes ineffectual, if decent, Leon Tallis as a

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<sup>91</sup> Thus, his profile would be that of the 'humane technocrat': P. Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War*, as cited in Stevenson, p. 460.

<sup>92</sup> For the Civil Service and 'meritocracy', see Stevenson, pp. 265, 351. For Tallis's likely being a public school product and a likely Cambridge man too, just as his daughter Cecilia and Robbie, see pp. 249, 254, 352. As for his contacts, we know that his younger daughter's godfather is a knighted MP (*Aton.*, p. 278).

<sup>93</sup> For this 'interlocking old-boy network', see *RFC*, p. 151; Captain Grimes, a character in Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* epitomizes, rather pragmatically, this reality: 'the public school system [...] may kick you out, but [...] never let[s] you down': Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall*, Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin, 2003; first publ. 1937), p. 28. An example thereof, extending to Oxbridge: *Aton.*, p. 315.

<sup>94</sup> *Hooperism*, a modern version of Matthew Arnold's *Philistinism*, could be described as the 'meritocratic, materialistic, Ford-worshipping order' of the lower-middle classes, professionalism, technology, state bureaucracy and global, low-brow, *pop* culture (*RFC*, p. 132). Hooper is a NCO appearing in the prologue and epilogue of Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*.

A significant contrast between attitudes towards technical and social progress in *Atonement* and *Brideshead Revisited* is their different use of an image, that of the typewriter: *Aton.*, p. 82; *BR*, p. 110. For more about technical-progress-related imagery as a brand of Hooperism, see below, p. 123, n. 80.

son.<sup>95</sup> Quite unhappily, Jack will let Robbie down when complications arise, troubling this rewarding but essentially fake relationship.

There might also be an element of social vindication in this senior civil servant's support for Robbie: a challenge to the oldest ideas on social worthiness, linked to blood and lineage. He certainly believes that kind hearts, if funded enough and conveniently moulded by a public school or Oxbridge, may be as good as coronets in order to become socially acceptable and worthy of sharing the ruling role of the upper classes: that is, in fact, his own case. Although this process is apparent in English literature since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, his support for Robbie goes well beyond: he is not backing a worthy member of the middle classes, co-opted by the traditional upper classes to help run the economic, social and political system; he is supporting the son of an absent, presumably gipsy father and a charlady. Thus, he anticipates a process that would speed up after Labour's 1945 electoral triumph, when the state would start funding the most promising youth of the lower orders of society for an Oxbridge education. Hence, Cee's father would be, at least in this respect, a social democrat of sorts. His privileged economic and educational background would link him to some Labour leaders coming from an aristocratic or gentry milieu (*DAF*, 502, 538-45, 662).

### ***Social Change: Love and Sex***

Following this idea of social progress, love and sex appear as forces bursting apart the absurd boundaries of the class system, the sign of a better world to come, if only imagined yet. This idea develops through three different scenes involving the same protagonists, Cee and Robbie: the first one would be the fountain scene in Part One, the dramatic core of the novel and the kernel of Briony's development as a mature author in the form of the novella draft sent to Cyril Connolly. It is the prologue to sexual consummation in the library, which will unleash tragedy by the interference of Briony's immature perception and her omnivorous literary obsession. Finally, Briony

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<sup>95</sup> For the contrast between Leon and Robbie's characters, see *Aton.*, pp. 108, 27.

grants the lovers their (eventually fake) time of peace as a couple in their little rented flat in London, after a brief, countryside idyll at a Wiltshire cottage.<sup>96</sup>

There is a special intensity in the London flat scene springing from what feels like the achievement of full, sexual love between two people whose conscience and morals have managed to go beyond the social conventions of the day, allowing us to catch a glimpse of the little domestic peace that these two renegades of the social system deserve. This reminds us of another novel, a myth in itself in its uncensored version during three decades in England: D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (mentioned as one of the titles in Robbie's domestic library: *Aton.*, 132).<sup>97</sup>

Retrospectively, we feel even more poignantly the tension between the young couple, together during one of Robbie's leaves from the front, and Briony, who breaks into their intimacy. Retrospectively, since we only know the fictional nature of this scene practically at the end of the novel, when Briony herself, now an old woman, explicitly states it so. It is then that we learn of Robbie's death by septicaemia on the eve of evacuation. Cee ends up drowned in a London tube station during one of the Blitz raids, only a month later (*Aton.*, 370). No chance for this modern Eurydice to invert the classical myth and rescue her Orpheus from the clutches of Hades; we can rather imagine her drowned corpse washed to sea through the sewers of London.

### ***Higher Education, Women's Emancipation***

The lasting binding of the upstairs and downstairs worlds represented by Cee and Robbie's life together in London is fuelled by two processes: the emancipation of women and the access of the lower classes to higher, Oxbridge education. They are related in the novel, since both lovers go to Cambridge, although they rarely share anything while there, overwhelmed by social awkwardness when being near each

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<sup>96</sup> For London as a law to itself in very much class-conscious Britain, see McKibbin, p. 527.

<sup>97</sup> An intertextual element helping character development is the presence of another mythical name of (pre-) modernist literature, Wilfred Owen, in Robbie's library. McEwan/Briony draws interesting parallels between Turner and the quintessential war poet: they are both of humble social origins, they both teach English for a stint and eventually fall in France: *Aton.*, pp. 82, 92, 353; Jon Stallworthy, 'Owen, Wilfred Edward Salter (1893–1918)', in *ODNB*, May 2012  
<<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/37828>> [accessed 5 June 2012] [para. 1, 4, 11 of 12]

other. In this respect, as a woman of the upper classes, Cecilia's emancipation differs greatly from that of Julia Flyte in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. While Julia Flyte is essentially a mundane, passive character led to conversion by the inscrutable workings of divine Grace, Cecilia studies at Girton, the first women's college at Cambridge (*Aton.*, 47).<sup>98</sup>

In a certain way, Cecilia is a specifically insular, slightly Bohemian variety of the flapper. A smoking young woman of independent habits of thought in an untidy bedroom, she nevertheless somehow remains under the long shadow of patriarchy.<sup>99</sup> To begin with, she is aware of the centrality of marriage in her prospects as a woman, and a woman of the upper classes, too.<sup>100</sup> The undertones in Cecilia's awareness of her position at the crossroads between a traditional and a modern world still being born only little by little, is clearly visible in her anxiety concerning her three years at Cambridge: she sees them as something worsening her marriage prospects rather than anything else. This anxiety is prolonged by what Cee thinks her miserable degree (as opposed to the academic laurels brought home by Robbie: *Aton.*, 21, 46-7, 64, 97, 90).

Cecilia assumes a more tragic character, though, from the moment of Robbie's fall. Willingly torn from her family and from her world of privilege (although, as we already saw, becoming a nurse was not uncommon in her social milieu), the war gives her a chance for yet another demonstration of love, serving Robbie's cause in the person of the unknown *wounded* warrior. Port of call and last refuge of the troubled intellectual, as well as wronged and anguished prisoner, she is portrayed as a new Veronica whose veil wipes the tears of someone whose life has been destroyed by social prejudice and injustice, a scapegoat for the *toffs'* sexual weaknesses and interested hypocrisies. Now, she finally dives into Doom more headlong than she did into the fountain, more aware than ever of the need to be moving on soon from the decadent, threatened certainties and stabilities of her class (19, 103).

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<sup>98</sup> 'Cambridge University', in *A Dictionary of British History*, ed. by John Cannon (Oxford: OUP, 2009), online edn, in *ORO* <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t43.e621>> [accessed 5 June 2012] [para. 1 of 2]

<sup>99</sup> Briony will, too: *Aton.*, p. 285. For patriarchy, see below, p. 113, n. 52.

<sup>100</sup> Which she shares with *BR's* Julia Flyte: see below, p. 110, n. 46.

Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, social progress through inter-caste love is put in brackets, since we learn, as already said, that such fulfillment in a rented flat in London has been just an atoning fantasy of Briony's, the ineffective mistress and goddess of a world of fictions and impostures. Robbie died a released prisoner for the sake of a military disaster, cannon fodder thrust to the Nazis. That he died leading two young working-class, dialect-speaking, townie corporals who called him *guv'nor* on account of his posh accent and sophisticated knowledge, brings us back to likeliness and probabilities. In 1940, as the BEF is awaiting evacuation from France with the Luftwaffe droning over their heads, massive social change is still something of the future. Yet, when we learn of Robbie's ultimate destiny, of this tragic contrast between (fictional) desire and (fictional) reality, we discover the myth-making powers of the contemporary novel: Cecilia is transfigured into our secular Madonna of Dunkirk, her heart pierced by seven swords; when we learn of her own underground doom, she is crowned as the new Francesca da Rimini, gloriously at the mercy of the winds of War and (socially) damned Love, forever entwined with Robbie, alias the downstairs Paolo Malatesta, an emblem of Conquering Defeat: *la bocca mi baciò tutto tremante*.<sup>101</sup>

### ***Of Forerunners and Holy Fools***

Robbie's doom seems to be founded on the fact that his character is cut to the measure of yet again a mythological archetype: he is the forerunner, the precursor, 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness.'<sup>102</sup> In him, the addition of history and myth equals this: too soon. With the sole backing of Cee's father, ignorant of a day when, after his bones have bleached under Flemish skies, more and more working-class students will be seen at the lecture theatres of Oxbridge and eventually sit at High Table as dons and fellows, he can only be conceived of as 'resentful' by the *toff* rapist that undoes his otherwise brilliant scholarly prospects (*Aton.*, 52).

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<sup>101</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, bil. edn, trans. and ed. by John D. Sinclair, 3 vols (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1961-72), i, *Inferno* (1961; first publ. 1939), v. 136 (p. 78).

<sup>102</sup> *Mark* 1.3, in *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, ed. by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2008; first publ. 1997), p. 44.

Through education, we are told, he achieves complete liberation (86). One suspects that his real liberation, however, takes place at the already mentioned Wiltshire cottage where he and Cee spend a short stint together, away from the world. We will be faced with harsh reality very soon, though: no idyll for the unlucky couple, only solitude, suffering and death (370). In fact, what Robbie gets before dying, rather than liberation, is his *just deserts*, according to the ‘snobbery that lay behind their stupidity’ (209).

As a practical rebel against social *apartheid*, he is condemned by a *toff* discourse on virtue and vice as *natural* dispositions according to caste. Power and *knowledge* will go hand-in-hand to punish him with a vengeance: he will be diagnosed a ‘maniac’, ‘morbidly over-sexed, in need of help as well as correction’ (158, 166-68, 204). Of course, what he pays for is his unauthorized occupying of that no-man’s land corresponding to a charwoman’s son given the education of a gentleman, and who has therefore become one. This is a socially unforgivable sin, as his sexual liaison with a genteel young woman. Not in vain does his probable Roma connection link him to another mythical literary character: Heathcliff, the (implicitly sexual) transgressor in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (83).<sup>103</sup>

To conclude, it might be better to remember and understand him in another mythological reading: as a *holy fool*, the innocent agent of changes he cannot even suspect (*Aton.*, 86, emphasis mine). But for his disastrous end, he can be seen as a new Parsifal, bringing health to long-infected wounds.<sup>104</sup> Others will reap what he sowed. Stevens the butler, Ishiguro’s anti-hero in *The Remains of the Day*, will not be one of them, though.

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<sup>103</sup> For Heathcliff’s being (taken for) a gipsy: Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (London and New York: Penguin, 2008; rev. edn, 2003; first publ. 1995), pp. 37, 39, 50, 87, 95.

<sup>104</sup> I prefer using Richard Wagner’s rendition of the hero’s name, since it is in his libretto, inspired in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* (in itself a development of Chrétien de Troyes’s *Perceval*) that the knight is most clearly the ‘pure fool, enlightened by compassion’ (‘durch Mitleid wissend, der reine Tor’). The first time Parsifal is described in this way in Wagner’s opera, it is done by Gurnemanz, a knight of the Holy Grail, in Act I: Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*, in *Richard Wagner: Libretti* <<http://www.rwagner.net/libretti/parsifal/e-t-pars.html>> [accessed 21 June 2012] See also Marion E. Gibbs, ‘Wolfram von Eschenbach: *Parzival*’, in *The Literary Encyclopedia* <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=13213>> [accessed 20 June 2012]



## Chapter Two

### Kazuo Ishiguro's *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY*

#### *Introduction. Structure*

Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* is the narrative of a butler's memories of a working lifetime at an archetypal country house during the interwar years. Written in the form of a diary, in the face of intense though unacknowledged shame, its narrator, Stevens the butler tries to explain, justify and eventually excuse away his co-operation with his master, Lord Darlington, who after WWII is shown to have been an unwitting pawn of the Nazis in Britain.<sup>1</sup> Viewpoint is significant in this chamber tragicomedy in that, unlike in *Atonement* and *Brideshead Revisited*, it is, in general, that of the Others of the *toffs*: the servants.

The stimulus for the butler's writing, functioning as a frame story into which the past insinuates itself through the butler's lifetime recollections, is a motoring journey to the West Country. There, he intends to convince Mrs Benn, formerly Miss Kenton, the housekeeper at the stately house for many years, to come back and help him organize the avowedly understaffed house now that their former common master has died in infamy and disgrace. This will be an anti-hero's spiritual, self-discovering journey, contributing to what we could call an expansion of his self, taking him away from what have been the very narrow confines of his life until then.<sup>2</sup>

During this unlikely and ironic *road novel*, Stevens contemplates the past from the standpoint of his deepest convictions and certainties, which ultimately come down to his professional code, based on a peculiar idea of dignity. In the face of some unexpected and unsavoury discoveries, however, which he pretends to disavow, his narrative adopts a tone of confession, betraying his bad faith and his unconscious

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia F. Wong, 'The Shame of Memory: Blanchot's Self-Dispossession in Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*', as cited in Brian W. Shaffer, *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro*, Understanding Contemporary British Literature Series (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Culler, 'Literary Competence', in *Reader-Response Criticism*, ed. by Jane P. Tompkins, as cited in Cynthia F. Wong, *Kazuo Ishiguro*, Writers and their Work Series (Horndon, Tavistock: Northcote House, 2000), pp. 57-58. See also Shaffer, *Understanding*, p. 82; *RD*, pp. 23-24.

feeling of guilt. Along the way, a number of repetitions, coming back as the return of the repressed, will anchor the narrative structurally.<sup>3</sup> He eventually loses control over his understanding of the past, subjected to ‘progressive decertainizing’ (*KI*, 58-59, 56).<sup>4</sup>

The reader senses quite early the existence of ironic gaps in this troubled, unreliable narrative, and in the narrator’s constant, if probably unconscious efforts to deceive himself and others. This has to be read as a self-protective reaction against the blurred, repressed, threatening memories that assail him as he writes. The impulses of revealing and concealing, hiding, altering or suppressing them battle in him until a final epiphany on Weymouth Pier.<sup>5</sup> This is shown through complex narrative strategies.<sup>6</sup>

During the week that the journey lasts, the butler will try to apply his own delusive self-myth of the ideal professional butler, of which his old-fashioned and borrowed *posh* language will be one of the main components, against the identity-threatening situations he comes across. Yet language, spoken in a very different, down-to-earth variety, as he meets other working-class people on his journey, will help him overcome his terrible repression, both sexual and political, allowing truth, once he has met Miss Kenton, to eventually surface. This will be a grim, devastating truth of vital failure.

Stevens’s self-mythology will refer us to Lord Darlington’s gentlemanly ethos. This ethos, and Lord Darlington’s character, will also be defined by recourse to social

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<sup>3</sup> The most relevant of which is undoubtedly his memory of standing on the other side of Miss Kenton’s door sensing her to be crying (see below, p. 82). Other repetitive sequences would be the examples of Mr Stevens Sr.’s professional dignity as remembered by his son, and his own three denials of his master, Lord Darlington.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Progressive decertainizing’ is a term Wong takes from Stanley E. Fish: ‘Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics’, as cited in *KI*, p. 91.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Wormald, ‘Kazuo Ishiguro and the Work of Art: Reading Distances’, in *Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by R.J. Lane, R. Mengham and P. Tew, as cited in Wai-chew Sim, *Kazuo Ishiguro*, Routledge Guides to Literature (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 107. *KI*, pp. 60, 64.

Adam Parkes, *Kazuo Ishiguro’s “The Remains of the Day”: A Reader’s Guide*, Continuum Contemporaries (New York, London: Continuum, 2001), pp. 35, 53.

<sup>6</sup> For example, through a constant, symbolic contrast between light and darkness to indicate Stevens’s reluctance to ‘look at’ the darkest part of his past (e.g., *RD*, p. 163). See also, e.g.: Parkes, pp. 37, 41; *KI*, pp. 53, 55, 63; Mike Petry, *Narratives of Memory and Identity: The Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro*, Aachen British and American Studies, 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 92.

history. I will defend the thesis that, functionally, Stevens is a native soul-colonized Englishman, a construct based on his superiors' discourse, as conveying a hegemonic ideology through myth.

I will also analyze the passage from private recollection to historical, collective memory in the butler's diary, as he transits from self-delusion to self-anagnorisis during his journey. From the very start of his story, quintessential Englishness, as a part of the discourse he has utterly assimilated since his early professional days, also has an important role in defining Stevens's character.

It should not be forgotten, though, that more than history proper, Ishiguro acknowledges his main target to be *intrahistory*: the emotions of ordinary people and their relationship with the historical times they happen to live in.<sup>7</sup> His main interest is therefore, being a psychological realist of sorts, in the workings of language and consciousness (Parkes, 26, 20-21). He treats his themes as universal, not as specifically English ones.<sup>8</sup> In fact, he acknowledges having worked on a kind of mythical England that never existed, as expressed through cliché and pastiche, rather than deep historical research (Parkes, 62). Against ethnic or cultural interpretations of his work, he clearly asserts that his characters are people 'just seen to be people' 'like everybody else': Englishness is secondary for him (25). Stevens's repression should therefore be understood as 'a human affliction', rather than as 'a peculiar English' one (61). However, certain conventional images and concepts of Englishness are analyzed and consequently decried or debunked, partly or altogether, in this novel. Incidentally, the author provides the reader with enough information to read between the lines a parallel story of historical unadaptation and demise: that of the traditional English (landed) upper classes.

A final remark, concerning the author's mention of pastiche: in sharp contrast to McEwan in *Atonement*, he uses it with very different purposes, neither wishing for a

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<sup>7</sup> Parkes, p. 24: 'see below the surface of everyday life to the *emotions* and what makes people do what they do.' (emphasis mine) I am borrowing the term 'intrahistory' from Spanish writer and philosopher don Miguel de Unamuno: 'La tradición eterna', in *En torno al casticismo*, as cited in Celso Medina, 'Intrahistoria, cotidianidad y localidad' ('Intra-history, the Everyday and the Local'), *Atenea*, 500 (2009), 123-139 (p. 126).

<sup>8</sup> As befits a multicultural British citizen and self-confessed writer of *international* novels, not an Englishman or an English novelist proper. For the author's idea of an international novel, see Sim, pp. 19-20. For an approximate catalogue of its themes, see Parkes, p. 26.

literary reputation as a modern, authoritative master in the recreation of historical settings and atmospheres, nor in underhand provision of sensationalist material to the cinematic industry. Consciously avoiding the temptations of metafiction, he declares not to be interested in ‘the over-intellectualized or self-conscious literary creations [...] for the professor down the corridor to decipher.’ (17, 20; Shaffer, *Understanding*, 10) Even more clearly, he thinks that ‘it’s always dangerous to have a writer in a novel’ (Parkes, 17). In any case, he does not think that ‘the nature of fiction is one of the burning issues of the late 20th century.’<sup>9</sup> In itself, this is not little: far beyond the glossy surfaces, scheming would-be novelists and little fake modernist, cinematic ballets around Italian fountains we saw in *Atonement*, this is a universal, human story with a human conscience behind it all.

### ***Lord Darlington, Gentleman: The Mythical Superiority of the Ruling Classes***

Although he is not the protagonist, everything in Stevens’s world will revolve around Lord Darlington, the ultimate source of his conscious and unconscious ideology. Certainly, Stevens’s ideal is to be the perfect butler, a true gentleman’s gentleman. Accordingly, we must know what a gentleman is first. Lord Darlington is the epitome of this mythical character.

To be a gentleman, if we are to follow Richard Steele’s authority, has to do with a way of life: ‘the appellation of Gentleman is never to be affixed to a man’s circumstances, but to his Behaviour in them.’<sup>10</sup> It has to do, in turn, with a number of principles and values ruling his standard of conduct. In the words of Mr Lewis, the American delegate to the international conference taking place at Darlington Hall, a gentleman is ‘decent, honest, well-meaning’ (*RD*, 102). These values pertain to what we could call the public school ethos, originating directly in Dr. Arnold’s educational experiments in Rugby.<sup>11</sup> Essentially Christian, humanist and Stoic, the gentleman

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Vorda, ‘Stuck on the Margins: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro’, as referenced in Petry, p. 169.

<sup>10</sup> As cited in Venetia Newall, ‘The English Gentry: Aspects of Class Lore and Traditional Prejudice’, *The Journal of American Folklore*, 88.349 (1975), 292-95 (p. 292)

<sup>11</sup> Berberich, p. 20.

That a gentleman is so under all circumstances shows in Darlington: he goes all the way from the Eton wall game to the death fields with the same old boy sporting spirit; for a true gentleman, war, life and death are sport (*RD*, p. 73).

will undergo anything, as long as it is honourable, to faithfully discharge his duties to King, Country and humankind. According to himself, Lord Darlington served in WWI to preserve justice in the world (*RD*, 73). This is the basic reason for his chivalric defence of Herr Bremann, a German ex-officer he becomes friends with after the end of the war, who ends up committing suicide (73-74, 92, 71). *Noblesse oblige*.

This element of moral superiority finds two practical connections in Stevens's own set of moral principles, in a social context in which the ruling classes, *naturally* made of *true* gentlemen, are expected to rule the destinies of the country.<sup>12</sup> In his ruminations on the greatness and the true essence of the English butler, Stevens supports the views of the profession's *idealistic* party: he will ascribe a butler's *greatness* to their employers', and this in turn to their 'moral status'. This is opposed to traditional prejudices expressed by a distinction between 'landed gentry' and 'business' (*RD*, 114). His definition of Lord Darlington is precisely this: 'a gentleman of great *moral* stature [...] to the last' (126, emphasis mine). This is also why Stevens, as the majority of the British public at the time ('the likes of you and I') would trust their rulers, Conservative, Liberal, even Labour, as deemed to be 'wise and honourable' in the direction of political affairs (201). At the end of the day, they are 'the great gentlemen of our times [...] in whose hands civilization has been entrusted.' (116).

However, the fact that what is entrusted in their hands is not merely public business and the common good but *civilization* itself, should make us aware that myth is round the corner: civilization as 'the work of aristocracies.' (*DAF*, 50) More than with class, we have to do with *caste* here.<sup>13</sup> There is something charismatic in the gentleman's condition, similar in some respect to (secular) priesthood. A gentleman is only granted a number of privileges, such as a legitimately expectable deference from his social and functional inferiors, in order to better discharge a number of duties.

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman*, as cited in Berberich, p. 21

<sup>13</sup> The concept of 'caste', unlike that of 'class', would not be economic or sociological, but religious or para-religious, directly linked to ideas of inherent or historical worth, ritual and discursive function.

A man of name, means, connections and talents as Lord Darlington is has to work, within his limits, to establish God's kingdom on earth. What that might be, of course, will depend on the social and historical circumstances. In the troubled 1930s, these knights of the Round Table may have been at a loss to know what standard of conduct they should exactly aspire to and how to behave to be worthy of their condition. In any case, this is important enough for the rest of society to feel involved in and affected by the definition of what a gentleman is and what this should practically be translated into (see, e.g., *RD*, 185). In the end, what is at stake is a social and cultural issue of the utmost importance. And here lies myth: what is talked about is ultimately the metaphysical essence of an entire cultural system.

The ruling gentleman as a taken-for-granted defender of the realm and civilization, ultimately of Order and his preternatural, mythical essence, is reflected even in some conventional, physical features that Stevens, Lord Darlington's most devoted worshipper, applies, for example, to his master's godson, Mr Reginald Cardinal (*Myth*, 150; *RD*, 83).<sup>14</sup> To Stevens, it is evident that 'true ladies and gentlemen' are not made of the same stuff as most mortals, butlers included, are (*RD*, 32, emphasis mine). He describes them as a Camelot peasant would Arthur and his courtly knights, Guinevere and her attending ladies. For all Stevens sees in Lord Darlington, he could go around wrapped in a *toga candida*, crowned with laurels and speaking in Doric metre only.

This already familiar mythical operation, *naturalization*, is signalled in the text by an otherwise innocent word: *instinct*. There are two instances of this: first, when Mr Cardinal, on Lord Darlington's presiding over a clandestine meeting between the Nazi ambassador, the PM and the Secretary of State, refers to his godfather's 'instinct of generosity towards a defeated foe' (223). A true nobleman is to be recognized in this: he does right because he cannot actually do otherwise, belonging to a particular species.<sup>15</sup> A second instance has to do with Stevens, when he is

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<sup>14</sup> Lord Darlington is also described as tall, slim and, although not expressly, aristocratic through and through (*RD*, p. 61).

<sup>15</sup> Mr Cardinal, however, is only citing this *belief* (an attitude befitting myth: one believes in something for which there is no evidence, yet deems to be of the utmost importance) in order to decry it: his godfather is but a pawn of the Nazis, who are taking him in. Mr. Cardinal, for all his scholarship and social background, is yet another 'holy fool' in the same way as Robbie Turner in

introduced to Mr Carlisle, a rural doctor, after allowing himself to be mistaken for a gentleman by some villagers. As he answers the doctor's questions, he struggles to suppress the *instinct* to add 'sir' (*RD*, 191, emphasis mine). Again, we are not dealing with an inveterate habit or professional deformation: here, the instinct comes out of deference for the specimen of the superior caste, the doctor having presumably been educated in Oxbridge, that factory of gentlemen.<sup>16</sup>

Another tacit underpinning of the mythical condition of the gentleman is made by reference to *tradition*, which in the novel is embodied mainly by the grand stately house, a great mythical presence in itself. In Lord Darlington's case, however, tradition would be an allusion to history in order to deny it. He will certainly refer to the treatment of Germany by the Allies after the end of the war as contrary to 'the traditions of this country.' (*RD*, 71) Yet, that is no obstacle when it comes to questioning one of the most celebrated British traditions: parliamentary democracy, which he finds inconveniently 'outmoded', 'something for a bygone era' (197-98). He makes quite clear that he envies the methods available in the new totalitarian regimes of Europe for the fulfillment of his sacred knightly vows.

### ***Lord Darlington, Traitor: Myth and Para-Fascism***

This is the first of a number of illustrations of what I will call the dark side of the gentleman as an agent of *civilization*. To begin with, Stevens's life would have been intimately connected to the ruling classes and their leadership, were it only because of his brother's premature and needless death during the Anglo-Boer War at the turn of the century.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Stevens's brother dies during a 'most un-British attack' on civilian settlements, one of the most notorious features of British military conduct during that conflict, along with scorched earth tactics and concentration camps (*RD*,

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*Atonement*, in that he manages to 'heal' Stevens, opening his eyes to the sad truth. He will also fall to the storm of steel gathering over Lord Darlington's roof (*RD*, p. 234).

<sup>16</sup> That these are instances of naturalization is clear in Hilaire Belloc's description of interwar Britain in *RFC*, p. 146.

<sup>17</sup> This is in fact the first of three episodes in which his father is represented as prefiguring his own professional life, always directed by an obsessive quest for dignity. Dignity, in the case of Stevens Sr., means to bend down a strong, spontaneous feeling of indignation and disgust at some blundering, incompetent military commander who has irresponsibly risked the life of his (working-class) troops, his own son included, to the point of volunteering to serve him, out of a peculiar sense of professional duty (*RD*, pp. 41-42).

40).<sup>18</sup> Yet, given the portrait of the officer in command of his brother's unit after the war, when Stevens Sr. volunteers to serve him, we can only imagine him as most British indeed: 'a gentleman first and an officer second' (*DAF*, 265, 272).

Lord Darlington will also exemplify the perversion of the gentlemanly ideal by his paradigmatic anti-Semitism, leading to two Jewish maids being sacked from his household (*RD*, 137-38, 146).<sup>19</sup> This episode both illustrates and debunks one of the aspects of the myth of the natural leadership of the ruling classes. Based on the presumed moral authority and greater insight of the privileged into social and political matters, Lord Darlington contradicts it here in an instance of *tautology*, as defined by Barthes. On informing Stevens of his decision, he will tell him 'it's regrettable [...] but we have no choice', along with some obscene allusion to his guests' well-being (*RD*, 146-47). Of course, this all comes down to *because I say so*. In other words, being 'at a loss for an explanation', Lord Darlington perpetrates a double murder: of rationality, because it resists him, and of language, because it betrays him (*Mythol.*, 153).

Later on, he comes to regret his decision (*RD*, 137). That is what he tells Stevens, betraying his feelings of guilt. This is a way of stooping to justify his decisions to his inferior, to whom he feels a feudal affection of sorts. In so doing, he takes us to yet another Barthesian mythological trope, *inoculation*: he admits an 'accidental evil' in the workings of a discursive, mythical institution (the gentleman, the ruling nobleman), intending, unconsciously as he might, not to question the evil which is inherent to the institution itself, as based on a naturalized, essential divide in society whereby a few have the absolute prerogative to rule and condition everybody else's lives (151). Meanwhile, he will carry on associating with the Nazis, about to reach

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<sup>18</sup> Craig Wilcox and Hugh Bicheno, 'Boer War, Second', in *The Oxford Companion to Military History*, ed. by Richard Holmes, online edn (Oxford: OUP, 2001), in *ORO* <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t139.e171>> [accessed 5 June 2012] [para. 10, 12 of 12]

<sup>19</sup> For indigenous British anti-Semitism, see Thomas Linehan, *British Fascism 1918-1939: Parties, Ideology and Culture* (Manchester and New York: MUP, 2000), p. 177. See also Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain between the Wars* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), pp. 278-83.



power in Germany, if not already holding it, which has immediate consequences concerning the Jews of Germany.<sup>20</sup>

Lord Darlington's darkest side, however, is apparent in his all-too-ready and enthusiastic contribution to the efforts of Nazi propaganda and intelligence to bypass the democratic institutions and legal procedures of diplomacy in their attempt to bring Britain either into an alliance with Germany or neutrality in the coming war (*RD*, 224). His abode becomes thus a platform for notorious off-the-record meetings at the highest level between representatives of the British government and the Third Reich.

Mr. Cardinal's explanation of how Lord Darlington has been taken in and made a fool and a pawn of the Nazis is another turning point in Stevens's progressive awareness of how his entire life of devotion and unconditional dedication to his service has been building up to a total waste. There is yet more to learn here: that, as Mr. Cardinal himself explains to Stevens, this has happened precisely because of Lord Darlington's being 'honest and sincere': in other words, because of being a gentleman. If there was ever a time for knights errand, it was not the interwar period (223-24).

### ***Lord Darlington, Toff: Disillusion and Delusion***

In the end, Lord Darlington may be understood as a member of an aristocratic generation disillusioned and concerned about an alleged decay of democracy.<sup>21</sup> A keen nostalgia for a bygone time (in fact, an *imagined*, mythical time), when parliament and government were to a fair degree made of people with 'the *instincts* and *principles* of gentlemen', can explain to a great extent the appeal that continental

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<sup>20</sup> See 'The Nürnberg Laws' in *HEART* <<http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/holoprelude/nurlaws.html>> [accessed 15 April 2012] [para. 6-7 of 15]

<sup>21</sup> For example, in 1930 Winston Churchill seems to have thought that Parliament could no longer deal with economic problems, very much like Mr Spencer: *DAF*, p. 546. It is precisely his wish to make this point clear that brings him to the incident in which Stevens is badly humiliated by being questioned on topics such as the gold standard, while his worshipped master-hero looks somewhere else.

authoritarianisms have for him.<sup>22</sup> These political doctrines may have seemed much likelier to bring about the restoration of a lost, mythical world without capitalist exploitation and subsequent class conflict, where people (presumably) mattered but would do what they were told by their *betters* (*DAF*, 547-48, emphasis mine).<sup>23</sup>

Not surprisingly, therefore, Lord Darlington gets enthused very easily about discourses scented with some of the features of the old, chivalric, neo-feudal ideal of England's nobility: paternalism, organicism, corporativism, (rhetorical) anti-capitalism, hierarchy and authority. This is what is behind his sympathies for New Italy and Germany, as well as behind his connivance with Mr Spencer when he humiliates Stevens. As the old, medieval infantry (unless mercenary, therefore expensive) was expendable for the gallant aristocratic cavalry, as Wellington's plebeian rank and file were mere cannon fodder for the future beneficiaries of Peterloo, Stevens might just as well go through some little humiliation. It is for his own good, as paternalistically justified by his master.<sup>24</sup>

In the 1930s, however, most noblemen can no longer take for granted what Lord Darlington still seems to: being entitled to the condition of a statesman, someone aspiring to change the world from his country house, for all of his ancestors' having done so for two centuries. His great expectations of influencing the foreign policy of the British Empire from his armchair or his dining hall are in themselves childish dreams (*DAF*, 88-89, 91, 298, 556).

His vain attempts at this are in a way just as much of an effort to protect the core of his personal identity as Stevens's are when trying to shut the whole world out of his mind by resorting to his crazy inner disquisitions on butlerian dignity.<sup>25</sup> Ultimately,

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<sup>22</sup> *DAF*, p. 550. Again, mythology is in the foreground: *instincts* and *principles* (emphasis mine).

<sup>23</sup> For disillusionment and fascism in interwar Britain, see *DAF*, pp. 547-54.

<sup>24</sup> Lord Darlington's little domestic speech to his butler after the commented incident, in which he expostulates against the shortcomings of democracy, is yet another instance of *inoculation* (*RD*, p. 198).

<sup>25</sup> If we give some thought to it, Lord Darlington's identity as a nobleman is anything but clear. We do not know in what measure he is the *real thing*, as his house seems to be (even this might not be so evident, given the comments of some American guests of Mr Farraday's, the new owner of the house, about some of its architectural features: *RD*, p. 123). Despite his grand house, we do not know whether it is attached to an agricultural estate, or else what his sources of income are. His Foreign Office acquaintances, such as *Sir* David Cardinal and snobbish and ruthless *Mr* Spencer are not noblemen or landed gentry, for all we know, but members of the professional middle classes, in the

what can be sensed behind Lord Darlington is something similar to Stevens's plight: if his butler is writing his diary and re-ordering his memories to make some sense of his life, our nobleman is presumably just trying to give some sense to his.

Quite probably, Lord Darlington's main problem is that he is out of step with his time. This might have to do precisely with being an aristocrat. The times of *natural* aristocratic government are gone for good, the millions no longer willing to acknowledge the rule of 'five hundred [...] ordinary men, chosen accidentally from among the unemployed' and 'in no way [...] better suited to govern the country than anyone else' as a fact of life (*DAF*, 49, 235).<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, confidence and belief in the innate, hereditary and 'unworked-for superiority' of the patricians as a caste, in their being 'God's elect', in their 'collective political wisdom', in their 'unique position' as the disinterested, 'responsible and hereditary custodians of the national interest' is also 'gone for ever.' In the coming new era, they will pass from the natural to the sectional; from essence to contingency; from myth, to history (*DAF*, 24, 53, 453, 499).

The problem, nonetheless, is that, against this background, and anxious to fit into any sufficiently dignified slot in the new scheme of things without previously having to acknowledge it, Lord Darlington is gullible, unstable and as deluded as his frequent guest, Herr Ribbentrop, and cannot see.<sup>27</sup> More than that, as an over-reaching amateur out of touch with reality, he is a public danger. Even if he is resolutely honourable, he lacks everything else that is needed in the modern political world: 'quantitative knowledge, unremitting effort, vivid imagination and organized planning'.<sup>28</sup> By these years, the political initiative goes to 'bourgeois adventurers'

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same way as his godson, Mr Reginald Cardinal, a journalist. His family might as well have married into spurious money for mere survival. This was what happened, for instance, to Winston Churchill's family, despite being the owners of probably the most historically significant stately house in the country. At the end of the day, Darlington might as well have been a prestigious, ceremonial figurehead sitting at one or several company boards (*DAF*, pp. 407, 419).

<sup>26</sup> For fiscal and constitutional reform, and its effect on the House of Lords, see *DAF*, pp. 48-49, 53-54, 49.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., the German Ambassador's bizarre belief in a sort of 'secret oligarchy' or aristocratic government made up of representatives of two hundred families controlling Britain in the shadows: Donald Cameron Watt, *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War, 1938-1939* (London: Heinemann, 1989), p. 37; Geoffrey T. Waddington, "'An Idyllic and Unruffled Atmosphere of Complete Anglo-German Misunderstanding': Aspects of the Operation of the Dienststelle Ribbentrop in Great Britain 1934-1939", *History*, 82.265 (1997), 44-72 (pp. 57-58).

<sup>28</sup> Harold Laski, *The Dangers of Being a Gentleman, and Other Essays*, as cited in *DAF*, p. 296.

and professional, ‘pure party politicians’, the ‘real power’ beyond aristocratic inertia and tradition (*DAF*, 220-21).<sup>29</sup> No wonder how easily he falls to the new powers of the post-aristocratic world, such as the tabloids of post-war Britain, passing his last years as an unwitting traitor, an invalid and a recluse (*RD*, 135, 235).

All these features, inconsistency of opinion, disillusion with democracy and admiration for authoritarianism, make Lord Darlington, quite unexpectedly, because of their very dissimilar personal temperaments, a mythical character by reference to the great, totemic War Leader: Winston Churchill himself. Most blatantly, for all Lord Darlington tells Stevens on how ‘ordinary, decent working people are suffering’ under democracy’s oppression, a legitimate suspicion arises as to his knowing ‘next to nothing’ about ‘the ordinary lives of ordinary people.’ (198; *DAF*, 608). He may well believe, as Churchill, as late as 1951, is said to have thought, that most people in Britain lived in ‘cottage homes’. Briefly: just like him, he is nothing but a disoriented notable in the alien age of mass politics. Such were the *natural* patrician rulers of the greatest Empire on Earth.<sup>30</sup>

Two final, bitter notes about this ‘fall of the *toffs*’ motif as exemplified by Lord Darlington’s disgrace: firstly, Stevens’s thesis on Ribbentrop, Mosley and other unsavoury characters counting among the most popular socialites of these troubled times, namely that many more people proved their pawns throughout these years, probably for much more interested reasons than his master’s.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, the black humour implicit in Sir David Cardinal’s five-year-long attempts to tell his 23-year-

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<sup>29</sup> Lord Darlington is, above all, an amateur. A theory on the inevitable amateurism of the aristocracy is developed in Moore, p. 488; see also *DAF*, p. 13.

For his Foreign Office connection and ‘administration practiced as a *sport*’ (emphasis mine), see *DAF*, pp. 239, 280-81, 291, 620, 608. A practical consequence in the novel: *RD*, p. 99.

<sup>30</sup> See David Cannadine, *Aspects of Aristocracy: Grandeur and Decline in Modern Britain* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 131. See also *DAF*, p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> For Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists (BUF), see *BF*, pp. 84-123.

For the pro-Nazi sympathies of many members of the upper classes, the Duke of Windsor included, see the following: *DAF*, p. 549; *RD*, p. 225; H. C. G. Matthew, ‘Edward VIII [*later* Prince Edward, duke of Windsor] (1894–1972)’, in *ODNB*, Jan. 2011

<<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/31061>> [accessed 19 June 2012] [para. 33 of 45] See also Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism: Action Française, Italian Fascism, National Socialism*, trans. by Leila Vennewitz (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), p. 19.

As for Ribbentrop’s social success, see Michael Bloch, *Ribbentrop* (London: Bantam Press, 1992), pp. 114, 65. It is curious to acknowledge how so many British aristocrats courted a wine-seller in order to flirt with an ex-corporal of rural extraction.

old son, on the threshold of marriage, about marital life, and Lord Darlington's deputizing for him and transferring the practical burden onto Stevens (*RD*, 83).

### *Soul-Colonialism, 1: Dignity as Submission*

Stevens's soul-colonization has to do with a discourse of hierarchy, authority and tradition. He absorbs these values from his two fathers: his biological one, Stevens Sr., who is his professional model and standard, and his cultural one and object of hero-worship: Lord Darlington, the ultimate gentleman (Shaffer, *Understanding*, 73). Knowing nothing about his formal education (other than his perusal of encyclopedias and travel guides in Lord Darlington's library, and his clandestine romance-reading in his pantry), we have to conclude these are to him what his public school, presumably Oxbridge, WWI and the Foreign Office have been to his master: in Althusser's terminology, his Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs).<sup>32</sup>

As the necessary object of Stevens's obedience, this discourse is an ideology.<sup>33</sup> Since it has been engineered towards social and political dominance, it deserves the name of hegemony: according to Gramsci, 'manufactured consent'. As Gramsci notes, 'a State – in broad terms, we could say *power* – rules [...] on a combination of coercion and consent'; 'dominance is secure only if a majority voluntarily complies with the law'.<sup>34</sup> This hegemonic ideology circulates through myth, especially under the tropes of tautology and statement of fact.

A clear example of both categories is the formula Stevens uses to express where a butler's 'greatness' lies: in dignity 'in keeping with his position' (*RD*, 33). Two things are implied here. Firstly, since the statement of fact, as purportedly based on 'common sense', tends to the maxim, such a reified formula allows anything to pass for dignity (*Mythol.*, 155). No wonder, of course, since as an example of tautology also, the ultimate origin of this and similar formulas is one and the same: the interest

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<sup>32</sup> Louis Althusser, 'State Ideological Apparatuses', in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation* (extracts), trans. by Ben Brewster, in *NATC*, pp. 1483-1509 (pp. 1488-91).

<sup>33</sup> See above, p. 28, n. 41.

<sup>34</sup> 'Antonio Gramsci', in *NATC*, pp. 1135-37.

of the privileged.<sup>35</sup> Secondly, the discourse where this formula is inscribed ‘puts everything in its place’ (‘Foucault’-Norton, 1619). Stevens’s place or ‘position’ is twofold: on the one hand, he is a subaltern *toff* (by dint of his directing rule over the rest of the domestic staff at Darlington Hall, making them comply *voluntarily* to the law, that is their master’s wishes and interest); on the other hand, given his lack of the credentials for a real, full-right *toff* role (blood, money, education), he is the man with the Panoptic in his head.<sup>36</sup> By analogy, his Panoptic is his master’s house, since ‘the same strategies and techniques as prisons employ’ are used there, as in other ‘institutions that administer individuals’ (‘Foucault’-Norton, 1618). These are the same techniques as both his fathers have exercised on him; he exercises them, in turn, on the other servants, supervising and leading them as a warden. Completely imbued with the ideology of the grand house, and restrained and repressed as an English butler must always be, he verifies the following assertion: ‘the soul is the prison of the body’. This is achieved through the control of ideas.<sup>37</sup>

His duties comprise strict respect to rituals and formalities, too.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, if power ‘produces reality’, it also produces ‘rituals of truth’, the truth of that discursively created reality (Foucault, *Discipline*, 194). This is the nature of Stevens’s little mannerisms and fetishisms, his idolatry of ‘dignity’ and other vague terms of order, and also of his old-fashioned, overwrought, posh language, his ‘translationese’ version of U-English, which subjects him to power.<sup>39</sup> His adopted language being a vehicle for *toff* mythology, he is deprived of a non-mythical worldview. What its words mean does not have to do with any referent in reality at all, but with what the

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<sup>35</sup> For the relationship between both tropes, authority, common sense and arbitrariness, see *Mythol.*, pp. 153, 155.

For all the presumed disinterestedness of the gentleman as an institution, see Berberich, p. 10.

<sup>36</sup> As a *toff*, if a subaltern one, Stevens contributes to the reproduction of the caste system in the servants’ hall, so that, in Barrie’s admirable Crichton’s words, ‘there will never be equality’ in it: J.M. Barrie, *The Admirable Crichton*, i.1., in *Peter Pan and Other Plays*, ed. by Peter Hollindale, Oxford World’s Classics, Oxford English Drama Series (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1999; first publ. 1995), pp. 1-71 (pp. 12-13, 5).

<sup>37</sup> Joseph M. Servant, *Discours sur l’administration de la justice criminelle*, as cited in Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan ([London?]: Peregrine Books, 1979; repr. London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 19, 102.

<sup>38</sup> E.g., *RD*, p. 18.

<sup>39</sup> Since through language, discourse creates individuals, which is the same as to say souls (‘Foucault’-Norton, p. 1617).

For *Translationese*, the language of ‘silence and elusion’, ‘the dumb language of the intimidated psyche’, see Parkes, p. 60.

privileged have wanted them to mean in their own interest.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, he is equally deprived of the possibility to make his own choices in life, to own up to his own mistakes as his: that is his master's privilege (*RD*, 243).

### ***Soul-Colonialism, 2: Order, Obedience, Renunciation***

Stevens is himself an inmate of Darlington *Gaol*, too. Much as he may elaborate on the butlerian ethos with his professional equals on those great occasions when they gather under one of the most distinguished roofs in England, and even if being a functional *toff*, he is all the same a subaltern one, that is all. In all those grand places, the one question is for order to be maintained, and order subjects him to a strictly subordinate position to his master and his master's discourse (Foucault, *Discipline*, 291).

In this static world of clear-cut caste distinctions, the very definition of order corresponds to the masters, not the servants, butlers as they may be. In this respect, judgment is not for them to make, but, as pronounced by his betters, to follow, leaving everything in their hands: they will always judge for the best.<sup>41</sup> A servant's duty is but to obey, corpse-like: work replaces morality, either overseeing the organization of an international conference, or shining shoes, or sacking Jewesses (Foucault, *Discipline*, 291, 242; *RD*, 148, 199).<sup>42</sup> In conclusion, his position, to which his dignity, according to his own formula, is linked, is abject servility.<sup>43</sup> Hence, in turn, and hard as Stevens tries not to question his employer's criminal motifs, the issue is clear: dignity, in Stevens' idiolect, means infamy. Infamy is the air he breathes, the livery he wears, the bitter bread he eats.

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<sup>40</sup> Since the concept at the core of every myth distorts and alienates meaning: see above, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> Even if it comes to defining some slippery metaphysical questions, such as the 'nature of Jewry': *RD*, p. 149.

<sup>42</sup> For a subject to judge a ruler is impiety, 'as though the foot must judge of the head': *Homily Against Disobedience*, as cited in David G. Hale, 'Analogy of the Body Politic', in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. by Philip P. Wiener and others, rev. edn, 6 vols (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2004; first publ. 5 vols, 1973-74), online edn in *University of Virginia Library* <[http://xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=DicHist/uvaBook/tei/DicHist1.xml;chunk.id=dv1-11;toc.depth=1;toc.id=dv1-11;brand=default;query=analogy of the body politic#1](http://xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=DicHist/uvaBook/tei/DicHist1.xml;chunk.id=dv1-11;toc.depth=1;toc.id=dv1-11;brand=default;query=analogy%20of%20the%20body%20politic#1)> [accessed 27 June 2012], i, 67-70 (p. 69).

<sup>43</sup> See Briggs, pp. 276-77.

Because of his dedication and his worship of his master-hero, Stevens is more than a mere servant in yet another way: he is a monk of the order of St Darlington the Just, his motto being *adora* (your master) *et labora*. His world is one of asceticism and renunciation for the sake of the discourse he has adopted as his only creed. The fact that he has no clothes of his own, for instance, but those he has borrowed from his betters to be used on those unlikely occasions he is not at his working and dwelling place, plus the clothing metaphors he uses to expound on his favourite subject of reflection, makes one see his butler apparel as his habit (*RD*, 10, 17-18, 210).<sup>44</sup> Consequently, being both an inmate of Darlington Gaol and a monk of Darlington *Abbey*, it is only natural, as Miss Kenton rightly remarks, for him to have a cell, just like his father (*RD*, 165). His Rule is his master's Word; his prison is built with the stones of his master's Law.<sup>45</sup>

Another even more significant element in respect of this renunciation is Stevens's attitude towards time. Although he declares that, in front of others, in public, a butler should never be 'off duty', he really means this to be necessary at all times, even when on his own: in his worldview, free time is an oxymoron (*RD*, 169). Time, the raw material of our lives, is considered unhealthy if not ordered towards service (7). A servant's availability must be total, to the point of sacrificing one's self-fulfillment for the sake of one's master (or, in practical terms, of deserting one's own dying father for the sake of some *toff's* aching feet: 104). If Barthes writes that 'the function of myth is to empty reality', in Stevens this is literal: life is a distraction (*Mythol.*, 142).<sup>46</sup> His is a lonely, celibate life of obsessive dedication, having given up the world and its allures as obstacles against it. The whole world is nothing, except if related to his lord's *civilizing* endeavours. The rest is vanity and confusion.

### ***Soul-Colonialism, 3: Power, Knowledge and Identity***

Finally, just to remind Stevens of what his position is (and therefore of where his dignity lies), a whole body of knowledge has been created and developed. According

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<sup>44</sup> He describes the reason of his total dedication to his master in terms that leave no doubts as to its religious nature; he calls it a *vocation*: *RD*, p. 173 (emphasis mine).

<sup>45</sup> 'POH', p. 15.

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g., *RD*, p. 52.



to it, and given the relations of dominance he is subjected to and inscribed into, Stevens is defined as a type, an essence, a soul, that of the quintessentially English butler. That means, first of all and tautologically enough, that since he is not a master, he must be a servant. Dr Carlisle spots this and reminds him of it when he helps him out with some spare petrol (Foucault, *Discipline*, 291; *RD*, 207).

Nevertheless, being a servant, as sensed by a man of the medical profession, other discourses of power will give Stevens an additional identity, too. Indeed, 'the butler is a good metaphor for the relationship of very ordinary, small people to power'.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, he is also a moral inferior, without Lord Darlington's knowledge of social Darwinism and pseudo-biological racism that makes him dismiss two Jewish maids and later justify his measure to the butler, presumably another *racial* inferior of sorts: liberty, freedom and hierarchy; inequality for all.<sup>48</sup>

Last but not least, he is an inarticulate voter with no knowledge of political economy, international trade or foreign affairs, as Mr Spencer proves in a shockingly humiliating way (*RD*, 196)<sup>49</sup>. At the end of the day, all these discourses are only taught to gentlemen in Oxbridge or London and in return for very high fees, as tailor-made for the *toffs*. In conclusion, it is several of these types as defined by these forms of knowledge that Stevens must inhabit in order to exist. Therefore, he can only exist as a type. That is his tragedy.

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<sup>47</sup> Graham Swift, 'Shorts: Kazuo Ishiguro', in *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, ed. by Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong, Literary Conversations Series (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), pp. 35-41 (p. 37).

The rural GP is another instance of power himself. Despite his socialism and although he asks Stevens not to call him 'sir', he will address him in ways such as 'old chap' and 'old boy' (*RD*, pp. 193, 207). If we consider that Stevens, now beyond his sixties, is being addressed by someone twenty or thirty years his junior, we can find this treatment clearly inconvenient and, significantly, closer to Mr Spencer's than might appear at first.

<sup>48</sup> *RFC*, p. 128. Lord Darlington's thought does not seem to be much apart from Herr Hitler's in this respect: Adolf Hitler, *Hitler's Table-Talk: His Private Conversations (1941-1944)*, trans. by Norman Cameron and R.H. Stevens (New York: Enigma Books, 2000; first publ. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953), p. 117.

For social Darwinism and related eugenics, see *BF*, p. 30; Overly, p. 106.

<sup>49</sup> Mr Spencer identifies Stevens with 'the few other millions like him.' See above, p. 65, note 21.

### ***False Consciousness, 1: Hegemonic Alienation***

Stevens's delusional ideology is absorbed as coming from above, but in his reception thereof he *naturalizes* it as if from within. This brings us to another standpoint from which to analyze his character: false consciousness.

This concept, developed within Marxism, alludes to the misrepresentation and distorted perception of social relationships, resulting in a specific form of alienation, namely the justification and perpetuation of exploitation.<sup>50</sup> The area of relevance of this concept, therefore, has to do with the difficult point, within Marxist theory, of the relationship between objective, material reality, and consciousness, thought or, more generally, the psychological dimension of the person. This is related to the Marxian assertion that social relations, the modes of production existing in a given society, determine consciousness, not the other way round.<sup>51</sup>

The core of this idea lies in an induced cognitive impairment, whereby class-consciousness is lacking in the subject as the result of the hegemonic workings of the dominant ideology of society (Little, para. 1, 6 of 7).<sup>52</sup> This is achieved through powerful channels, such as the media, in ways that are specially designed for this effect. Historically, a manifestation of this false consciousness, pertinent to our analysis, is working-class support for the British Conservative Party, which we can assume is the political option closer to Stevens's hero and role model, Lord Darlington, for all his velleities for different forms of fascism.<sup>53</sup>

### ***False Consciousness, 2: The Conservative Party and the Great Chain of Being***

Although it is difficult to picture the perfect butler exercising his right to vote, even in a wretchedly inarticulate way, we will include Stevens in the half of the British

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<sup>50</sup> 'False Consciousness', in *MIA: Marxists Internet Archive, Encyclopedia of Marxism: Glossary of Terms* <<http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/f/a.htm>> [accessed 26 March 2012] [para. 1 of 6]

<sup>51</sup> Daniel Little, *False Consciousness*, in <<http://www-personal.umd.umich.edu/~delittle/iess%20false%20consciousness%20V2.htm>> [accessed 26 March 2012] [para. 3 of 7]

<sup>52</sup> See above, p. 28, n. 41, for ideology; for hegemony, see above, p. 69.

<sup>53</sup> For the peculiar relationship between European fascisms and traditional conservative forces, see Nolte, pp. 15-19.

working-class population that voted Conservative throughout the interwar period (McKibbin, 530-31). The relevant scene in the novel regarding this is the one when Stevens stops over at a country inn on his journey to the West Country, where he is mistaken for (almost) a gentleman (*RD*, 119).

In the course of his conversation with the locals in this scene, different political sensibilities are expressed, giving hints about the workings of different stances of ideological indoctrination in Britain, all of them with the ultimate purpose of manufacturing widespread consent to the power of the upper classes. First, in spite of the general impact of the People's War in working-class consciousness, except for opinionated left-wing activist Harry Smith, the rest of the locals share with Stevens what David Cannadine calls 'a commitment to hierarchical and organic values', those of 'the old world', as embodied in his hero and master, his lineage and his ancestral abode.<sup>54</sup> In Stevens's case, his ideological contagion has happened by pure inertia, for all of his concomitant enthusiasm and identification. For the rest of the working class supporting this axiological world, their support was defined moreover by the belief in the 'inevitability and rightness of inequality, the fundamental unity of society, and the "infiniteness of gradations" within it', as 'composed of individuals who knew their place rather than classes that did not.' (*RFC*, 161)

This deserves elaboration. To begin with, this ideology has been sold wrapped in the ideas of fatality and divine Providence, as befits a Christian culture where the defenders of the faith were the landed orders: there is no alternative to the way things are, God has made the world just so.<sup>55</sup> The fact that all this disguises a cluster of material interests that originated in the relations of production, based on exploitation and subordination, is not easy to perceive in an age-long discursive context where an imagery of unity has been analogically developed to make everyone rally around the conviction that their social role, miserable as it might be, accomplishes in its own little degree the functioning of the entire social *body*. As the human body is a complex unity made up of different organs in charge of different functions, so individuals, functionally belonging to divinely instituted orders or estates, make up

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<sup>54</sup> Kenneth Morgan, *Labour in Power*, as cited in *RFC*, pp. 159, 161

<sup>55</sup> See Cecil Frances Alexander, 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', in *Hymns for Little Children* <<http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/a/l/allthing.htm>> [accessed 10 February 2012]

an aggregate, collective one: the *body politic*.<sup>56</sup> This body may also be subject to disease, a symptom of which could be the spreading of social theories positing such deleterious categories as social classes necessarily confronted in class struggle.<sup>57</sup>

This is even more so, if we consider that the social body is one with the cosmos through the Great Chain of Being, the ultimate example of this scatological mythology of order since the Middle Ages.<sup>58</sup> Besides, in a country where Protestantism has been intimately connected with national identity since the Reformation, the belief in personal responsibility for one's own salvation (in itself an anthropological basis for British-invented and patented modern capitalism, both a cause and an effect of strong individualism), the surprising fact is that only half of the working class vote/d Conservative.<sup>59</sup>

Consequently, one should not wonder to find these conservative views 'still extremely popular among *ordinary people* during the late 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s.' (*RFC*, 162, emphasis mine) What these voters could not understand was 'the "deviant" behaviour of those voters who [...] supported Labour instead.'<sup>60</sup>

### ***False Consciousness, 3: Pomp and Circumstance***

Accordingly, if eleven years after the end of the war, Harry Smith can be taken to represent an 'unprecedented politicization' of the population, and if a certain 'rudeness', as a gradual social abandonment of traditional 'courtesy' or 'deference', takes place, not only were these organic views still held by a considerable section of the subordinate classes, but they were also enhanced by displays of traditional power,

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<sup>56</sup> This very conservative ideology, stressing the principles of order and obedience, utterly identified with the monarchy, and whole-heartedly supported by the landed classes understood the state as an organic reality. After the Enlightenment, it was expressed through the trappings of many British 'invented traditions': Hale, i, 67-70; E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture: A Study of the Idea of Order in the Age of Shakespeare, Donne and Milton* (New York: Vintage, 1959), Preface, vii; 8. See also below, p. 77, n. 62.

<sup>57</sup> Cicero, *De officiis*, as cited in Hale, i, 68.

<sup>58</sup> Stevens's *position* and the social system sentencing him to imprisonment for life in it, match perfectly this conception of cosmic order. See Tillyard, Preface, vii; pp. 31, 26, 5-6.

<sup>59</sup> As Barrie's Crichton confesses to his radical Whig master: 'I *can't help* being a Conservative, my Lord.' (Barrie, i., p. 9, emphasis mine).

<sup>60</sup> Let alone when the ones to join Labour were the aristocrats themselves: *DAF*, p. 530.

pomp and circumstance such as the first TV-broadcast English coronation in 1953 (McKibbin, 531).

This is a perfect example of what the ideological state apparatuses can do in terms of making the dominant social ideology perpetuate itself in the consciousness of the socially subjected and culturally colonized. It was achieved by bringing together such powerful ‘instruments of consciousness’ as the new communication technologies and the old myth of the Crown (and implied in it, of the entire Establishment) as the ultimate defender of independence and national identity, only eight years after the end of WWII.<sup>61</sup> It did not matter if many of those ‘traditions’ celebrating and proclaiming hierarchy were yet another example of ‘invented traditions’, little more than half a century old in the form they were presented to the public. Staged like ‘a pageant of history, empire, and inequality’, they were lived by the poorest sections of the British population in the same alienated, yet adhesive way as the soap operas the BBC brought daily to their humble homes: in imagination, that is, at the cost of an immobilization and an impoverishment of consciousness (*RFC*, 160; *Mythol.*, 140).<sup>62</sup>

Indeed, even Harry Smith is under the influence of the imperial implications of such semiotic operations: he is against the independence of the colonies (*RD*, 192).<sup>63</sup> In this way, when Stevens leaves the inn the following morning, the only one to find him out as a camouflaged servant is, ironically, a member of the middle classes with a privileged university education: the local doctor, the frustrated socialist. The timid Labour reforms in the immediate aftermath of the War neither really succeeded nor even contemplated a true dignification of the living conditions, ideological ones included, of the likes of Stevens and his hospitable, working-class country hosts.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> A new version of the old notion of defender of the realm and the faith. ‘Instruments of consciousness’ is a term coined by Gramsci, as cited in Little (para. 6 of 7).

<sup>62</sup> *RFC*, pp. 126-28, 145-46. Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Introduction: Inventing Traditions’, in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, London and New York: CUP, 1992; repr. 2000; first publ. 1983), pp. 1-14 (p. 1). David Cannadine, ‘The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the “Invention of Tradition”, c. 1820-1977’, in *The Invention of Tradition*, pp. 101-164 (pp. 108, 161, 138, 131, 142).

Before such efficient mechanisms of consciousness-impoverishing, Gramsci’s hopes in what he called the ‘cultural institutions’ of the working class can only be contemplated with skepticism, as an example of wishful thinking (Little, para. 6 of 7).

<sup>63</sup> Mr Smith is an imperialist radical: see *RD*, p. 209.

<sup>64</sup> For Labour’s hierarchical and *organic* commitments, see *RFC*, p. 160.

### *Identity: Self-Mythologies of Order and the Unconscious*

As indicated in the introduction, Ishiguro's main narrative object in his first three novels is his characters' emotional world. A very negative emotion, namely shame, is our good man Stevens's first cause for the identity crisis that seizes him on his way to Miss Kenton. It is also the driving force behind his diary-writing, which will be aimed at protecting himself from his disturbing reminiscences.<sup>65</sup>

His first unconscious protective mechanism is straight suppression of everything related to his biological family, except for his father's professional example.<sup>66</sup> We know nothing about his first name or about his mother, in themselves very significant details. Of his elder brother's death, we know because it is related to one of the three examples the butler gives us of his father's professional dignity; otherwise, one suspects it might not have been mentioned, either. This is related to the importance of the unspoken in Stevens's narrative, where often what is said is controlled by what is not (Shaffer, *Understanding*, 63, n. 3).

His relationship to his father is very much a question of both suppression and sublimation. That he has grown up an estranged child shows in the scanty, pathetic words they exchange as his father is on his deathbed and Stevens is in the thick of the international conference in the grand house. This is preceded by a scene in which we acknowledge Stevens Sr. as an unlikeable character, an old man who hardly sleeps at all, who is to be found in his bare cell (rather than bedroom proper) already donned in his servant's apparel well before dawn, and who has very little patience for anything that is not work-related (*RD*, 97, 63-66). His professional life and his ideal of professional dignity, as we saw, are best resumed by an undignified anecdote involving his elder son's death.<sup>67</sup> Rather characteristically, he also keeps telling the other servants a shocking story about some butler killing a tiger in India and later

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<sup>65</sup> Christopher Henke, 'Remembering Selves, Constructing Selves: Memory and Identity in Contemporary British Fiction', as cited in Sim, p. 110.  
Barry Lewis, *Kazuo Ishiguro, Contemporary World Writers* (Manchester and New York: MUP, 2000), p. 90.

<sup>66</sup> *KI*, p. 59. For suppression of emotion, see Shaffer, *Understanding*, p. 64.

<sup>67</sup> See above, p. 63, n. 17.

informing his master without moving a muscle in his face (*RD*, 35-36). Stevens sublimates all of this into an admirable example and wholesome doctrine.

Against this bleak family background, Stevens defines himself round an alternative, demanding, yet non-conflictive professional identity, shutting out all this emotional bleakness and the rest of the messiness of life.<sup>68</sup> In the end, what he really wants is to embody what Barthes calls the myth of the *irresponsibility of man*: to become a tautologically and self-sufficiently true, immediately apparent, ideal butler, as impersonal as the discourse and the myth behind such a type, so that anyone can identify him as such, as in the presence of greatness, only by seeing him (*Mythol.*, 151).<sup>69</sup> This is attempted by displacing his affection from his natural to his cultural father, and by using an entire mythology of order.<sup>70</sup>

Alternative to this mythology of order, there might be another path by which Stevens can inscribe himself into a discourse that may achieve the same objective: the substitution of history for life. History, or diary-writing for that matter, being a narrative genre and bound to an arbitrarily structured language consisting only of differences, the very moment Stevens names the events and experiences of his life, he mythologizes them, too. Like this, he kills the *real*, the factual and non-linguistic, building a defensive wall against the steady assault of shame, guilt and bad faith.<sup>71</sup> He tries to keep them at bay behind a parapet of stories made of *words, words, words*.

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<sup>68</sup> Ihab Hassan, 'An Extravagant Reticence', as cited in Shaffer, *Understanding*, p. 76.

<sup>69</sup> I owe the development of this idea of Barthes about a kind of *ideal servant* to Petry, p. 110 (*Mythol.*, p. 152). This myth would be expressed through tautology and statement of fact. For tautology, see Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History: 1950-1995*, as cited in Petry, p. 110; for statement of fact, see *RD*, p. 111: 'It is with such men [...] as it is with the English landscape [...]: when one encounters them, one *simply knows* one is in the presence of greatness' (emphasis mine).

<sup>70</sup> John Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Literature: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens*, as cited in Shaffer, *Understanding*, p. 64.

Sigmund Freud, *Five Letters on Psychoanalysis*, as cited in Shaffer, *Understanding*, p. 68.

<sup>71</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, as cited in Petry, pp. 10-11.

'In language there are only differences without positive terms.': Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, as cited in *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*, ed. by Carol Sanders (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), p. 60.

## ***Bad Faith***

Although Stevens believes he ‘has acted throughout his life in good faith’, by identifying himself steadfastly with an unchanging role, whereby he lives his daily, practical life in a pre-ordered, thoughtless and mechanical way, Stevens behaves in bad faith (Lewis, 85; *RD*, 42-43). This concept, understood in Sartrean terms, equates the butler with the famous example of the too precise, too eager and too evident waiter appearing in *Being and Nothingness*.<sup>72</sup> Bad faith is self-deception, a flight from freedom, the by-product of a characteristic of our ontological constitution whereby, our freedom being infinite, we cannot escape making choices.<sup>73</sup>

This freedom is the formal object of every choice, the general content of authenticity. Our human condition is ambiguous, trapping us all somewhere between facticity and transcendence, between ‘what is not’ (i.e., the future) and ‘not what it is’ (i.e., our ego, understood as an already finished, complete identity: what it is, is ever changing, shifting, evolving). Bad faith uses this ego, as opposed to a spontaneous, responsible ‘selfness’, as an excuse for not becoming through free choice (Flynn, para. 21, 23-25 of 52). Thus, Stevens limits himself to his function as a butler, ‘just as the soldier at attention makes himself into a soldier-thing’. He imprisons himself in what he is (or is expected to be: Sartre, p. 59).

Stevens makes a number of choices in the course of his early professional life on a quest for a worthy employer according to his ideal, in a conscious and responsible way (*RD*, 116). Once he finds him, however, he starts to build up a shield against the true nature of his relationship with him, as based on hierarchy, constant repression, eventual humiliation and ultimate unworthiness and shame. He does not choose any more. Instead, he develops a delusional discourse of trust and due obedience whose most significant instance is his attitude towards the dismissal of the two Jewish

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<sup>72</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen, 1957), p. 59.

<sup>73</sup> Chase B. Wrenn, ‘Sartre’s Existentialism’, in *The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2012 <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/sartre-ex/>> [accessed 27 March 2012] [para. 3, 37-38 of 47]

Thomas Flynn, ‘Jean-Paul Sartre’, in *SEP*, Spring 2012 <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/sartre/>> [accessed 27 March 2012] [para. 21 of 52]



maids.<sup>74</sup> Here, the contrast is evident between Miss Kenton's spontaneous assessment of Lord Darlington's decision as 'a sin', and Stevens's bad faith (*RD*, 149).

Bad faith has its collective side, too. In Sartre's existential ethics, there are no a priori values. These are created by making proper choices, by coordinating facticity and transcendence. If expressed in particular forms, these values can make sense to anyone else in one's situation, thus revealing themselves as universal (Wrenn, para. 3, 42, 47 of 47). Historically, this permits a transposition of Stevens's behaviour to the general context of responsibility in the face of fascism during the interwar years. He appears as an accomplice, if marginal, to those deciding, executing, accepting, silencing or denying the Holocaust.

What this existential ethics amounts to in the end is a challenge for every individual to examine their lives for intimations of bad faith, resulting in a heightened sensitivity against oppression and exploitation (Flynn, para. 35 of 52). This is what happens at the end of the novel, when Stevens, after saying goodbye for ever to a Miss Kenton in tears, goes through his 'epiphany of shame and waste' on Weymouth pier, knowing himself responsible for his and Miss Kenton's wasted lives (*KI*, 64; Parkes, 53).

### ***Repression, 1: Love and Sex***

Finally, the most forceful, yet eventually unsuccessful self-protecting mechanism of Stevens's unconscious is repression, both sexual and political, which determines and conditions his relationship to the most important people in his life, both his fathers and Miss Kenton (Shaffer, *Understanding*, 64).<sup>75</sup> This occurs by way of censoring,

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<sup>74</sup> This apparent loyalty and the recourse to due obedience originate in Stevens's unpredicted discovery of his master's darkest side as led by his obsessive analectic seizures, and ultimately aim at dodging his own responsibility as his accomplice. In the course of his cogitations on this matter, he inevitably gets muddled, eventually contradicting himself and disowning his employer's civilizing efforts as 'misguided, even foolish' (*RD*, pp. 200-01, emphasis mine). This is behind his continuous lies, and more specifically in his St-Peter-like denial of his former master three times (Lewis, pp. 85-87).

<sup>75</sup> For the intimate relationship between both types of repression, see Parkes, p. 57.

displacing and condensing dangerous psychological material, 'driving it from the conscious into the unconscious'.

Sex, as an ideological factor, is indeed very much present in the discourse upheld in Darlington Hall's upstairs quarters and interiorized downstairs by butler and housekeeper, both presumably virgins. This is an unspoken topic underlying their entire problematic relationship during the very long years they spend at the helm of the house. More generally, Darlington Hall is an example of how the 'poverty, unhappiness and wretchedness' of English sexual life was the price paid for England's 'conventional moral code'.<sup>76</sup> Nothing to wonder at in a society based on self-repression and fear of sexuality and sexual knowledge (McKibbin, 522). Despite being acknowledged as an embodiment of an age-long, culturally prestigious tradition, and one of the finest products of the 'infinitely adaptable and creative' human mind, the grand house, in Freudian terminology, is ultimately revealed as a major example of 'nothing more than the sublimation of the baser instincts'.<sup>77</sup>

The most paradigmatic example of a repressed memory in the novel is one that Stevens seems so much at pains to remember in its true details: standing by Miss Kenton's door, while still at Darlington Hall, sensing, rather than actually hearing, that she was crying. Coming back to his memory twice in the course of his narrative, he puts her crying down to the wrong reason. It is only at the end of Stevens's journey, when he finally meets her, that the real cause appears, as stated by her: her wish for a life together with him, and his utter insensitivity to her modest advances (the last time in a most inconsiderate, cruel way). The sexual connection is clear.

One of these two occasions is associated with a very much symbolic flower motif (*RD*, 215).<sup>78</sup> This theme comes to a head in the scene in which, having caught the butler in the act of reading a sentimental novel, Miss Kenton touches his hands in order to loosen his grasp on it, making him feel as if they had both suddenly been 'thrust on to some other plane of being altogether.' (*RD*, 167) In quite a Freudian slip-of-the-tongue way, during their last brief professional meeting over cocoa,

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<sup>76</sup> Janet Chance, *Cost of English Morals*, as cited in McKibbin, p. 328.

<sup>77</sup> Sigmund Freud's 'Obituary', *The Lancet*, 30 September 1939, as cited in Overy, p. 172.

<sup>78</sup> See above, p. 72, n. 46.

feeling very tired, she says she has been *wishing for her bed* for a few hours (174, emphasis mine).<sup>79</sup>

The most flagrant mythical-ideological operation in this field takes place when a couple of young servants leave the house in order to get married (*RD*, 157). *Toff* discourse fire-branded on their souls, butler and housekeeper cannot understand sacrificing professional duties and prospects for any personal imperative, such as love.<sup>80</sup> In their ideological constellation, love can only be contemplated as something valuable when understandable in a context of socially sensible arrangement. They overcome the situation, as long as an understandable interpretation thereof is needed, by way of the mythological trope of *identification*. Thereby, ‘the other is a scandal’, being turned, therefore, into ‘analogues who have gone astray’. Their alleged ‘otherness’ being thus ‘reduced to sameness’, the young couple’s decision cannot possibly constitute any real threat or challenging stand to their subaltern-*toff* (‘petit-bourgeois’ in Barthes) ideological universe (*Mythol.*, 152-53).

### ***Repression, 2: Self-deception, Little White Lies, Treachery***

Stevens’s repression is also exposed through an imagery of clothing. In Freud’s words: ‘people [...] do not show their sexuality freely, but to conceal it, they wear a heavy overcoat woven of a tissue of lies.’<sup>81</sup> As already commented, it is highly significant that austere Stevens does not possess any civilian clothes of his own proper. He cannot be understood without his professional apparel, a sort of camouflage uniform in his constant battle for butlerian greatness and dignity. He defines this last all-important concept as ‘not removing one’s clothing in public’ (*RD*, 210). By the end of the novel, Stevens’s ‘mythic draperies’ will be shed like the Emperor’s new clothes in his Weymouth epiphany, becoming an ‘other to himself’ and revealing the irreducible naked ape underneath, the aging, failing Yahoo who

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<sup>79</sup> Making Stevens put an abrupt end to the meeting and cancelling any future ones thenceforth. For the several types of slips of the tongue or *parapraxes*, as well as other ways of releasing a repressed psyche according to Freud, see Eagleton, p. 137.

<sup>80</sup> Stevens finds these situations ‘a serious threat to the order in the house.’ This formula is practically identical to the one used by Briony Tallis after her discovery of sex in her home (see above, p. 21, n. 26).

<sup>81</sup> ‘People are in general not candid over sexual matters.’ Sigmund Freud, *Five Letters on Psychoanalysis*, as cited in Shaffer, *Understanding*, p. 63.

was once a Nazi sympathizer's domestic right-hand man (Shaffer, *Understanding*, 67).<sup>82</sup>

That the tissue Stevens's clothes are made of is woven of lies is to be seen in the 'language of self-deception' that his story is written in, from his little white lies told for the sake of avoiding unpleasantness to the denial of his former master, always under the 'uniform and deceptive veil of politeness' (Swift, 38).<sup>83</sup> An example of how twisted Stevens can be when he feels the need to lie, yet not losing face with himself, is directly related to the mythological trope of *neither-norism*. Hereby, Stevens tries not to appear as a traitor and a renegade to himself, after denying having worked for Lord Darlington when asked by Mr Farraday's guests, the Wakefields (*RD*, 123). Stevens's 'magical solution' to this moral difficulty is neither to explicitly deny him, nor to be his hagiographer: he lies for the sake of social and professional convenience, acknowledging him to be, however, 'a gentleman of great moral stature [...] to the last.' He does this in a strictly private way, in his diary, where he assesses his master's life and work as 'at best, a sad waste' (201). Like this, he provides himself the moral relief of feeling that his explanation to Mr Farraday has not been 'entirely devoid of truth' (*Mythol.*, 154; *RD*, 125-26). The house's honour and prestige, besides, is secured in front of everyone. Once Lord Darlington passes away, the house will still go on unblemished as such.

### ***Repression, 3: Politics***

Stevens's repression has also a political side, bound up with his professional ethos, as it is based on the fatal, inevitable, inexcusable and absolute character of every single principle, value, rule and duty thereof, beyond their functionality and possible context, articles of a faith whose necessary corollary is not only an ascetic renunciation of oneself and the world, as we already saw, but also a mysticism of

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<sup>82</sup> Waddick Doyle, 'Being an Other to Oneself: First Person Narration in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*', as cited in Sim, p. 121.

Cynthia F. Wong, 'Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*', in Shaffer, *Companion*, pp. 493-503 (p. 499).

<sup>83</sup> Freud defines repression precisely as a 'device' to avoid 'unpleasure'. Stevens's 'forgotten memories' have to do with 'wishes [...] incompatible with the ethical and aesthetic standards of his personality.' Sigmund Freud, *Five Letters on Psychoanalysis*, as cited in Shaffer, *Understanding*, p. 68. 'Veil of politeness' is an expression in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as cited *ibid*, p. 67.

hardship for its own sake (Moore, 447). Thus, in his peculiar view, silver-polishing, for instance, as something leading to a smoother relationship and a better understanding between a Nazi criminal and an arch-appeaser, is not seen as a professional task met to earn a living in a society where survival is difficult and uncertain, but as a great triumph, evidence that a member of the humblest order can also make his own, if small, contribution to *justice in the world* and *peace in our time* (*RD*, 110, 136, emphasis mine). Of course, this is yet another instance of sublimation: the same psychical operation as Stevens perpetrates, if unconsciously, to make some sense of the pathetic fact that when his father passes away, for instance, he is taking care of somebody's feet (Eagleton, 132).<sup>84</sup>

During his journey, though, as under Socratic prescription and in a *psychoanalytic* way of sorts, Stevens undergoes conversational treatment of this moral disease, as applied by the fleeting, mostly working-class acquaintances that he makes on his way to Cornwall. As Socrates's mother, the midwife, they assist him in gradually giving birth, if that is possible at all at his age, to a new self, aware of his ideological impasses and non-sequiturs, and of his deleterious illusions. Stevens has the chance to experience them as decent, hospitable people living their lives in a deeply historical context that includes sacrificing their own sons in the People's War. That would be the reason why they fought Hitler, conquering in the process 'the right to be free citizens', as Harry Smith says.<sup>85</sup> After all, there might still be a contradiction, unacknowledged by Stevens, between dignity and 'being a slave' (*RD* 186, 189).

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<sup>84</sup> And maybe an instance of Bloom's 'anxiety of influence', despite both Mr Stevens not being poets, but humble servants? We might imagine Stevens Jr. as a 'strong' butler, condemned to the 'unwisdom' of 'seeking to overcome [his father's] priority' and 'authority' in their common profession or *art*: Harold Bloom, 'Introduction. A Meditation upon Priority, and a Synopsis', in *The Anxiety of Influence*, in *NATC*, pp. 1797-1802 (1800-01). Actually, Stevens's refusal to tend his dying father for the sake of his professional duties is inscribed into a vicious circle by following his father's own example, of which he always pretends to be proud. In any case, by deserting his dying father, Stevens finally conquers his position as a great butler in his own right. In the end, according to Cynthia F. Wong, he appears to be 'as odious and cold as the father he admires so much' (*KIRD*, pp. 497, 499).

<sup>85</sup> In Churchill's own words about the 'ordinary people': 'they have saved this country; they have the right to rule it.' Colville, *Fringes of Power*, as cited in *DAF*, p. 636.

### *Waste and its Antidotes: Bantering*

This awareness, however, is ironically remarkable. Although Stevens gains insight into his former ideals and his past, there is something like an unspoken understanding of the futility of such knowledge: it is too late. He is the fatal, lonely butler. Lost opportunity is irredeemable (*KI*, 53, 57; *RD*, 179; *KIRD*, pp. 499, 502). In a way, this is the opposite of the *Bildungsroman*: faced with his moral and vital waste, Stevens, a man already approaching the remains of his lowly life, has to face his discursive self-undoing: he has to learn to forget all that he cherished as the very foundations of his life.

The central element in the acknowledgment of Stevens's life as a waste is his relationship with Miss Kenton. This relationship allows for a curious psychoanalytic reading that connects Stevens's suppressed emotionality with his worshipped professionalism from a Lacanian perspective.<sup>86</sup> According to it, we can only say that he loves her as long as that implies her submission to his beloved professional code and its rituals.<sup>87</sup> This would go against the presumably commonest perception of the average reader, who would see those codes, the discursive instrument of the privileged to achieve the working man's subjection and acculturation, as obstacles stifling the butler's unconscious, repressed emotional and sexual drives, whose object could only be the housekeeper. On the contrary, what makes Stevens love her is that she is such a dedicated professional, unable as she is, for example, to take any days off, just like him.<sup>88</sup> After so many years, she becomes yet another part of the house rituals. This sheds an altogether different light on their little evening meetings over cocoa. Thus, we can understand both her frustration and his consternation when one evening, as we already saw, she expresses she is tired and *wishing* for her *bed*. The idyll finishes that very moment. When it returns, twenty years later, on his receiving a letter confessing the waste of her life, what makes him feel his forgotten love is precisely the memories of their *work* together!

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<sup>86</sup> The novel's psychoanalytic connection might be traced in its very title: Susannah Hunnewell, 'Kazuo Ishiguro: The Art of Fiction, n° 196', *Paris Review*, as cited in Sim, p. 135.

<sup>87</sup> Renata Salecl, 'I Can't Love You unless I Give You Up', in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. by Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek, as cited in Sim, pp. 135-36.

<sup>88</sup> At least, until she starts dating her future husband: see *RD*, p. 170.

In any case, ambiguously and interestingly enough, all his awareness avails him in practical terms is the ‘futile hopefulness’ of his final resolve to cultivate yet another little professional mannerism, bantering, as if driven by inertia, ‘eternally stretching forth towards the desire for something else’ (KIRD, 496). This is so because desire itself, in Lacanian terms, ‘can never be satisfied’, its realization not consisting in being ‘fulfilled’, but reproduced as such. By reaching ‘for a new object’ in this way, Stevens’s ‘symbolic structures’ would be left ‘more or less in place’.<sup>89</sup>

A different, yet compatible explanation of Stevens’s final enthusiasm for bantering comes to mind, thinking in strictly historical terms (History being the antidote of myth and its distorting effects). Despite his moral responsibility, we should not over-stress the options really available for Stevens during his decades at Darlington Hall. In real historical terms, in 1932, on the eve of Hitler’s ascent to power in Germany, there were 2,750,000 unemployed, many of them uninsured, in Britain: a ‘bitter society’, indeed, was that of the Hunger Marches.<sup>90</sup> In 1956, sitting by the sea at Weymouth, although in a few months a PM will state that Britons ‘have never had it so good’, old Stevens, aware as he finally is of the waste that his cherished dignity ultimately stands for, still has to eat, wear and lodge; besides, there is a much smaller demand for butlers.<sup>91</sup> A consummate survivor, he displays his ‘ability to adapt to whatever new situation’ by putting on ‘a dignified face’, suppressing and even transforming ‘past disgrace into present acceptance.’ (KIRD, 500-01) Ethics, like mythology, suits the rich much more so than the poor. Maybe the elusive secrets of bantering are a satisfactory, if delusive, motivation to go on striving.

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<sup>89</sup> Quoted from Lacan by Molly Westerman, ‘Is the Butler Home? Narrative and the Split Subject in *The Remains of the Day*’, as quoted in Sim, p. 137; D. Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychiatry*, as cited in Sim, p. 135. For the Symbolic Order, see below, pp. 105-106.

<sup>90</sup> Briggs, pp. 309-10, 315. See also M. Pember Reeves, as cited by Briggs, p. 276 (and contrast with Orwell: see above, p. 46, n. 78). For the Hunger Marches, see Stevenson, pp. 290-92.

For unemployment, homelessness and Stevens Sr. himself, see *RD*, pp. 51, 241, 243; Stevenson, p. 286. For Miss Kenton’s reaction after the sacking of two Jewish maids, see *RD*, pp. 152-53.

<sup>91</sup> H.C.G. Matthew, ‘Macmillan, (Maurice) Harold, first earl of Stockton (1894–1986)’, in *ODNB*, Jan. 2011 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/40185>> [accessed 13 Feb 2012] [para. 52 of 79]

For the dwindling numbers of those employed as domestics in Britain, see *DAF*, p. 636.

### *Mythical Englishness and Nostalgia*

Being a 'voice of the margin' speaking about a (delusively perceived) 'centre of events', although his main purpose is to justify and excuse himself away, Stevens reconstructs, through his private memories, a 'public historical context'.<sup>92</sup> By doing so, he establishes a link between the intrahistorical and the historical proper, as a collective experience and narrative. *The Remains of the Day* is thus one of the main exponents of the so-called 'crisis of inheritance' literature, where the vicissitudes of a certain estate are dealt with metaphorically, ultimately referring to the national ethos.<sup>93</sup>

Hence, although the novel's main theme is character or, as I called it before, making sense of one's life in the face of shame and guilt, the importance of the themes of Englishness and nostalgia, their object being a past of (national) greatness evoked by the narrator, cannot be underplayed. This is evident from the very start, as it is the 'restraint' of the English countryside that launches Stevens onto his speculations on the nature of the *necessarily* English butler (*RD*, 28-29, 43). This moral feature, as applied to a geographical entity, betrays Stevens's idea of Englishness as a metaphysical, mythical one, based on fictions.<sup>94</sup> In fact, and even more seriously, he links it to race, of all things (*RD*, 43).<sup>95</sup> This is yet another blatant example of 'privation of history', whereby the English countryside is experienced and interpreted as 'coming from eternity' (*Mythol.*, 152). In itself, this is not new: industrialization already prompted this reaction in many of the intellectuals and

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<sup>92</sup> J.M. Lang, 'Public Memory, Private History: Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*'; P. Veyret, 'The Strange Case of the Disappearing Chinamen: Memory and Desire in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and *When We Were Orphans*', both as cited in Sim, p. 111.

For Stevens's delusive perception of Darlington Hall as the center of power and influence in England, see his metaphors of the wheel hub vs. the ladder in *RD*, pp. 115, 227.

<sup>93</sup> John J. Su, *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), pp. 120-25, 23.

<sup>94</sup> Parkes, p. 59. More precisely, on the encyclopedias in Lord Darlington's library, the National Geographic magazine and, most significantly, on a spurious travel guide, Mrs Jane Symons's *The Wonder of England* (*RD*, pp. 28, 11).

<sup>95</sup> For an analogue spatial mythology relating the South German landscape with the avowed moral qualities of the fantastical Aryan race, see *Classic Mountain Film - A Short History of Mountain Film* <<http://www.mountainfilm.co.uk/about.html>> [accessed 10 February 2012] See also 'Leni Riefenstahl' in *HEART* <<http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/holoprelude/riefenstahl.html>> [accessed 10 February 2012]



artists of the Victorian age, who saw rural England as a symbol of the country's *unchanging essence*.<sup>96</sup>

As any metaphysical essence, this neo-rural English ethos is fraught with ideological danger. To begin with, as a charismatic notion, its apprehension, its knowledge, requires a special 'expertise', not just the sensory perception and common logic shared by all humans. This expertise pertains to those worthy of trust: the charismatic aristocracy and those assimilated to them in the upper classes. This is what can be deduced when Lord Darlington authoritatively speaks on Englishness: 'We English...' (Su, 133)

Furthermore, the nationalism implicitly constructed into this fictionally originated ethos becomes in turn a 'matrix of ideological constructions' to be aware of for the sake of individual dignity. This is so because it supports a mythical image of England as a 'Garden of Eden', existing in a kind of untroubled 'pastoral harmony' before the start of mass immigration from the former colonies, Trade Union unrest and the *Swinging Sixties* (Parkes, 61; Sim, 50). As a result, the ultimate intention behind Ishiguro's self-conscious pastiche on interwar England, as far as the collective is implied, is to deconstruct a 'dominant heritage myth of Englishness in the Thatcherite 1980s' and to resist a 'nostalgia industry' susceptible of political exploitation. Briefly, what Ishiguro is doing here is to indict 'an entire nation's mythical self-identity'.<sup>97</sup>

For example, Stevens's understanding of *greatness* can be associated with ideas common to Mrs Thatcher, who would be fond of speaking of *Great Britain*, as a sort of challenge to the historical decline of the former Empire into a small, peripheral European nation (Su, 131).<sup>98</sup> The novel pitilessly deconstructs this idea: the greatness

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<sup>96</sup> See Berberich, pp. 52-53. An early, pre-Victorian example of this would be William Blake's 'Jerusalem': 'England's mountains green' or 'pleasant pastures' as opposed to 'these dark Satanic mills.' William Blake, 'Preface', in *Milton* (extracts), in *Selected Poetry*, ed. by Michael Mason, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1998; first publ. 1996), pp. 161-76 (p. 161, lines 2, 4, 6).

For more on neo-rural ideals of Englishness in the interwar period, see below, 'Catonism', pp. 124-26.

<sup>97</sup> Sarah Gibson, 'English Journeys: The Tourist, the Guidebook, and the Motorcar in *The Remains of the Day*'; Brian W. Shaffer, *Reading the Novel in English 1950-2000*, both as cited in Sim, p. 126. Parkes, p. 62. See also Allan Vorda and Kim Herzinger, 'An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro', as cited in Su, p. 130.

<sup>98</sup> Stevens's Britain is also *Great: RD*, p. 28.

that Stevens speculates about as an essentially English quality is directly related to a *lack* he perceives in the flat, undramatic English landscape (*RD*, 28-29). 'Englishness', as Slavoj Žižek states about *Remains*, 'is an empty signifier'.<sup>99</sup> This emptiness also constitutes an ingredient in the making of related quintessentialist ideologies based on social hierarchy. In this way, not surprisingly, the main reference in Stevens's life, dignity, is associated with another mythical character, the 'great' English butler, who is as undramatic and self-restrained as the English landscape and who, in his greatness, scurries about shining shoes and emptying chamber pots (Su, 131-32).

This deconstruction is facilitated by a structural displacement of ethos, originally equated with Darlington Hall, through the metaphor of Stevens's journey to the West Country. This displacement becomes apparent at the little village where Stevens is put up for the night on his running short of petrol. There, the monolithic and exclusive greatness of the English ethos is opposed, in a conversational, practical way, by different opinions bespeaking a plural national community, in which there is room for Stevens's borrowed ideas about Britain, but also for the local radical's convictions. Therefore, what was an unchanging, metaphysical essence administered by the wealthy and powerful is shown to be, at least potentially, the product of an ongoing conversation, a communicational activity made possible by the generous contribution and the heavy blood toll paid in WWII by the ordinary, working people, definitely giving them the right to a share in the country's management and the definition of its identity, their identity (136). Thus, Englishness may prove to be a potentially shifting notion, according to circumstances and different perceptions thereof. Stevens himself avows that he had been missing 'a whole dimension to the question', accustomed as he is to the 'putative national past' made of the 'invented traditions' acted out at Darlington Hall every single day of his life as a servant (121-22).

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<sup>99</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, as cited in Su, p. 131.

Therefore, we can identify a sort of utopian and uchronic virtuality in the idea of nostalgia as represented in fiction, which John Su defends in the face of its dominant critical assessment as a delusional and escapist construct.<sup>100</sup> This idea involves the proposal of shared, solidary ethic principles and values applicable to our present time, as the product of imaginative negotiations with the past, represented as it could have been, rather than as it actually was, and as evoked by the different groups sharing their longing for it on account and in the terms of their present needs. Thus configured, this nostalgia does not fall very far from Habermas's idea of communicative rationality, as oriented towards the concrete, situational needs of others (Su, 3, 7, 12-13, 17, 19, 24, 135).<sup>101</sup> Hence, it is the ordinary people, like those waiting for the lights on Weymouth pier to be switched on, the very same people whose needs would come into conflict with the reassuring certainties of the national ethos as defined by the powerful, who will make it possible for a new ethos to be developed, constituting an alternative, challenging paradigm of social relationships in terms of class, gender and race (Su, 21, 138).

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<sup>100</sup> For a disparaging view of 'nostalgia', see Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narrative of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, as cited by Linda Hutcheon, 'Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern', in *UTEL: University of Toronto English Library* <<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/index.html>> [accessed 27 March 2012] [para. 12 of 27] For similar stands, contrasting nostalgia with 'memory': David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*; Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, both as cited in Hutcheon, para. 9 of 27. See also Su, pp. 1-2.

<sup>101</sup> See Brian Shaffer, 'An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro', as cited in Su, p. 10. For Habermas on rationality as communicative and positing 'reaching understanding', and on 'matters of common concern' as its object and as 'the inherent telos of speech', see James Bohman and William Rehg, 'Jürgen Habermas', in *SEP*, Winter 2011 <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/habermas/>> [accessed 16 June 2012] [para. 17, 20, 21, 4 of 81]

## Chapter 3

### Evelyn Waugh's *BRIDESHEAD REVISITED*

#### *Introduction. Structure*

First published in 1945, *Brideshead Revisited* is in sharp contrast with the two other novels studied in this dissertation.<sup>1</sup> This is due to its apologetic tone and nostalgic mood, celebrating Roman Catholicism and recreating what at the time Waugh feels to be the doomed world of the traditional English aristocracy, the ultimate guardian of a social ideology whose values he equates with civilization itself.<sup>2</sup>

The novel has proved to be a major inspiration for those authors, McEwan and Ishiguro amongst them, who, born after 1945 and lacking Waugh's direct personal experience and involvement in this exclusive universe, have written about this lost world before the Welfare State and global Hooperism. It has proved a quarry for them in terms of themes, motifs, characterization and imagery.

They have also drawn on Waugh's counter-worshipping elements in his representation of this world. These are related to the inner contradictions of a decadent, retreating and bankrupt caste living within a residual culture doomed to disappear after WWII, on which biting satire is often set loose. In *Brideshead Revisited*, there is nothing like the ambiguity we felt about Lord Darlington's status as a nobleman in Ishiguro's portrayal. In this respect, the novel shows us, as

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<sup>1</sup> The edition I will comment on is the original American one, as referenced. In 1960, Waugh published a new version with a preface that expounds on his rationale for some changes introduced: Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder*, rev. edn (London: Penguin Books, 1962; repr. Penguin Modern Classics, 2000). For all of its excesses in style and characterization, I find the original edition very representative of precisely the characteristic *barbarism* of the English aristocracy, as opposed to the philistinism of the rising lower-middle and lower classes. This attitude is in itself a signifying factor in the novel and an essential element in the aristocratic mythology fashioned by the author. The revised edition, moreover, has never been published in America. See Martin Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: No Abiding City 1939–1966* (London: Flamingo, 1993), pp. 72-73, 382-85.

<sup>2</sup> For Waugh's amazement at the failure of some of his predictions: BR60, Preface, pp. ix-x (p. x). Civilization, for Waugh, can only be Christian (*ergo* Catholic): Evelyn Waugh, *Robbery Under Law*, as cited in Laura Coffey, 'Evelyn Waugh's Country House Trinity: Memory, History and Catholicism in *Brideshead Revisited*', *Literature and History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 15.1 (2006), 59-73 (p. 64).

Stevens's American employer would say, the 'real thing': the very core of England's age-old landed aristocracy, 'barons since Agincourt', warts, education, income, debt, sex and all (*BR*, 332). The collective demise of this caste will also be shown in the Flytes' many plights: exile, alcoholism, apostasy and, finally, extinction without issue. Their world is one in its death throes.

The perspective for the analysis of this decadent, yet discursively enthralling caste, is that of a member of the middle classes, Charles Ryder, who lives two intense love stories with Sebastian and Julia Flyte, the marquess of Marchmain's son and daughter, and another, more generally, with the aristocratic world itself. Unlike Stevens, he has the cultural resources needed to fully acknowledge what is behind the Flytes' attitudes and behaviour. Unlike Briony Tallis, by becoming a convert to their ideology and values, he could not care less about the righteous morality of the bourgeoisie. The originality of this narrative point of view is that Ryder ushers us into the Brideshead universe describing it, as it were, both from within and from without at the same time.

In a similar way to Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, the first-person-narrating main character, Charles Ryder, a painter turned into an army captain during WWII, fashions a frame story as an excuse for the narrative of his life from his first days as an Oxford undergraduate in the early 1920s until his separation from the woman he loves on the brink of war. The prologue triggers the main story through Ryder's inadvertent arrival at Brideshead Castle, the ancestral home of the Marchmains, in the wake of military exercises and rumours of mobilization. After an initial major flashback, carrying us twenty years back to a perfect moment of youthful summer bliss on an English meadow beside his beloved friend, Lord Sebastian Flyte, Ryder's memories are presented in a mostly linear sequence, with some little adjusting analepsis. The epilogue takes us back to 1943, when, after a visit to Brideshead chapel, Charles hints at personal conversion to Roman Catholicism: after all, as the subtitle indicates, these are somebody's not merely *profane*, but also *sacred* memories. The circularity of the frame story may be interpreted as a symbolic allusion to sacredness under the fashion of eternity, world without end.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 3.21, in *The Bible*, p. 241.

Roman Catholicism is a dominant theme in the novel and the only major deviation from the historical standard of its depicted aristocracy, causing controversy from the moment of its first publication.<sup>4</sup> From the very start, Christian discourse, iconography, symbolism and mythology supports all the signifying structure of the narrative. For instance, we should note how, in the initial scene of Ryder's life account, nature is said 'to proclaim *the glory of God*' (BR, 21, emphasis mine). Ryder is starting a spiritual journey finishing precisely in silent adoration of the Eucharist in Brideshead chapel, to which he is about to be introduced for the first time.

In this very scene, the recreated Arcadia of countryside splendour, languor and love, the circumstantial bliss of two semi-pagan young men on their unwitting way to conversion must be read against the darkest signifying element in Western pastoral tradition, namely the presage of the decay and death of youth and happiness. This, in turn, must be inscribed into a mythical context where the soul plays its part in an unending, universal drama in its fight against its enemies: World, Flesh and Devil. At the end, a number of conversions are staged or hinted.

This happens, moreover, in a specific historical context of economic slump, social unrest, and impending war. The end of civilization (which, for Waugh, starts with the end of religion) may be at hand. For him, History is not contingent: it is the raw material for the deployment of God's plan of salvation through the workings of divine Grace. We humans only possess the past, a book written by God with a mind to His saving purposes (225). The present points to war, the future is for the human race yet to see, but it is in the hands of divine Providence. Thus, History becomes naturally transcendent, it is necessary in its overall form.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For the most notorious dictum on Waugh's Catholicism, see below, p. 133, n. 108.

<sup>5</sup> We could call this idea of history 'memory', something installing 'remembrance within the sacred' for the members of an ideologically cohesive community: Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', as cited in David Rothstein, 'Brideshead Revisited and the Modern Historicization of Memory', *Studies in the Novel*, 25.3 (1993), 318-331 (p. 319). Throughout the novel, Brideshead Castle will be a site of memory, the treasure house of a collective identity based on an old tradition of memory.

Finally, plot development can be said to be that of a *Bildungsroman* with a double focus: the aesthetic and moral education of an artist, but also the spiritual pilgrimage of a human being in his quest for love. This human being will be our first object of analysis.

### ***Charles Ryder: Moral Paralysis and Spiritual Longing***

We meet Charles Ryder as a fresher, just arrived in Oxford. He is a well-to-do, London middle-class orphan invested with the premature maturity that the public school system has programmed him for, and the bleakness that his social background and an estranged parent-child relationship have provided him with throughout his entire life (*BR*, 44).<sup>6</sup>

His father, a mythically (and very entertainingly) distracted erudite living in a parallel, wacky universe of his own, has not kissed him since his nursery days. His is a dead world of emotional restraint and dullness (*BR*, 44, 97, 65). Were it not for his fascinatingly deranged sense of humour and sarcasm, the atmosphere in Charles's house could be described as dominated by moral paralysis. Despite the brilliant satire in the pages dedicated to him, and the articulateness of both characters, it is apparent that their communication is not much more fluent than the one between both Stevens, father and son.<sup>7</sup>

Ryder lives through his fresher term as subjected to a new alienating routine. This will result in a strong bond with Sebastian Flyte, who has grounds for such a mood, too. Their friendship will appear to quench Charles's longing for something else, for something different, his spiritual thirst for love, wonder and discovery (*BR*, 28, 31).

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<sup>6</sup> His name symbolism presents him in a very accurate way as a free man not belonging to the nobility; a *ceorl*, not an *eorl*: 'Karl', in *Nordic Names* <<http://www.nordicnames.de/wiki/Karl>> [accessed 27 January 2012] See also 'earl, n.', in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Oxford: OUP, 1989), online version June 2012 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/58971>> [accessed 18 June 2012]

His surname Ryder could link him to chivalric ideals: a horseback warrior, a knight riding for justice and honour. See 'Last name: Ryder', in *The Internet Surname Database* <<http://www.surnamedb.com/Surname/Ryder>> [accessed 27 January 2012]

<sup>7</sup> As for his mother, she dies in Bosnia during WWI, thus making him grow up 'overshadowed by bereavement' (*BR*, p. 44).

After a satirical epiphany of sorts, implying Flyte's vomiting into his room, an entire new world is open to him (44). He tells us, 'I date my Oxford life from my first meeting with Sebastian.' (24) Here, we have another example of mythical rhetoric: neither-norism. Placed between the tedious smart set he initially makes friends with and the unpromising *barbarian* alternative of Flyte's carousing Etonians, Charles will opt for the *magical* solution: the 'enchanted garden' down the Rabbit-Hole, a Wonderland where plovers lay their eggs early for Sebastian's mother (*Mythol.*, 154; *BR*, 31).<sup>8</sup> In a word, he finds Paradise.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Oxford: a Toff's Privilege***

Prior to any further development, a warning should be made as to the dangers of this mythical, 'innocent speech' of the orphan and Oxonian fresher (*Mythol.*, 130). In this respect, the comment Ryder's father makes to him shortly before leaving for Oxford is highly significant; on discussing his allowance, he openly asserts: 'nowhere else in the world and at no other time, do a few hundred pounds, one way or the other, make so much difference to one's importance and popularity.' (*BR.*, 25) This is a *toff* narrative on the antipodes of poor Stevens's tale in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. Only with this consciousness should we let ourselves be seduced by Waugh's sensually descriptive powers and his flair for the humorous and satirical.<sup>10</sup> Among gorgeous country houses and wine parties, money, class and power lurk in the shadows. The praise of the exclusive, privileged world of the traditional aristocracy

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<sup>8</sup> This *smart set* like to discuss papers on Freud, among other subjects. Charles's (and Waugh's) own concept of Freud and psychoanalysis is quite clear, if we think of what happens on one of these occasions: Ryder opens his window, 'weary with metaphysics', only to see how Sebastian approaches and throws up into his room.

<sup>9</sup> A certain structural unbalance has been seen in the relationship between this 'paradise lost' of earthly joys and the Bildungsroman plot that leads Charles to conversion, more important in theory and the fruit of Ryder's growth into maturity: Valerie Kennedy, 'Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*: Paradise Lost or Paradise Regained?', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 21.1 (1990), 23-39 (pp. 24-26, 34,36).

<sup>10</sup> As an example of Waugh's ideological stand, beyond humour and satire, when Cordelia Flyte, Sebastian's younger sister, becomes a paramedic in the Spanish Civil War, we can read between the lines that she has done so on Franco's side: she learns about her brother's life in North Africa while in Burgos, the capital of Franco's *New Spain* from early in the rebellion until the fall of Madrid: *BR*, p. 303; 'The Spanish Civil War', in *Country Studies: Spain* <<http://countrystudies.us/spain/21.htm>> [accessed 31 May 2012] [para. 3 of 16]

For Waugh's explicit support of Franco, see Overy, p. 328. As an attenuating circumstance, it seems that his stand was by no means an exception among English Catholics, working-class ones included: McKibbin, p. 287. For the general attitude of European churches to fascism in the continent, see Nolte, p. 18.



can be made by a middle-class orphan only inasmuch as he has graciously been granted access therein, eventually to be co-opted by their full-right members.

Hence, it does not come as a surprise that the reason a member of Sebastian's drinking party proposes for Charles to forgive Flyte's throw-up act, namely the too many different wines they have tasted, speaks of the life of economic and social privilege that these young men, still under twenty, self-indulgently enjoy. Even Charles's cousin Jasper, when he visits his rooms to try to make him come back to the fold after running severely into debt, admits to belonging to an Oxford dining club, a very expensive extra-academic activity (*BR*, 41).

However, according to the peculiarly witty, though nutty monologue of Charles's father's on his son's imminent going up to Oxford, we can notice that he may be more than just a poor lad taken up by a rich friend: he is going to be given almost double the allowance most men are. His father's hobbies include buying archeological relics, which is no poor man's pastime, either. An incidental reference to somewhere called 'Boughton' may indicate an originally landed family origin. The family's country seat may have gone to his uncle, Jasper's father, in his son's words the 'Head of the Family'. Most likely, Charles belongs to the upper layers of the financially solid, professional London middle classes with some land behind them, too. Thus, Charles is a *toff*, if a minor and plebeian one, in his own right (25, 63, 67).

### ***Another Oxford: The Waste Land***

A second warning should be made about this seeming paradise of love and aristocratic glamour. It is made in partnership by T.S. Eliot and Anthony Blanche, a colourful character who, from Sebastian's balcony, through a megaphone, recites *The Waste Land* to a group of sporting undergraduate beefcakes. Like this, he introduces

a note of instability and dark presages in the narrative, along with Lady Marchmain's suggested power to make even Nature alter its cycles for her sake.<sup>11</sup>

Eliot's disturbing poem on the predicament of civilization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, felt as materialistic, technocratic, godless and decentred, perfectly suits Anthony Blanche, the homo/bisexual and very much effete (and stammering) cosmopolitan aesthete, an heir to the Yellow Nineties. Of an uncertain nationality (although he calls himself a 'dago'), Blanche assumes the role of an oracle in the classic way, just like bisexual Tiresias, whom he mentions in the passage he reads aloud (*BR*, 272, 33).<sup>12</sup> Actually, he stands, like Eliot, between the innovations of Modernism and tradition, between the Gothic of Oxford and the novelty of his frequently cited Freud. When he leaves Oxford after their first year, Charles mentions his locking the enchanted garden and hanging the key in his chain (*BR*, 53, 46-47, 31). Later in the novel, he will provide Charles with characteristic insight in other highly significant moments in his life.

### ***Brideshead as Ideology: The Mythical Discourse of the Stately House***

The paradise Charles discovers is both discursive and aesthetic. He falls madly in love with the aristocratic way of life, a novice in a brave new world where his intuition finds a promise of wholeness. Sebastian introduces Charles to the fact that he still has to learn much in a nonchalant way that dismisses any rational grounding or scholarly fashion. If mythology is a pre-rational way of assigning meaning to the world, Sebastian does so by using another mythological trope: tautology. When he takes Charles, barely acquainted to him, to Oxford's botanical gardens, the only reason he gives to his friend's questioning is 'to see the ivy' (*BR*, 34). In other words: just because, or because I say so.

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<sup>11</sup> For Eliot, see Martin Stannard, 'Introduction', in *Evelyn Waugh: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Martin Stannard, The Critical Heritage Series (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 1-61 (p. 7). See also Overy, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, he is as 'foreign as a Martian.' (*BR*, pp. 49, 46, 32) As to his ethnic affiliation, there sometimes seems to be some Jewish implication, which would make his character an even more mythical one: the Wandering Jew. This is how Charles describes him because of his experience of life (p. 46). See 'Der Ewige Jude', in *HEART* <<http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/holoprelude/derewigejude.html>> [accessed 27 January 2012] See also 'Tiresias', in *Encyclopedia Mythica Online* <<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/t/tiresias.html>> [Accessed 10 February 2012]

Besides, as an artist, Ryder's conversion to the aristocratic ethos can be related to several places of beauty: Brideshead Castle, Sebastian's home and the ancestral seat of the Marchmains; Marchmain House, the family's London home; and decadent Venice, where Sebastian's father lives in exile.

Ryder experiences Brideshead as a revelation, an epiphany. Instantly, he becomes a convert to the Baroque (*BR*, 82). This conveys a mythical subtext that we should not miss: beyond being 'an aesthetic education in itself', an essential element in Brideshead's discourse is aristocratic ideology, a major component thereof being tradition.<sup>13</sup> The stately house has in fact been built with the stones of a castle previously existing up the valley it now commands (*BR*, 79-80). Later on, Ryder will associate the house with 'the august, masculine atmosphere of a better age' (138).<sup>14</sup> This affects Charles's moral education: Brideshead brings together the ideals of community, Englishness and civilization (Coffey, 60). Charles has just trodden a pathway leading him from love of form and tradition, to awareness of and convinced support for the social role of the aristocracy, to love of God as a Catholic.<sup>15</sup>

There are important hints at this evolution, following the novel's general circular pattern, in Charles's first visit to Sebastian's house, where he is shown the chapel, Lord Marchmain's wedding gift to his bride for bringing him back to the faith of his ancestors (*BR*, 220). Later on, as he spends his first summer vacation alone with Sebastian at Brideshead, he describes his experience as a time of 'peace and liberation', where he felt himself 'very near heaven', both expressions being amenable to the lexicon of religious experience (78-79, 83-84).<sup>16</sup> As the plot flows on, we will be witness to a progressive shedding of aesthetic concern in favour of the moral and spiritual in both Charles and Sebastian. Brideshead is 'an emblem of the

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<sup>13</sup> On the Baroque and Tridentine Catholicism, see Frank Kermode, 'Mr Waugh's Cities', *Encounter*, November 1960, 63-69 (p. 64). Charles had grown up in a very much English liking for 'the insular and mediaeval': *BR*, p. 82.

<sup>14</sup> As for country houses as emblems of a certain tradition and a social and political ideal, in an *organic* way, professional architectural painter Ryder confesses: 'I loved buildings that grew silently with the centuries, catching and keeping the best of each generation' (*BR*, p. 225, emphasis mine).

<sup>15</sup> In the end, both the English aristocracy and the Catholic Church share an avowed historical legitimacy and a hierarchical structure (Coffey, p. 64)

<sup>16</sup> Emphasis mine. 'Truth shall make you free.' John 8.32, in *The Bible*, p. 127.

city', 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 (MW'sC, 68; Berberich, 108).<sup>17</sup>

Brideshead is also a symbol of essential Englishness, in that the house is part and parcel of a class system Charles will eventually identify with national character, in the same way as Waugh himself sees the country seats of England as the highest achievement of English national art.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Brideshead can be understood as a symbol of the civilizing function of the class system, as a fortress against social chaos and the barbarism of contemporary life (Coffey, 63, 67).<sup>19</sup> That is why Ryder specializes as an architectural painter: to *eternalize* an endangered *essence*, a trace of God's work among men and the nations. In other words, to *mythologize*, mourning for a world that probably never was.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Venice and the Loss of Innocence: Heterosexuality and Exile***

An unexpected short holiday to Venice provides an incomparable frame for the apex of Charles's aesthetic and moral education in the world of the aristocracy (if not religious yet, despite some interesting ruminations about faith that he records in his diary before going to Italy).<sup>21</sup> It also marks a divide between his life as a young man and the beginning of his life as a man proper. A diffuse restlessness surfaces in his awareness of being 'drowning in honey, stingless' (BR, 101).

The most revealing components of this Venetian interlude are Charles's conversation with Cara on the subject of the nature of his bond to Sebastian, and the character of

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<sup>17</sup> 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.' (MW'sC, p. 68). We should not forget that the ultimate element making sense of the novel is a little red flame flickering in 'a beaten-copper lamp of *deplorable design*' (BR, p. 351, emphasis mine).

<sup>18</sup> Evelyn Waugh, 'I See Nothing but Boredom... Everywhere (1959)', in Evelyn Waugh, *A Little Order: Selected Journalism*, as cited in Berberich, p. 114. See also the preface to BR60, p. x.

<sup>19</sup> Waugh has an anthropological foundation for the class system, rendering it therefore mythically *natural*: Evelyn Waugh, *Robbery under Law*, as cited in Coffey, p. 64.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Toynbee, as quoted in Martin Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: No Abiding City 1939-1966*, as cited in Berberich, p. 115. As a painter, Ryder can be seen as an archival one, taking inventory of the material signs of a fading aristocratic tradition, which he, with prophetic tone, denounces as a sign of the downfall of England itself (BR, pp. 226-27; see also the prologue to the 1960 edition). Indirectly, he is also propping up his new identity as a Catholic (Rothstein, pp. 326-29).

<sup>21</sup> In which he writes that the implicit notion of Christianity within his education had been that 'the basic *narrative* of Christianity had long been exposed as a *myth*' (BR, p. 85, emphasis mine).

the arch-*toff*, the larger-than-life and mythical figure of the great English milord, the marquess of Marchmain himself.<sup>22</sup>

The main object of Cara's conversation with Charles is love and growing into maturity. In Cara's eyes, adult, real love can only be heterosexual, as will be confirmed in Charles's case later in the novel. Anything else, the 'romantic friendships of the English and the Germans', is just a nice way of bringing children into manhood, as long as it does not last for too long. Otherwise, the hazards that might result could be just too serious. Lord Marchmain is an example of the risks of the absence of this phase in a society such as England's, where boys grow far apart from girls and the first, immature and possibly passing love often develops into marriage, which is for life (*BR*, 101-02).<sup>23</sup>

According to Cara, Lord Marchmain hates his wife (maybe, by extension, his offspring too) because she represents the failure and loss of his innocence, presumably his religious and ethical illusions included, shattered by the war.<sup>24</sup> Yet, these war scars cannot fully explain, in her opinion, a by-now subdued alcoholism. Cara has to resort to the myth of the aristocratic Barbarian to account for it: Lord Marchmain's dipsomania ran 'in the blood'. Clearly enough, this posits an aristocratic soul, a mythical essence of the nobility, as visible in the popular notion of *blue blood*. Cara's idea also explains Sebastian's case. Both instances illustrate the same mythical concept of the aristocracy as 'biblical fate' (*Mythol.*, 52).<sup>25</sup> Charles is different: he drinks because and when he enjoys it (*BR*, 103). However, given Cara's mythical arguments, one feels tempted to think: and because he is no aristocrat.

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<sup>22</sup> Within Waugh's 18<sup>th</sup>-century-like gentleman ideal, he is depicted as slothful and profligate (Berberich, p. 105). He ends up in financial ruin, leading to the sale of Marchmain House in London. This notwithstanding, he dies in luxury (*BR*, pp. 95, 217, 318).

<sup>23</sup> Instances of lack of sexual knowledge or experience among young and even middle-aged *toffs*, and tensions springing from it, show in this Venetian episode: *BR*, p. 100. Other instances in the novel: pp. 76, 50, 320.

<sup>24</sup> Since he does not return to England when it is over. He seems to have experienced the war in a very different way from Ishiguro's Lord Darlington: what he may have found in the trenches is nothing but 'total war and total hell.' (*DAF*, pp. 74-76)

<sup>25</sup> Uncaring Julia and Sebastian himself share this mythical belief: *BR*, pp. 129, 131, 154, 161, 142.

### *Psychoanalysis, 1: The Labyrinth of the Imaginary*

It is convenient now to focus closely on Sebastian, the central character, if not protagonist, of Book I, 'Et in Arcadia Ego'. Being a catalyst for plot development and the central reference of mythical discourse in *Brideshead Revisited*, his shortcomings deserve a closer examination than the commonplaces of myth. Some psychoanalytic considerations will give us some further insight into them. Only then will we be able to attempt to understand the nature and the implications of his relationship with Charles.

Sebastian's personality has to be understood in terms of what psychoanalytic theory calls the Imaginary Order. His main psychological trait is an irresponsible, practical resolve not to grow up, arresting his development towards maturity in a perennial boyhood. Sebastian's plight is that, in some inarticulate way, he longs to remain in this unconscious Imaginary as the place of insertion of his unique individuality.

Ultimately, this place he wants to remain in is what Julia Kristeva calls the *Chora*, the maternal Womb.<sup>26</sup> In her theory, and drawing on Freud and Lacan, this would be the unordered space, previous to wholeness and unity in the subject, not fully constituted as yet, where the sole point of reference is the mother's body. It is at this stage that a first alienation takes place in the subject, allowing them to access the Imaginary through the mirror stage, in which, still in a way unmediated by language or logical categories, the subject begins to understand themselves as detached from an outer, if indistinct, object world.<sup>27</sup> This realm does not totally disappear after the full generation of the subject by way of the acquisition of language and the subsequent entrance into the Symbolic Order: it is assumed into it, playing a part in its own development.<sup>28</sup> In Sebastian, however, the Imaginary seems to block this

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<sup>26</sup> 'Julia Kristeva', in *NATC*, pp. 2165-68 (p. 2166). Further references to this article are given in the text or footnotes as made to "'Kristeva'-Norton'.

<sup>27</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (extracts), trans. by Margaret Waller, in *NATC*, pp. 2169-79 (pp. 2170-74).

<sup>28</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan', in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986*, Theory and History of Literature Series (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 75-115 (p. 87).

Dino Felluga, 'Modules on Lacan: On the Structure of the Psyche', in *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*, Purdue University

process, constituting a pole of irresistible attraction, as expressed in his unmitigated narcissism.<sup>29</sup>

A main component distinguishing this phase of psychic development is an idealized identification with the mother. This is central to Sebastian's character. The novel introduces him through a scene in which he conducts Charles to the centre of his world, at a time his family is not at home. Of all places, Sebastian leads Charles to the nursery, where old Nanny Hawkins lives.<sup>30</sup> Besides, the nursery is described as occupying an uncanny space at the centre of a labyrinth. This brings nuances of a lost psychic world where geometry and rational order have not been acquired yet, a mythical realm of childish indifferenciation between the self and the world.

Because of his failure in the transition to the Symbolic, as time passes, Sebastian will be left to the storms of his powerful unconscious, the space of 'true selfhood', the 'treasure house of the signifier', where the nucleus of the subject's being, their most ancient fantasies, are stored: 'I am where I think not'. It is underground that this 'real subject' would be driven, leaving behind itself the ego, its mere symbolic representative (JIM, 90-92).<sup>31</sup> 'Alienated and repressed', this deep yet authentic self will make its presence felt, trying to emerge and disrupt into the Symbolic, penetrating consciousness in the form of an impulse, which in Sebastian's case is his alcoholic urge and his deep nostalgia.

Yet, the Imaginary is a most unreliable location for nostalgia, and can never be recovered. Furthermore, Sebastian will experience the effects of the Symbolic as a further alienation of the subject, feeling the impossibility of returning to an archaic, preverbal stage of the psyche, which for him means, in a more or less unconscious way, total bliss.

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<<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/lacanstructure.html>> [accessed 18 May 2012] [para. 3, 5 of 6]

<sup>29</sup> The Imaginary, in fact, can be defined as the fundamental narcissism whereby the subject creates fantasy images of himself and his ideal object of desire (OSP, para. 3 of 6).

<sup>30</sup> We have to understand Nanny Hawkins as Sebastian's *real* mother: Lady Marchmain, later to appear in the narrative, is a woman from whom Sebastian feels estranged, as associated with a number of social and religious expectations and pressures weighing heavily on him.

<sup>31</sup> See also Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Beginnings Series, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Manchester and New York: MUP, 2002), pp. 109-12.

This drives him into a constant state of melancholy and purposelessness. Hence, his world will be confirmed as a very narrow one, a world of the 'here and now' bound up with his childhood experiences in the nursery, as symbolized in his playthings: his nursery toys.<sup>32</sup> Even those other toys of early manhood that Charles finds in Sebastian's digs, fascinating him so much (silk shirts, liquors, cigars, his mother's early plover eggs...), portray him as a mere 'owner' or 'user'. To Sebastian, they represent a world without adventure, wonder or joy (*Mythol.*, 54; *BR*, 106).

Compared to them, his old playthings bespeak a creative experience, now irretrievable; they represent the object of an unsolvable nostalgia and a fruitless longing. Once the romance with Charles is discontinued as he gets to know and frequent Sebastian's family, advancing towards his adult life as an active member of society, Sebastian will start shedding those *adult* toys. From now on, a bottle of no matter which alcoholic beverage and some money in his pocket, when available, will suffice (*JIM*, 90-91). In this way, he poses as the paradigm of civilization's discontents. As Charles tells us, he will count conscience among his intruders, his constant prayer being 'to be let alone.' (*BR*, 127)

In the end, we can see Sebastian as an unadapted subject in a world of social roles and pressures, as a subject in process, always on the run, escaping from stasis, like Democritus's River, fleeing the constraints of the Symbolic: for example, travelling all over Europe and Northern Africa after Charles is ejected from Brideshead, never to return to England. By doing so, he also runs away from civilization and its protective mechanisms, unable to act out his fantasies of happiness in an adult, responsible way, according to family and social expectations.<sup>33</sup> By the end of Book I,

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<sup>32</sup> Or his teddy bear. These objects somehow embody certain primary drives of Sebastian's, functioning as extensions of his childish character (*RPL*, p. 2175). For teddy bears, gender and sexuality in Oxford, see Paul R. Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men: British Masculinities and the Undergraduate Experience, 1850-1920* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 52. See also Cliffe, notes to *BR*, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Sebastian's most eloquent, meaningful and escapist fantasy of happiness is set in the introductory scene (*BR*, p. 24). It significantly takes place on their way to Nanny Hawkins, therefore to the pre-Symbolic, to the Imaginary. By contrast, his anguish at family pressures and his subsequent estrangement from them shows for the first time on their ride to introduce Charles to his house: he will refer to Brideshead not as his home, but 'where my family live' (p. 35).



his attitude will amount to self-destructive recklessness.<sup>34</sup> He will eventually die as an alcoholic, homeless indigent.

### ***Psychoanalysis, 2: The Symbolic, or Desire***

Unlike Sebastian's, Charles's Imaginary has been left well behind, somewhere in his distant psychic past. To move beyond the primary relationship of the Imaginary and make love functionally realizable, the subject must reinscribe it into the Symbolic Order's laws and contracts, acquiring language and constituting themselves as an Other, as an ego, in the process. The ego appears at the point of rupture of the circle in which the inner and the outer world have previously been united (OSP, para. 5 of 6; JIM, 87). In this way, the subject abandons Nature and the *jouissance* (in Lacan's terminology) associated with the materiality of the subject's body for Culture, supported by what Lacan calls the Name-of-the-Father, and desire.<sup>35</sup>

Culture, for Charles, as long as his relationship with Sebastian is involved, has to do with socialization, a process supported by the growth of the ego. His introduction to the aristocratic world of Brideshead has expanded its confines in a far greater way than any previous vital experience. He takes advantage therefore of the positive, protecting and maturing effects of the acquisition of the Symbolic and his placement in social reality. This fixes a boundary and a cleft between our two friends that will grow wider and wider in the course of their relationship.<sup>36</sup>

As for desire, in turn, a function of the Symbolic making socialization possible, it is never really our own; rather, it is created through fantasies that are caught up in cultural ideologies rather than in material sexuality (OD, para. 2 of 3). Fantasies, by definition, do not correspond to anything in the Real, the material universe for ever

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<sup>34</sup> From a historical and sociological point of view, Sebastian's case is anything but exceptional: *DAF*, pp. 405-06.

<sup>35</sup> Dino Felluga, 'Modules on Lacan: On Psychosexual Development', in *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*, Purdue University <<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/lacandevlop.html>> [accessed 18 May 2012] [para. 7 of 7].

Dino Felluga 'Modules on Lacan: On Desire', in *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*, Purdue University <<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/lacandesire.html>> [accessed 18 May 2012] [para. 3, 1 of 3]

<sup>36</sup> See below, p. 111.

absolutely out of reach to us on account of our entrance into the Imaginary and the Symbolic (JIM, 107). Thus, desire relies on lack; it is but a screen for our narcissistic projections, and it involves misrecognition of fullness (OD, para. 3 of 3). On our quest for this impossible fullness, desire does not aim at satisfaction, which is in itself impossible, but at its own reproduction. To love, ultimately, is to love one's ego (para. 1 of 3). Charles's desire will therefore change its objects, or subsume them under new ones, as he walks on along life's path. This finds expression in his chain of love objects: from Sebastian to Julia, who within her carries the image and experience of his love for her brother (in the same way as, unconsciously, he may already have loved her epicene, boyish youth in Sebastian). In them, and alongside them, he also loves their aristocratic world and its history, as embodied in their family's stately house.<sup>37</sup>

In the end, the object of desire is structurally unresolvable, for ever a problem and an existential dilemma (JIM, 112). This posits the need for a practical, *existential* ethics, in which the subject's only guiding principle before the void of choice is a coordination of two forms of self-knowledge: what one's desire is at the moment and how to handle it. In a moment of authentic self-consciousness, Charles condenses his entire history of love and desire by aiming at a single, unchanging and ultimate object: God, as symbolically represented in an ever-shining red lamp in Brideshead Chapel. The Flyte siblings are left behind as forerunners of this divine love.<sup>38</sup> They will still accompany Charles through life, but only as minor, if cherished, presences and ancillary memories.

### ***Psychoanalysis, 3: The Inspiring Semiotic, or Charm***

A point of connection between Sebastian and Charles, in this psychoanalytic approach, is the markedly visual character of Charles's fantasies of desire, translated into rich descriptive passages in the novel. His love fantasies, beyond all of his articulateness, both verbal and pictorial (bespeaking his firm stand in the Symbolic),

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<sup>37</sup> See, for instance, *BR*, p. 322.

<sup>38</sup> In Julia's words: 'perhaps I am only a forerunner, too'; 'perhaps all our loves are merely *hints* and *symbols*'. Previously, Charles has told her that her brother was the forerunner of his love for her (*BR*, pp. 302-03, emphasis mine).

are translated into a lavishly visual narrative, full of splendid, material images, as those of Sebastian's luxurious lodgings, his *crêpe de chine* or the Baroque of Brideshead. Somehow, they are projections of those first sights of Sebastian's 'arresting beauty' he caught in the Oxford of their early fresher days, which he characteristically calls 'the city of aquatint' (*BR*, 21). In a word, Charles's art is developed under the influence of Sebastian's bodily, sensual personality.<sup>39</sup>

Sebastian can only express himself fully, not by way of language, but through the mediation of some strictly physical, gestural component of his personality and manner of interacting with others that falls within the paradigm of what Kristeva calls the Semiotic.<sup>40</sup> As Anthony Blanche insightfully apprehends, the main trait in Sebastian's personality is his charm. Not very much endowed in the upper storey, as Blanche puts it, he nonetheless seems to fascinate others with his pure physical presence, his graceful elegance and the many puzzling avatars of his eccentricity.<sup>41</sup> He is Charles's first inspiration.

### ***Love between Men, 1: The Freudian Paradigm. Homosexuality***

Having studied Sebastian's personality and its implications regarding his relationship with Charles, it is time now to analyze this relationship itself. Its relevance stems from two reasons: first, its narrative structural role; second, the existence of a certain literature involving both homoeroticism and homosexuality, into which *Brideshead Revisited* could be inscribed, and of a related mythology very much linked to the aristocracy, its decadence and its connection with the educational system.

I would like to begin this by linking the former psychoanalytic approach to what Paul Hammond calls the still 'dominant modern *mythology* of homosexuality', namely Freud's. In this, he wants to underscore the unavoidably historical and ideological

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<sup>39</sup> Charles never totally loses his connection with the Imaginary through Sebastian, a pervasive influence all through his life. See *JIM*, p. 99.

<sup>40</sup> For the Semiotic, see *RPL*, pp. 2173-74. For its liberating potential and its feminine nature, see 'Kristeva'-Norton, p. 2166; *RPL*, p. 2174.

<sup>41</sup> This expressive corporeity, not deprived of sexual undertones, connects with a world where gender specifications or the moral meanings attributed to sexual relationships, both issues being directly linked to the Symbolic, do not exist.

shortcomings of a conception of male homoerotic and homosexual relationships based on the following fundamental concept: their being produced by an arrest of sexual development.<sup>42</sup>

Making this clear, I will try to take advantage of this mythical, pseudo-scientific *knowledge* of the human soul to make some sense of the in any case fictional relationship between two literary characters. Thus, a first object of our analysis should be what sort of relationship this is. There has been a long controversy concerning its exact nature, arguments having been provided both for and against homosexuality.<sup>43</sup>

Sebastian's sexuality can be seen in close contact with the defining characteristics of his psychology, directly linked to the Imaginary, as we already saw. Two main traits characterize him: his immaturity and his narcissism. Centring our interest on the former, we may venture Sebastian's seeming homosexuality derives from a lack in his sexual development, linked to the absence of the father (exiled abroad) and the mother, a great and greatly repressed lady of atavistic, male power-traits, who leaves him to the cares of the nursery while a child, and later on to the all-male and emotionally bleak world of his public school, Eton.

In this respect, having found blockages to his development, his sexuality spills over into 'secondary channels of perversion'. This is the adolescent Sebastian that Blanche evokes for Charles, hinting at shady zones in his dealings with her elder sister or even with confessing priests. These perversions, to use Freud's own terminology, have to be understood as fixations for infantile sexual interests that should have been left behind as the boy grows up to become an adult. As a consequence, Sebastian remains in a sexual 'state of nature' where there is no distinction regarding the choice of sexual object: a state of 'polymorphous perversity'. This would be therefore the original, zero degree of sexuality: 'the perverse is original, the normal is acquired' (Hammond, 21-22).

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Hammond, *Love between Men in English Literature* (Houndmills, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 18, 20, 6, 22, emphasis mine.

<sup>43</sup> See, for instance, David Leon Higdon, 'Gay Sebastian and Cheerful Charles: Homoeroticism in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 25.4 (1994), 77-89.

Narcissism is a concomitant trait. It reveals the self, as Freud states in his essay *The Uncanny* (1919), as a psychological instance of instability: the place of safety may also be the place of danger (17-18). Totally self-centred, he will fall prey to an inner maelstrom the moment the winds of life start to ruffle his up-to-then crystalline self-image, at one with that of his carefree, happy childhood in the nursery.

Charles's sexuality, in contrast, follows the average pattern of maturation. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, his homoeroticism, regardless of the degree it might reach at a determined point, is but 'a phase associated with the all-male worlds of the English public school and university' (Higdon, 80). Consequently, I will try to analyze his relationship with Sebastian from an alternative mythical point of view, as also linked to a part of his education and ideological indoctrination: Platonism.

### *Love between Men, 2: Homoeroticism, or in Plato's Way*

Platonism is a major force shaping the gentlemanly educational model designed in England from mid-Victorian times onwards, as embodied in the reformed public schools and Oxbridge. The core of the humanities was based on the Greco-Roman classics, a major component thereof being Plato's *Dialogues*, most notably the *Symposium* (Hammond, 10). There is a point of contact between this major Platonic dialogue and our heroes' love relationship, since the former's goal is the acquisition of wisdom through the discussion of love. When their romance starts, Charles defends precisely knowledge and love of another human being as the highest form of wisdom (*BR*, 45).

Other homosexual implications are also clear from an intertextual point of view: Wilde's life and work are in the background, devoted as he was to Plato and the Greek homoerotic tradition (apart from being a man of Magdelene College, Oxford, some forty years before).<sup>44</sup> The close linkage between the beautiful and the good

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<sup>44</sup>Forster's *Maurice* and his retelling of a tortured homosexual love born while studying the Greek philosopher in Cambridge belongs, even more clearly, to this intertext (Hammond, p. 196). Waugh would not know this text, though, since it was published only in 1971.

(*kalós kaí agathós*) in the Greek moral vocabulary will support this discourse, where we can find a dialectic progression from love of male beauty to abstract, ideal Beauty, Truth and eventually Goodness as identified with God (Hammond, 11, 13).<sup>45</sup> This is exactly the narrative of Charles's spiritual pilgrimage in the novel (*BR*, 24, 79, 83-84, 350).

A number of features should be underlined to understand the particularities of the relationship between Charles and Sebastian when seen against the background of its Platonic model: first, the practical misogyny behind this discourse is also related to the English educational model designed for the middle and the upper classes, which, like that of classical Athens, excluded women completely.<sup>46</sup> In Plato, this has to do with perceptions of the male as 'stronger and possessed of more intelligence' (Hammond, 11). Secondly, this intellectual and moral component of love has to do with the clearly 'heavenly' nature of our friends' relationship, at least in Ryder's terms, as an adventure of discovery, initiation and spiritual growth. His love is not grounded strictly on physical attraction, much as Charles describes Sebastian's beauty as 'arresting' (*BR*, 28). It is rather an affinity of souls, which Charles experiences as the mesmerizing quality of Sebastian's childish yet sophisticatedly elusive nature and his aristocratic panache; it is also a chance for Charles to live

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Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also includes D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in this intertext, as a heterosexualized version of *Maurice*: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 215.

<sup>45</sup> For the aristocratic nature of this Greek phrase (also *kalós k'agathós*) and its physical and moral implications, see Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, trans. by Gilbert Highet, 3 vols (Oxford: OUP, 1943-45), i, *Archaic Greece: The Mind of Athens*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (1945; repr. 1986; first publ. 1939), 4; 416, n. 4; 287.

In Plato's *Symposium*, moral excellence (*agathós*) is clearly privileged over physical beauty (*kalós*). Eros would be thus an intimate yearning for wholeness, that is, for perfection and goodness, a desire 'to possess the good for ever'. Through the satisfaction of this yearning, we ultimately find the 'true self within us' or *arête*: Jaeger, *Paideia*, ii, *In Search of the Divine Centre* (1986; first publ. 1943), pp. 189-90. In Christian terms: through love of God (and we can end up there through human love), our immortal soul can reach the ultimate, eternal and unchanging Good, salvation.

<sup>46</sup> See Deslandes, p. 8; *BR*, p. 21. It is not surprising that both Flyte sisters are represented as notoriously void of any intellectual interests, as any other female character in the book (except for Cara, who is after all a woman of the *demi-monde*). The role that Oxbridge wanted their students to play when thinking about women shows in Julia Flyte's prospects in life (pp. 182-83). Undergraduate 'education in heterosexual romance and heterosocial contact' took place only on special occasions (Deslandes, p. 8; Cliffe, notes to *BR*, pp. 21-22). The places where decent social contact was expected to occur among young heterosexual *toffs* were Mayfair and Belgravia, rather than Oxbridge.

through him a childhood denied to Ryder by early bereavement, fatherly indifference and the rigours of the *toff* educational establishment.<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, Charles's point of arrival at the end of the affair is very different from Plato's model: his new God is the personal, transcendent Judeo-Christian deity, as he gets vitally re-oriented by a religious doctrine at odds with the classical ideal of Reason. This will gradually make him drop his aesthetic understanding of the world for the sake of a more solidly ethical one, in which Sebastian will be rediscovered as the forerunner of an adult, heterosexual emotional and sexual life, and as an unforeseen example of holiness.<sup>48</sup>

Another discordant note in this Greek homoerotic paradigm is Sebastian's jealousy when Charles, much to his dismay, gets on rather well with his family. There is no philosophical equanimity in this reaction, coinciding on a couple of occasions with his first all-out alcoholic sprees, including a notorious drunken tantrum he throws in front of his family (*BR*, 134). If in Plato's *Symposium*, ivy-crowned Alcibiades protests his feeling of jealousy for Socrates in front of the rest of the attendants to the drinking party, because he is in love with the ugly, old man's soul, there is too much moral suffering and social unadaptation in Sebastian's behaviour to link it with anything classical; Charles is not an ugly old man either, but a young man growing up, as his social and cultural horizons widen up day after day (Hammond, 14). Yet again, Sebastian's immaturity and narcissism betray him in front of others.

It should be remarked, though, that Charles is also narcissistic during his friendship with Sebastian, by trying to mould himself on the aristocracy that, through Lady Marchmain, who draws him into friendship and confidence, starts to co-opt him into his ranks. He seems to lack the nerve to reject its spell and fascination for his friend's sake. Quite clearly, *Brideshead* makes him into someone special and different,

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<sup>47</sup> In this respect, and taking up Plato's metaphor in *Phaedrus*, the white horse of the soul's chariot is given precedence over the black one, the horse of bodily passion, despite its responsibility in bringing lovers together (Hammond, p. 15).

<sup>48</sup> Charles will gradually discover a 'higher Beauty', that of religion, for which art cannot substitute: Laura White, 'The Rejection of Beauty in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*', *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*, 58.3 (2006), 181-94 (pp. 181-82). See also *BR*, pp. 27-28; Cliffe, notes hereto; White, pp. 182, 184.

Later on, his (private) failure as an artist is represented as a happy one, a *felix culpa*: *BR*, p. 270; White, p. 188. By the end of the novel, material beauty is but a secondary concern (p. 191).

considering the milieu he stems from. In the end, however, he is too much of a bourgeois not to realize that his becoming one of them is but a fantasy. Thus, when he is rejected, as caught in the act of subsidizing his friend's alcoholism, he immediately acknowledges a phase of his life is finished. He immediately adapts to the demands that the Symbolic has for him: for the time being, growing into a full, mature artist; later on, to marry and engender children.

### *Love between Men, 3: Homosocial Desire, or a Man's World*

Before reaching my conclusions, I will open up the scope of my theoretical background, using what I consider a wider, more flexible and more apt theoretical paradigm, such as Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire. I will connect it with some historical issues related to the ancient Greek ethos, too.

The flexibility of this model takes into account certain elements that are present in the previous mythical regimes, psychoanalytic and Platonic, with neither their epistemological rigidity nor their categorical exclusivity. In this respect, especially in its disowning of Freud's theory of psycho-sexual development precisely because of being ahistorical, it recalls Foucault's emphasis in the explosion of technical and scientific disciplines on types and identities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These would articulate the passage of the target of the different instances of social control from acts to persons, defined essentially, typologically, as *souls*, making them both intelligible and manageable through the institutional and administrative mechanisms of power. Freudianism would be one of these discourses of authority, a 'conceptual prison' if applied in a dogmatic way, segmenting reality into rigid typologies (EKS, 27, 8-9).<sup>49</sup>

Kosofsky Sedgwick understands the different modalities of expression of inter-male socialization, desire and sexuality as a continuum, naming it 'homosocial desire'. She defines desire in a broad way as a 'social force' shaping an 'important relationship'. This would exclude its consideration as an emotion or an affective

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<sup>49</sup> Foucault calls them 'discursive practices': Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *NATC*, pp. 1622-36 (pp. 1632-33).



state, which clarifies the true nature of Charles's *desire* for Sebastian (*EKS*, 2).<sup>50</sup> Thus, it deserves to be called 'homosocial' in that its scope includes same-sex social bonds constituted and developed to promote male interest, as opposed to women's. This is so because it is inscribed into a general, social, educational and professional network of institutions and practices from which women are excluded.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, it is to be understood in a continuum with categories such as patriarchy, a necessary component in its configuration, as well as homosexuality (in its different degrees of development and visibility), compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia. Finally, it is also in close contact with those power relationships that articulate differences on account of gender and class, contributing to discrimination of women and the lowest orders of society (*EKS*, 1-5). In this ideological reading of social issues ultimately describing the divisions of 'human labour', sex would be a charged 'leverage point' for the exchange of meanings between gender and class (11).<sup>52</sup>

According to this theoretical paradigm, boundaries between the sexual and the non-sexual, as well as between genders are variable, but not arbitrary, as they 'preside over the distribution of power in every known society.' (*EKS*, 22) This is why the historical has to be duly backgrounded in the analysis of this homosocial continuum.

### ***Conclusions: Oxford as the Ephebate; Effete Aristocrats, Virile Mesocrats***

Having said this, it is my conviction that the relationship between our two heroes is not a homosexual one, but a passionate homoerotic bond (especially for Charles, inducted by Sebastian into his life of privilege and leisure); that this relationship is

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<sup>50</sup> Whereby I mean that there is love, but not of a strictly sexual type: what Charles desires is the beauty and splendour of everything related to Sebastian during their brief, perfect idyll: his Apollonian looks, his elegance, his house, his wine cellar...

<sup>51</sup> Such as the Oxford societies that Jasper recommends his younger cousin to join, prefiguring the London clubs they could be expected to join once they left university, or the valuable social connections Ryder acquires through the Flytes, such as his later aristocratic clients.

<sup>52</sup> For patriarchy in this theoretical model we are following, see Heidi Hartmann, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Toward a More Progressive Union', in Sargent, *Women and Revolution*, as cited in *EKS*, p. 3.

See also Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, as cited in *EKS*, pp. 25-26.

loosely structured after the historical and cultural model of the classical erastes-eromenos relationship; and, finally, that its role is a formative one.<sup>53</sup>

If, according to Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘the whirlwinds of the soul were often acted out in the flesh’ in the public schools, it is also clear that, even in the face of homosexual relationships, ‘the educated middle class looked to classical Sparta and Athens for models of virilizing male bounds’. In other words, Charles, at least, has lived in an atmosphere of ‘masculinism’ up to his arrival in Oxford, this category remaining essential for him to understand his development and maturation experiences.

Homosexual relationships while at public school, moreover, would be thought of as necessary or temporary outlets for a pressing libido in a context of childishness, understood as powerlessness. It was a phase that would last until marriage, which could take rather long to occur, allowing therefore of ‘different rates of individual maturation’ until then. Once married, it was expected that the old boy would not only commit himself totally to heterosexuality, but also develop a sense of homophobia, if not gynephobia and anti-feminism. As I see it, Charles goes through all this as on cue, as though he were fulfilling a part of the syllabus (*EKS*, 176-77, 179, 216).

A counter-argument could be held against this view. Namely, the existence of an alternative, originally aristocratic homosexual identity that, by the 1920s, had spilled over to the middle classes. This style is defined by its being public, overt, effeminate, affluent, philo-Catholic, pro-continental, tragic and apolitical (217). It seems that Sebastian has been imbued with it at Eton.<sup>54</sup>

However, it is rather significant, in my opinion, that such an evident and open relationship as Charles and Sebastian’s is taken for granted by every single member of Sebastian’s entourage, as something natural and *decent*. We can arrive at this conclusion, *a contrario*, from the question that Bridey, Sebastian’s elder brother, asks Charles about the nature of the relationship between his brother, whom Ryder has just visited in Morocco, and one Kurt, a German scoundrel of seedy ways. Even

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<sup>53</sup> For shades of homosexuality in Sebastian’s name, see Charles Darwent, ‘Arrows of Desire: How Did St Sebastian Become an Enduring, Homo-Erotic Icon?’, *Independent*, 10 February 2008.

<sup>54</sup> As shown in his many fresher eccentricities and his relationship with his schoolmate Anthony Blanche (for this last aspect, see Cliffe in his note to *BR*, p. 33). See also Higdon, p. 80.

then, Charles's answer is negative. Furthermore, by then, Sebastian's life has changed round towards a certain understanding of his religious side.<sup>55</sup>

Considering how reliable and opinionated a narrator Charles is, casting a retrospective, authoritative look, from the strict Catholic vantage point of a convert, at his past and his generation's, the lack of anything remotely explicit about anything homosexual in the physical sense of the term is outstanding (whereas he depicts bluntly his wife's and his own infidelities and his abandoning their children, for instance). His depiction of Kurt, as much of a physical wreck as Sebastian, one of his feet oozing pus, does not incite the imagination to any specifically sexual image, either. In any case, if there were anything like that in their relationship, it would only confirm Sebastian's immaturity, the fact that in his social and sexual self-debasing, the original in him is the perverse, unchecked by his upbringing and education.<sup>56</sup>

Hence, the concept that better defines the nature of the brief relationship of unconditional friendship and romantic, Platonic love between Charles and Sebastian, always considering that we live through it depending utterly on Ryder's report and viewpoint, is homoeroticism. The homoerotic applies to feelings, rather than to acts. It is related to the gaze, admiring and desiring, of one man at another.<sup>57</sup> It also entails a certain dialectic of danger and desire, and is usually expressed in a literature of longing, not consummation, as is the case of *Brideshead Revisited* (Hammond, Preface, xii; 5). Its object is a phase to pass through and to remember for life in a more or less romanticized way.

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<sup>55</sup> Inscribing Sebastian into another mythology, that of Christianity, in his role of 'hopeless sinner saved' (Higdon, p. 78).

<sup>56</sup> The facts are not so clear, though. If Charles is not dissembling when answering Bridey's question, their having spent no fewer than six years in Greece before moving to North Africa leaves one plenty of room to imagine anything.

As for the hypothetical homosexual relationship between Charles and Sebastian, if 'naughtiness high in the catalogue of grave sins', in itself, as used by Charles to describe their summer idyll at Brideshead, should not necessarily imply it, we should pay attention to other uses of 'naughty' and its derivatives in the novel: (*BR*, pp. 216-17, 306-07, 45, 50, 86; see also Cliffe, notes hereto). An even more disquieting use of the word is to be found in *BR*, p. 280.

It is at Anthony Blanche that we should look to find the practical, fully-fledged homosexuality that I cannot recognize anywhere else in the novel. His is a very much Wildean type of rhetorical homosexuality, related to a genuine subculture of cosmopolitan dissolution, decadence, effeminacy, promiscuity, even prostitution, and the arts (Hammond, pp. 173-74)

<sup>57</sup> That is the gaze that Charles casts on Sebastian's 'profile' in the introductory, 'crock of gold' episode of their relationship (*BR*, p. 24).

That the homoerotic is in a continuum with the homosocial is apparent since the beginning of the love story we are considering. Here, the significant element is the social difference between Ryder and Flyte. We already saw how Sebastian acts as Charles's mentor in his discovery of the world of the aristocracy and the pleasures of fulfilled youth, according to which, despite their similar age, he is in a higher position in their relationship than Charles is. This is consistent with the classical model for the relationship between the adult, expert citizen and warrior or *erastes*, and the adolescent *eromenos* entering the world of power, privilege, duty and responsibility that his condition of citizen demanded of him.

Articulated in a much more restrained and culturally specific way than many seem to understand, this type of relationship asked both lovers for very specific roles and behaviour. A particular element of shame in the *erastes* when seen in any dishonourable attitude by his beloved echoes in Sebastian's on one occasion when drunk, as he apologizes to Charles in front of all his family while at dinner, as I mentioned earlier (*EKS*, 11; *BR*, 133-34). Causing a sad impression on both his family and Charles, this unmanly attitude is yet another sign of the decadence of the aristocracy, of its ineffectual and bankrupt part in the social drama of modern Britain.<sup>58</sup>

The irony, even the paradox here, is that the more Charles gets orientated towards the aristocracy, the more his narration depicts it as dysfunctional, self-interested and cut off from reality. Sebastian, who is presented as part of the decadence and downfall of an entire class, meanwhile becomes more and more isolated in his revolt against the Symbolic order and his socially pre-ordained course of life: here, the *eromenos* is taking advantage of the lessons taught by the *erastes*, despite the latter's contempt for the object of such knowledge.

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<sup>58</sup> It also speaks of the figurative feminization of the English aristocracy in English literature since the beginning of the Gothic (*EKS*, p. 93).

*The Recusant Instinct: Martyrs for God and Country; A Neo-Feudal Ideal*

Since the end of Book I, when the relationship between Charles and Sebastian has been given a final blow by physical separation (Charles leaves Oxford to train as a painter in Paris, while Sebastian, a confirmed drunkard and a social disgrace from now on, sets off on a tour of the Levant, only to become a cosmopolitan waif), a number of themes start developing as dominant in the novel: namely the historical moment and the aristocracy's place and role in it, and religion, leading towards conversion.

Coming back to Venice and the last moments of Charles and Sebastian's shared happiness, we should pay attention to an apparently surprising remark made by (generally) peaceful Sebastian: he tells Charles how much he regrets that they cannot possibly get involved in a war (*BR*, 101). Considering that he is at the apex of his splendid aristocratic youth and that these are the early 1920s, long before the 1929 Great Crash and Hitler's access to power, this sense of restlessness in the blood and a wish for an ultimate challenge of manhood and patriotism, Rupert-Brooke-like, does not make much sense. Sebastian's problem, of course, is facing up to responsibilities and pressures.

The Great War, for Sebastian, has to do mainly with his Machiavellian, Jesuitical and deluded mother, a paradigmatic example of the 'full sense of bereavement that most landed families experienced' because of WWI (*DAF*, 79-80). Streams of pure recusant, Old Catholic blood flow in her veins, the blood shed by her three brothers, martyrs for England. They were the last representatives of a caste of ruling yet sacrificial barbarians, sharing with her that 'old, atavistic callousness that went with her delicacy', 'another form of that barbaric vitality which animates the upper classes even in decadence.' (*BR*, 189; *MW'sC*, 66) Callous indeed, as she wants Sebastian, her childish, weak son, no less than to take over and fulfill the mission that her favourite fallen brother never could (*BR*, 137).

A *deserving warrior* motif builds up meanwhile (*DAF*, 73). If Lord Marchmain's *instinct* to defend the realm brought him to the trenches past his middle age, Lady Marchmain's brothers add to this a tragic note of doom *in the blood*, knights recusant

giving their lives for their infidel, faithless country.<sup>59</sup> Waugh's nostalgia for this idealized, organic, mythical world of chivalric martyrs of the faith, fallen for King and Country, is apparent in the terms he uses to describe their manly prowess: 'the Catholic squires of England [...] the aborigines, vermin by right of law to be shot off at leisure for the sake of the travelling salesman [...] the same blaze marking her [i.e., Lady Marchmain] and hers for destruction by other means than war' (*DAF*, 139).<sup>60</sup>

Even Cordelia Flyte lives up to this chivalric example, another defender of the Faith supporting the cause of Religion on other fronts.<sup>61</sup> In this, she follows her conquering *instinct*, only moderated by her personal piety and her female condition.<sup>62</sup> This is a sort of 'historical intransigence' that Ryder learns to admire, linking this generation of recusants with an ancient, venerable tradition: that of their ancestors, who made England 'the island of saints, and the most devoted child of the See of Peter.'<sup>63</sup> It does not matter if this recusant branch of English Catholicism is small in numbers and 'culturally and socially rather isolated' (McKibbin, 286). Later on, I will consider this conjunction of religious revival and socio-political traditionalism in more detail.

Approaching the males of the line, however, the ones to fend for the family and its aristocratic, Catholic ethos in a world of mesocratic *monsters*, shadows start to be noticeable in this bright, ardent zeal for the cause of King, Country, Christ and Pope. To begin with, Sebastian, of course, is out of the question when it comes to upholding these causes in a practical way. We already saw how WWI unexpectedly affected the marquess of Marchmain, a peer of the realm. As often in the novel, bizarre Anthony Blanche will be the one to enlighten Ryder on the true nature of the voluptuous *magnifico* posing as a great man. He depicts the marquess as a social case: the last genuine social outcast, an exile and a renegade; as Charles will

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<sup>59</sup> Again, the aristocracy as 'biblical fate'. See above, p. 101, n. 25.

<sup>60</sup> The travelling salesman is, of course, Hooper: p. 50, n. 94.

Neville Chamberlain, scion of a clan of dissenting ironmongers, can also be seen as another sort of travelling salesman, bringing home the damaged merchandise of ephemeral peace at the price of honour: see *DAF*, pp. 229-30.

<sup>61</sup> See above, p. 96, note 10; see below, pp. 134-35.

<sup>62</sup> For the leading, chivalric instinct of the English aristocracy, see above, p. 62.

<sup>63</sup> Edmund Campion's words (MW'sC, p. 64). Waugh wrote a biography of this English Jesuit martyr (Stannard, 'Waugh', para. 10, 11, 38 of 39).

acknowledge directly, a man mastered by sloth and prejudice, national, social and political, and without any special talent beyond his manners and a seeming knowledge of art.<sup>64</sup> Most significantly, the marquess himself, a man very much detached from social convention and expectations, avows his utter indifference for the duties of his caste (*BR*, 99). One suspects this is just a compensating, soothing feeling for the likely fact that he and what he represents are utterly indifferent to his country and the society he used to be an important member of, which is no longer the case.<sup>65</sup>

When we get to his heir, the Earl of Brideshead, a Jesuitical enigma of a man, things get even worse. A ‘learned bigot’, a matchbox collector, a loner, a recluse in his own house after his mother’s death, a virgin in his middle age (as the marquess casually points out in his deathbed in front of Julia and Charles), and a man with whom the lineage will probably die out, yet he appears to embody a social point of reference on his estate: civilization proper, Christian, neo-feudal and aristocratic. In spite of his inherited ‘indifference to the world’, as perceived by Charles, his is a little universe of perfectly adjusted, venerably ancient relationships between lord and subjects, in which the pact of homage requires both parties to take account of a number of realities other than merely economic ones (*BR*, 289, 87-88, 99, 280, 320, 282).

Thus, even if agriculture as such is a liability, rather than an asset, for most of the landed gentry and aristocracy since the 1880s (especially after WWI, when ‘massive sales of land, houses and works of art’ ‘on a scale rivalled [...] only by the Norman Conquest and the Dissolution of the Monasteries’, eventually result in ‘the end of the traditional, ordered, stable rural world in Great Britain’), yet any trespassing on tradition on the part of the Flytes would be felt to go against their obligations as members of the nobility, good neighbours and exemplary overlords.<sup>66</sup> This is the world Ryder/Waugh longs for and supports. It is but a mirage, though.

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<sup>64</sup> For the aristocratic milord living abroad, see *DAF*, p. 343.

<sup>65</sup> For the aristocracy’s loss of interest in power, see McKibbin, p. 20. See also *BR*, p. 186.

<sup>66</sup> *RFC*, p. 131; see also *DAF*, pp. 27, 704. In fact, the Flytes are in debt in excess of GBP 100,000 in London only (*BR*, p. 175; *DAF*, p. 130). The debt will make the family’s London house go: see below, p. 126, nn. 84-85.

See Cordelia, e.g., getting angry and disappointed with Sebastian because of acting against the family’s ‘local prestige’ (*BR*, p. 159).

## *Residual Cultures*

Bridey's recusant, neo-feudal world should be seen in the light of what Raymond Williams calls residual cultures – in other words, a number of 'experiences, meanings and values which cannot be verified or expressed in the terms of the dominant culture'. The latter would be 'the central, effective and dominant system of meanings and values' for most members of a given society.<sup>67</sup> A residual culture, besides, is linked to a 'previous social formation', that is to certain modes of production.<sup>68</sup>

Apparently, in Bridey's little Brideshead realm, the socio-economic and the spiritual go hand in hand (Williams, 10). His relationships with the estate tenants reach beyond the paradigm of modern capitalist society, where the human disappears in favour of a purely formal link, the contract, which binds the parties on the base of a monetary valuation of their reciprocal obligations. On his estate, these obligations are global and imply Bridey's duty as a model Christian landlord, rather than mere owner or patron: he must be (or look like) a father to his tenants, someone who will not exploit them, but rather rule them in a loving and provident, if authoritative way, for their own good. His duty has religious and moral implications, originating in unwritten norms that nevertheless create expectations in his tenants.<sup>69</sup>

A key fact should not be missed, though: this residual culture can only manifest itself as a culture at all provided it does not contradict the central definitions and features of the dominant, hegemonic one (Williams, 10). In Britain, after the industrial revolution and constitutional, electoral and fiscal reform from the 1830s onwards, this is the culture of fully-fledged, transnational capitalism: a reified world revolving

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<sup>67</sup> The concept of 'dominant culture' would be roughly equivalent to the hegemonic culture or ideology defined by Gramsci as 'manufactured consent' (see above, p. 69). See also Raymond Williams, 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', *New Left Review*, 1.82 (1973), 3-16 (pp. 8-10).

<sup>68</sup> In Marxist terms, this has to be understood in a materialistic way: 'social being determines consciousness' (Williams, pp. 5, 3).

As a consequence, and among other things, 'all that is holy is profaned': Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, as cited in Rothstein, p. 328.

<sup>69</sup> This shows in the 'great awkwardness about the tenants' resulting from Julia's wedding well below her aristocratic status and against her family's landed culture. This is all the more noteworthy, since the tenants are not Catholic: *BR*, pp. 199, 85, 92.



around private property, accumulation of capital, monopolistic concentration and a preponderance of industry and finance; where everybody is for themselves when it comes to well-being or mere survival; where the working man is totally alienated from the object of his labour and reduced to the condition of commodity in the labour market; a world, in a word, where religion is but an irrelevant, private matter. After fifty years of 'bleak and bewildering agricultural depression', increasing fiscal pressure and state intervention, in the 1930s land is yet another commodity for capital to be invested in with a mind to maximized profit, regardless of its use, agricultural or not, and firmly orientated towards the market (*DAF*, 457-58).<sup>70</sup>

Hence, the marginalized culture of Roman Catholicism and aristocratic rule on the Brideshead estate are a perfect example of the residual-incorporated, as merely accommodated and tolerated within the particular effective and dominant culture (Williams, 10-11). Bridey's behaviour towards his tenants is but an expression of 'lingering patrician hopes and sentiments' in the face of the facts of irrepressible decline. They are rituals of power and duty carried on because of a residual landed ethos and mentality, long after the family's economic status has undoubtedly become that of rentiers (*DAF*, 135, 137-38; *BR*, 175).

The Flytes' *lifestyle* remains landed, but that is all they get from their land (except debts). In fact, it cannot hide an ultimate reality: bankruptcy. They are just a bunch of (to a degree) ruined and (to a degree) absentee landlords. They might be thought to be paradigmatic examples of 'decay in the ability of the ruling class', or even of the physical, moral and intellectual decline of the English aristocracy.<sup>71</sup> They embody an interwar aristocratic trend to retire to a private world of their own, out of choice, fear or indifference, their main concerns being salvation in the world to come and family quarrels in this (*DAF*, 235). Without constituting any real ideological challenge, their lifestyle is alternative, not oppositional to the dominant ideology. Their world can only inspire nostalgia, not rebellion (Williams, 10-11). In letting himself be co-opted by them, Charles joins a tribe of misfits (Rothstein, 321).

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<sup>70</sup> For heavy taxation, especially on land and succession (therefore, indirectly, also on land) since the 'People's Budget' of 1909, see *DAF*, p. 48; see also: Stevenson, p. 124; *BR*, p. 319; *DAF*, pp. 96-97, 103.

<sup>71</sup> George Orwell and Arthur Ponsonby, as cited in *DAF*, p. 235. See, e.g., Bridey's doubts as to what to do with his life: *BR*, pp. 88, 280-81.

*(Anglo-) Catholicism and the Radical Right*

Focusing on the specific Catholic component of the Flytes' social and ideological world, I will venture to foreground an ideologically more perturbing and rather less assimilable element bearing some similarities to the reactionary ideology of militant Catholicism on the Continent during the interwar years.<sup>72</sup> Thus, the tradition enacted and celebrated on the Flytes' estate would be the expression of an ideology firmly rooted in Christian conservatism, as engaged in a fight to the death against the Enlightenment (Nolte, 35).<sup>73</sup>

The adversary in this unceasing struggle knows two main avatars: Revolution and Protestantism, seen as the beginning of 'the revolutionary monster'. As based on the allegedly 'trembling light' of Reason, which endangers faith, considered to be 'essential for human existence', the French Revolution is deemed radically evil, as it overthrows the foundation of eternal order, the rule of the authority of God and of His anointed, temporal magistrate (Nolte, 34-35).<sup>74</sup> Much more importantly, Revolution, bourgeois or Bolshevik, is ultimately against *Nature*, the one final argument of myth, as opposed to the circumstantial and contingent.<sup>75</sup> We already saw how human nature has a purpose, as ultimately founded on God's plan of universal salvation. This implies political obligations for the faithful. There might be a deeper, more sinister, if probably unconscious side to Waugh's shocking ultra-monarchist and anti-parliamentarian claims about not voting than merely his wish to *épater le bourgeois*.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> In many respects, this component is also visible in Lord Darlington's deluded and out-of-step ideological world (see above, p. 63; p. 65, n. 21). Parliamentary democracy, especially after the reforms culminating in the practical demise of the House of Lords in 1911 and universal suffrage in 1918 does not seem to be the Flytes' (or Waugh's, for that matter) cup of tea, either.

<sup>73</sup> For Catholic reactionaryism, as represented, e.g., by Charles Maurras and his Action Française, a group that exerted considerable influence on some of the most renowned English Catholic intellectuals of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Nolte, pp. 29-141.

<sup>74</sup> We should bring to mind the untrembling, eternal light of the Tabernacle, worshipped by Ryder in Brideshead chapel at the end of the novel: *BR*, p. 350.

<sup>75</sup> See above, pp. 24-25, 'Literature as Myth, 1: Naturalization'.

<sup>76</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *A Little Order*, as cited in Damon Marcel DeCoste, 'Waugh's War and the Loop of History: From *Put Out More Flags* to *Brideshead Revisited* and Back Again', *Style*, 34.3 (2000), 458-86 (n. 4).

It is under this sign that we should read the marriage of religion and politics in many intellectuals during these troubled times.<sup>77</sup> It should come as no surprise that the veritable ‘Christian literary revival’, with its numerous conversions, taking place in the Republic of Letters at this time has as its main beneficiaries the (avowedly) most historically authoritative and hierarchical denominations, namely the Roman Catholic Church (e.g., Waugh’s case) and the Anglo-Catholic movement within the Church of England (e.g., Eliot’s).<sup>78</sup>

Behind these developments there are two main elements: firstly, what Ortega y Gasset calls the rebellion of the masses, defined as the combination of the triumph of hyperdemocracy and the dictatorship of the mass.<sup>79</sup> This mistrust of modern mass society, already interpreted by Nietzsche as a bridgehead of socialism, and this fear of the ever-growing modern state, powerful enough to crush the individual and felt to be the greatest danger to civilization, will position these politically minded converts in the ranks of the new radical right (Carey, 3-4).

The second element buttressing this radical politics is, by way of reaction, anti-modernism. Hatred is its cornerstone: of the masses and of all manifestations of the modern world, especially in its urban avatars (Eliot’s ‘desiccated urban wasteland’), its perceived vacuity and its depthlessness.<sup>80</sup> In turn, this anti-modernism is but a manifestation of a more general cultural elitism which, in the age of the masses,

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<sup>77</sup> Waugh’s allegiance to this traditional understanding of the monarchy is also one of the elements in T.S. Eliot’s contemporary and notorious self-definition as ‘classicist in literature, royalist in politics, Anglo-Catholic in religion’, which followed closely a previous declaration by Charles Maurras in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*: Richard Griffiths, ‘Another Form of Fascism: The Cultural Impact of the French Radical Right in Britain’, in *The Culture of Fascism: Visions of the Far Right in Britain*, ed. by Julie V. Gottlieb and Thomas P. Linehan (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), pp. 162-81 (p. 172). For Maurras’s self-definition, see Joseph Pearce, *Literary Converts: Spiritual Inspiration in an Age of Unbelief* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1999; repr. 2006), p. 117.

<sup>78</sup> Pearce, Preface, pp. xi-xii. For the huge numbers of converts both were achieving at this time, see Pearce, p. 167; Keith Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales: The Christian Church, 1900-2000*, Oxford History of the Church Series (Oxford: OUP, 2008; repr. 2010), p. 219.

<sup>79</sup> For Ortega’s *The Rebellion of the Masses* (1930), where he discusses the two other mentioned concepts, see John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 3.

<sup>80</sup> Griffiths, pp. 163-64; Pearce, p. 161; Barry Spurr, ‘Anglo-Catholic in Religion’: T.S. Eliot and Christianity (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2010), p. 38. For manifestations of the modern world these right-wing, intellectual converts found disquieting as part of an ‘all-consuming “philistine” mass culture’, see Thomas P. Linehan, ‘Reactionary Spectatorship: British Fascists and Cinema in the Interwar Period’, in *The Culture of Fascism*, pp. 27-44 (p. 29).

purports to prevent disenfranchised ‘intrusion’ into the places civilization has created for ‘the best people’ (Carey, 3).<sup>81</sup>

Against these ruins, all these Christian intellectuals can shore up is just their new faith as an element of order, as well as a tradition that is not only religious, but also social and political. In England, this is related to an age-long rural, Christian culture, which they translate into a (lost) ideal of rural community.<sup>82</sup> It is either that or the chaos of the emergent, cosmopolitan, rootless, materialistic monster pretending to pass for a civilization, which is ultimately threatening to destroy good old England and the entire Christian West.<sup>83</sup>

### *Catonism*

Nevertheless, in historical, material terms, this elitist, traditionalist, anti-democratic ruralism, would also come down to a residual ideology. In the landed milieus, we find another related ideological construct, which we could call Catonism. Linked to other forms of romantic nostalgia, such as, generally, *merry England*, Catonism can be described as an anti-modern, anti-urban, anti-materialistic and, in our case, *spiritual* doctrine. Being an ‘upper-class mythology about the peasants’ (tenants, in this case), it proposes an ideal of rural community featuring the characteristics we saw in Bridey’s paternalistic rule over his father’s estate. This is advocated in the face of both the new, massive wealth of the international plutocratic world of modern industry and commerce, and the financial requirements of modern agriculture, for

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<sup>81</sup> In *Brideshead Revisited*, those ‘best places’ are essentially the Marchmains’ palace (most prominently the chapel) and their London house; for Waugh, more generally, English country houses. For Eliot, see *ACR*, p. 38.

<sup>82</sup> ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’: T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), pp. 59-80 (p. 75, line 431). The national/nationalist element in Eliot’s Anglo-Catholic faith is also evident, as opposed to defection to Rome, pure and simple: *ACR*, p. 43. See also Barry Spurr, ‘Religion’, in *T.S. Eliot in Context*, ed. by Jason Harding (Cambridge, New York: CUP, 2011), pp. 305-15 (p. 314).

John Carey shows how the usage of the terms ‘mass’ and ‘masses’ by these conservative Christians has also a religious origin (Carey, Preface, n.p.). Their defence of religion, tradition and the aristocratic principle in society is thus linked to a belief in an innocent, prelapsarian, mostly rural world before the advent of *progress* and reform.

For the connection of order and religion, see Griffiths, p. 171.

<sup>83</sup> ‘The essential issue is [...] between Christianity and Chaos’, in Evelyn Waugh, ‘Converted to Rome: Why It Has Happened to Me’, *Daily Express*, 20 October 1930, as quoted in Pearce, p. 166; see also p. 162. For similar ideas in Eliot, see *ACR*, pp. 45, n. 46; p. 48.

which the landed orders were not prepared, in the context of a global agricultural market (Moore, 495).

Because of its mythical nature, this ideology hides an operation of semiological forgery: the traditional world of the landed elites was not based on righteous rule and beneficent conduct, both praised as the natural consequence of that 'great repository of wisdom', that 'island of sanity in a raving world' which Catholicism is claimed to be, but on a massive process of estate consolidation, enclosure and investment of capital in a new commercial, technically refined agriculture shouldered between the landlords and large, wealthy tenant farmers during the 'golden age of the great landed estate', from 1688 to the end of the Napoleonic Wars (*ACR*, 45; Pearce, 163; Moore, 8, 23-25). Evidence of this, in Waugh's novel, is the stately house itself: it does not seem likely that a benevolent, generous administration of agricultural activity by the landed aristocracy and gentry could ever have accumulated so much wealth as to put up such magnificent buildings all over the country. Certainly not during a time when the Poor Houses were full and millions had to leave for America or the dominions (see Moore, 30, 426, 23).

Therefore, what Bridey enacts on his estate is but a sort of rural masquerade, trying to disguise the 'degradation and suffering' of the victims of the historical 'massive violence exercised by the upper classes against the lower', in which most of his ancestors, Catholic or not, no doubt played their part. In the same way, they surely contributed to the ruling of the country by Parliament as a 'committee of landlords', legislating the livelihoods of their inferiors and taking care of agriculture as an activity directed by private interest and economic freedom, rather than as a means of supporting the population (29, 19, 22, 8).

In the end, this ideological stand bows down before capitalist pressures, for the sake of survival as a minor component of the new ruling order (29, 495-96). This when not selling out to the new corporate world of agricultural enterprise, generally linked to great commercial and financial concerns. Hence, if the Marchmains may well agree that there are beliefs more necessary than one 'in compound interest and the

maintenance of dividends', yet, as their creditors certainly are of a very different mind, their London house must go.<sup>84</sup>

The sale of the London house while the Marquess is still alive, and the requisition of the stately house by the army during the war are just the prologue to total reorganization of the estate once the war is over (*BR*, 217).<sup>85</sup> Most probably, even if the Flytes' historical counterparts had kept their ancestral home, rather than sell it to some spurious plutocrat or American millionaire, the owners would have had to adapt to the role and duties of subsidized guardians of a stately house open to the public as a part of the national heritage.<sup>86</sup>

According to this, the Brideshead estate would undergo a semiological reinterpretation, in an ideologically *diluted* way, as part of the hegemonically defined 'significant past' or 'selective tradition'. Thus, the baronial banner, won at Agincourt, which waved on the Marquess's arrival to die where his forefathers did, would cease to be a meaningful sign, only to become yet another exhibit shown to visitors behind a glass pane, duly labelled (Coffey, 61-62; Williams, 9, emphasis mine). This would be yet another example of how certain features of residual cultures or ideologies can be incorporated into the dominant one.<sup>87</sup> Apart from that, Bridey's version of merry England is definitely gone for good: Hooper rules.<sup>88</sup>

### ***The 1926 General Strike: Charging in Cheerfully against the Rabble***

The dominant culture, so far away from the Flytes' neo-feudal delusions, takes centre stage in the novel in a number of instances from the end of Book I onwards. Waugh, however, provides them as a setting for an implicit statement on British social

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<sup>84</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'The Idea of a Christian Society', in *Christianity and Culture*, as cited in *ACR*, p. 35, n. 5. See also *BR*, pp. 217, 219.

<sup>85</sup> For aristocratic London houses, see *DAF*, pp. 342, 352, 355, 627-29, 632.

<sup>86</sup> For the country houses of England and the controversial status of their owners as their subsidized guardians, see *DAF*, pp. 639-47, 651-58, 693-96.

<sup>87</sup> *Brideshead Revisited* itself could be seen as yet another feature of the residual-incorporated culture it purports to be a panegyric on (Williams, p. 13; see also pp. 9, 16).

<sup>88</sup> In 1940, Vita Sackville-West observes: 'It is not as if we were fighting to preserve the things we care for. This war, whatever happens, will destroy them.' (Harold Nicolson, *Diaries, 1939-1945*, as cited in *DAF*, p. 625) If Stevens of Darlington Hall had still some hopeful expectations about the remains of his day, many aristocrats knew theirs was done: James Lees-Milne, *Ancestral Voices*, as cited in *DAF*, p. 632.

corruption, in mournful defence of the aristocracy as defenders of the realm and Christian civilization. The General Strike of 1926 will be the first of these instances (*BR*, 201).

If the heroic mythology of WWI is the most serious ideological pressure on peaceful and harmless (except to himself) Sebastian, as mercilessly inflicted on him by his mother, the strike will also arouse a wish for heroic emulation among many of the privileged young men of England. As Viscount/*Boy* Mulcaster, Ryder's future brother-in-law tells him, they will show the millions of 'dead chaps' they can fight, too (205-06). As the supply of Huns has run a bit thin lately, they will make do with the strikers.

The hysterical reaction among the British upper classes to what might have looked like the beginning of revolution in Britain only nine years after the Bolshevik coup in St Petersburg makes Ryder come back home from Paris, only to depict his experience with absolute awareness of its second-hand quality (201).<sup>89</sup> The other main component of his description is the brilliant evocation of the exhilaration felt by the privileged in being allowed to confront the underprivileged directly, something he does not attempt to conceal in any possible way.

There is a clear element of para-fascism in this episode, as embodied in two characters.<sup>90</sup> The first is one who might have become a mythical character if the outcome of WWII had been different: the Futurist, the fanatic, violent young bourgeois from abroad, an inverted forerunner of the international brigadists of the Spanish Civil War. This is the idealistic interwar prophet of a society without class conflict by the method of the total subjection of 'the lower orders', as expressed in the right he claims to bear arms against them anywhere in Europe, everything for the sake of Property and Order.<sup>91</sup> If there were still any doubts about the explicit political

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<sup>89</sup> Fears of revolution were already known to Ryder while in Venice, as contemplated by Lord Marchmain: *BR*, p. 99).

<sup>90</sup> For the involvement of the upper classes, the future Edward VIII included, in thwarting the strike, see McKibbin, p. 6.

<sup>91</sup> For 'Order' in Barthes, see *Mythol.*, p. 150.

As for 'Property', the founder and mouthpiece of Futurism, Marinetti, a bourgeois through and through, described Futurism as 'anti-communist by definition'; see Lawrence Rainey, 'Introduction: F.T. Marinetti and the Development of Futurism', in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence

stance of Ryder's acquaintance, he flaunts having marched with our second para-fascist character, Admiral Horthy, a future ally of Hitler's, seven years earlier in Budapest (*BR*, 201-02).<sup>92</sup>

One doubts whether a mature, already Catholic Charles would include among his sins this youthful confession about his *drôle de guerre*: 'we charged in cheerfully' (*BR*, 206). Maybe not, given the official position of the English Catholic Church on the strike: 'a direct challenge to a lawfully constituted authority [...] a sin against the obedience which we owe to God'.<sup>93</sup> Human essence, earthly authority, heavenly Order: *toff* mythology in its purest form.

### ***Hooperism: The Rule of the Middle Classes***

The General Strike can be seen from another standpoint, quite distinct from that of the aristocracy proper: the middle classes'. Rather than by Ryder, infatuated as he is with the nobility, this viewpoint is represented by Rex Mortram and, above all, Hooper, Charles's lower-middle-class subordinate and recurrent nightmare while in the army.<sup>94</sup>

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Rainey, Christine Poggi and Laura Wittman, Henry McBride Series in Modernism (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 1-43 (pp. 1-2, 11, 37).

For the involvement of Futurism with fascism since the Twenties, as well as its characteristics overlapping those of fascism, see *BF*, pp. 273, 33-34. In his *Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* (1909), Marinetti had already proclaimed Futurism's intention to 'glorify war – the only hygiene of the world - , militarism, patriotism' and 'beautiful ideas worth dying for': Lawrence Rainey, 'Continental Interlude I: The Futurist Moment (1909-1914)', in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey, Blackwell Anthologies (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 1-38 (p. 4). For the appalling relationship between 'political reaction' and the aesthetic avant-garde in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Griffiths, p. 180.

<sup>92</sup> An admirer of Mussolini and Hitler, Viscount Lynton, as cited in *DAF*, p. 547, states his opinion of Horthy: 'As a dictator, he was the nearest thing in my recollection to a larger English landlord'. 'Horthy de Nagybánya, Nikolaus', in *A Dictionary of World History*, online edn (Oxford: OUP, 2000), in *ORO*

<<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t48.e1733>> [accessed 21 March 2012]

<sup>93</sup> This was the Archbishop of Westminster's opinion. It must be said, however, that the real power in Catholic Northern England, the Archbishop of Liverpool, the head of the by far biggest congregation in the country, was of a very different opinion: McKibbin, p. 288. Even Bridey, the bigoted Stonyhurst old boy, has moral scruples about joining the strike-breakers (*BR*, p. 208).

As for Anglo-Catholicism, despite Eliot's political thought and the movement's reactionary theological views, it often stood for social reform: *ACR*, p. 44; Griffiths, p. 241, n. 32.

<sup>94</sup> It was the solidity of this class that defeated the strikers (*RFC*, p. 135). In its lower echelons, Waugh could identify this class as the Hooperist hord, but in its higher ranks, it was ever growing in numbers, wealth, power, education, glamour and even access to the peerage (or could develop fluent relationships with them, as in Ryder's case). Parliament and government were also 'unprecedentedly



Hooper is Waugh's foil for his reactionary apology of a neo-feudalism led by the old aristocracy and the teachings of the Church. Waugh's contempt for this emerging society is expressed by an imagery of technical progress, as characteristic of the spiritually and morally impoverished world of Hooper's social and cultural likes.<sup>95</sup> To Waugh and Ryder, this is a world of self-indulgent vulgarity, whose main value is efficiency.<sup>96</sup> This may be a consequence, partly, of the debased version of history taught to young Hoopers, as having to do with 'human legislation' (therefore, not the permanent, *divine* law of creation ruling human *nature* as established by God) and 'industrial change' (*BR*, 5, 12, 119, 9, emphasis mine).<sup>97</sup>

What they both think of these 'heirs at law of a century of progress' is symbolically represented by a procession of madmen, committed at a nearby hospital while Charles is with the army in Glasgow (*BR*, 7). Hooper defines himself when he says that the madmen should all be sent to the gas chamber, following Hitler's example: 'I reckon we can learn a thing or two from him' (4).<sup>98</sup>

### ***Saint Sebastian Flyte: The Lordly Drunken Boat***

If Sebastian, in Venice, tells Charles how much he regrets that they cannot possibly get involved in a war, by the time Charles joins the army, he is just a shadow of what he was, fit for another sort of martyrdom, 'a deer lifting his head at the far notes of the hunt'. This image is not merely ornamental, if we pay attention to what Charles writes about Sebastian's uncle Ned, the ultimate referent of his mother's expectations

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bourgeois' (p. 133). If the landed classes saw these times as a catastrophe, they saw it as a Golden Age. See McKibbin, pp. 528-529.

Rex Mortram is the Canadian upstart of unknown origin who becomes Julia Flyte's fiancé after making a fortune and a name in politics.

<sup>95</sup> See, e.g.: *BR*, p. 15, 165; see also above, p. 51, n. 94. For the insertion of this deprecation of technology into a more general cultural and religious elitism, see above, p. 123, n. 80.

<sup>96</sup> For widespread contempt among intellectuals for new, vulgar suburban England and the 'clerks' inhabiting it, see Carey, pp. 46-ff. See also *BR*, pp. 5, 9.

For efficiency, see *BF*, p. 31.

<sup>97</sup> For the difference between divine and human law in the greatest Catholic philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, see Enrico Pattaro, 'An Overview on Practical Reason in Aquinas', *Scandinavian Studies in Law*, 48 (2005) 251-67 (pp. 252-54).

<sup>98</sup> For Hooper in terms of savagery, see Evelyn Waugh, 'Fan-Fare', in *CH*, pp. 248-53 (p. 251, emphasis mine). For the modern world as 'rapidly approaching the civilization of the savage', see Pearce, p. 153.

for her younger son: ‘he was [...] a *hunter*, a judge of the tribal council, the repository of the harsh traditions of a people at war’ (*BR*, 127, 138, emphasis mine). If his uncles are truly English ‘aborigines’, Sebastian will rather be that mythical figure, the Noble Savage, ‘harmless as a Polynesian’ (127).<sup>99</sup> This naïve escapism finds some peculiar outlets, such as his wish for ‘escaping to the savages’ as a chimerical missionary (*BR*, 305, 307).

The sad truth is that he becomes a confirmed alcoholic, always short of cash and disgraced beyond social redemption.<sup>100</sup> Thenceforth, however, Sebastian, who in Book II is no longer the main focus of attention, is slowly transmuted into a *holy* character, becoming at the same time an agent of salvation for others. This is probably the most ambitious mythological operation in the novel, and deserves to be analyzed with Barthes’s help.

Being essentially an inner process, Sebastian’s metamorphosis is fueled by suffering. Cordelia describes him as ‘maimed’, with ‘no dignity, no power of will.’ (*BR*, 305, 309)<sup>101</sup> This suffering, being religious, metaphysical, sublime and ultimately mythical, therefore signifying more than what could merely be taken for the pain and confusion of someone in the last phases of alcoholism, can only be imagined through a demythologizing interpretation. In the same way as Sebastian has long before started to strip himself of the moral signifiers of his caste (by systematically acting against the gentleman’s code), he strips himself of its formal attributes here. According to Barthes, ‘fashion is antipathetic to the idea of sainthood’ (*Mythol.*, 47; *BR*, 305).<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Described as a ‘mythic personification of *natural goodness*’: Ter Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001), p. 1 (emphasis mine). If civilization stands for the Symbolic Order, its constraints and pressures, then Sebastian Flyte is the savage par excellence. Conversely, if we saw before how Hooper and *Atonement*’s Paul Marshall could be portrayed as modern savages, here they both deserve to be seen precisely as the new paradigm of ‘civilized man’ in the mechanic, godless civilization that may take over, Waugh fears, when WWII comes to an end. What makes this ‘primitive man’ *noble* by comparison, according to Rousseau, is no other than moral superiority, seen as springing from his ‘natural way of life’ (Ellingson, pp. 2-3, 47, emphasis mine).

<sup>100</sup> To the extremes, e.g., of *BR*, p. 204

<sup>101</sup>. As it has been remarked, Waugh’s religion ‘has nothing to do with making or keeping people in the ordinary sense happy.’ (MW’sC, p. 68) In Catonism, ‘happiness and progress are contemptuously dismissed as decadent bourgeois illusions’ (Moore, p. 492).

<sup>102</sup> This stripping of apparel is a common signifier in Catholic narratives of holiness and conversion from the Gospel to our days, from the prophets of the Old Testament (e.g.: Isaiah), to John the Baptist,

As the Abbé Pierre, a highly respected character in the France of the Fourth Republic and a member of the French resistance during WWII, the physically broken Sebastian, ‘emaciated and withered’, later ‘rather bald, with a straggling beard’ (which Cordelia links to his newly acquired religiosity), becomes entitled to ‘the label of Franciscanism’ (*BR*, 306; *Mythol.*, 47). This would include a new ‘capillary archetype of *saintliness*’, here as mythical, abstract and arbitrary as the concept of *Sininess* that Barthes also writes about in *Mythologies* (47, 84, 119, emphasis mine). No doubt, as everybody should know, ‘ecclesiastical beards have a little mythology of their own’, as ‘the attribute of missionaries’. Missionaries, furthermore, are ‘the depositaries of the spirit against the letter’. This is a strong point: although the public of both Waugh’s and Barthes’s time had no longer access to real apostleship, except through ‘the *bric-à-brac* associated with it’, gorged as they were with their ‘enormous consumption of such signs’, Sebastian’s signified apostleship is true (48).<sup>103</sup> Suffering, poverty, humility to the degree of abjection, and love have made it so. This is the love that, winning him the title of ‘real Samaritan’, he bestows on someone even more wretched than himself: Kurt, the German renegade of the French legion (*BR*, 214-15).<sup>104</sup>

Kurt means both a fresh start and an ending to Sebastian. For the first time in his life, he has the chance to take up responsibilities in a way that is tasteful to him, according to his own inclinations, regardless of his family and the pressures of society with respect to a marquess’s son. Whatever the nature of his relationship with this ailing, unlikely Fisher King might be, the harmless Polynesian, now turned caring Perceval, has the mettle to follow his Kurt no less than to Nazi Germany on

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to St Francis of Assisi. If Ishiguro’s Stevens never dares drop his mental, butlerian livery, Sebastian strips his nobleman’s apparel without ever looking back.

<sup>103</sup> Feeling great respect for the Abbé, Barthes only deprecates that such consumption of holy signs may be used by a significant part of the public as an alibi ‘to substitute [...] the signs of charity for the reality of justice.’ (*Mythol.*, p. 49) Sebastian’s taking care of Kurt is real, material enough, providing him with companionship, a shelter, food, drink, cigarettes, a servant... (*BR*, p. 212).

<sup>104</sup> Yet again, Sebastian’s attitude could be a different expression of the aristocratic instinct to fight, lead and rule, still merely dormant in him. His great achievement is to become a saint and to give an example to others on their own way to God and salvation (*BR*, p. 137). The ultimate reason, by analogy (*Mythol.*, ‘The Writer on Holiday’, pp. 27-29; ‘Novels and Children’, pp. 50-52), is a condition, a nature, a ‘Biblical fate’: his noble blood (see above, p. 101, n. 25; p. 118, n. 59).

the eve of the great conflagration (*BR*, 307).<sup>105</sup> This signifies the turning point where the once childish boy shows that the blood of his ancestors flows in his veins: he becomes a leader, an inspiration for others, an agent of their conversion. To begin with, of those who love him: the already convinced Cordelia, and Charles, the still agnostic artist.<sup>106</sup>

As for himself, from now on, Kurt having hanged himself in a concentration camp, Sebastian will let himself go and dissolve in the flux of the River (*BR*, 307).<sup>107</sup> Not worrying any more about tomorrow and its cares (or, if anything, about some absinthe every now and then), he becomes Rimbaud's Drunken Boat, 'the boat that says I', 'a travelling eye', involved in a 'genuine poetics of exploration.' (*BR*, 304; *Mythol.*, 67) The exploration that will eventually bring him to the sea of divine Grace and salvation, granting him, at last, to reach the Imaginary in its original plenitude: the origin before the self, the place of bliss he always wanted to come back to. His exploration will echo in Charles's own into the realms beyond sensory perception and Reason.

### ***Encounters of the Ineffable Kind: Lord Marchmain and Conversion***

When expelled from Brideshead, many years before, Charles made the resolve to 'live in a world of three dimensions' with the aid of his five senses. In retrospect, he immediately adds, 'I have since learned that there is no such world' (*BR*, 169). Not for a believer, certainly. We will try to trace Charles's path to conversion.

It starts paradoxically with sin: adultery, both Julia Flyte and Ryder coming from failed marriages. Both lovers are actors of a divine *plan* of redemption: pure (Christian) mythology (259, emphasis mine). Their going to bed together is a rite of initiation into another dimension of love, the one that God has for His human

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<sup>105</sup> More clearly than in Robbie Turner's and David Cardinal's cases, Sebastian Flyte is Perceval, the perfect, healing knight and Christian hero: the archetypal holy fool. See above, p. 56, n. 104; p. 62, n. 15.

<sup>106</sup> For others, see *BR*, pp. 307-09.

<sup>107</sup> 'He always wanted a river, you see' (*BR*, p. 305). The same river as Briony Tallis tried to ford with the aid of her little myths of order: see above, 'Briony Tallis: Authorial Ethics and Myths of Order' (pp. 21-24).

creatures, fashioned in His image and called to salvation through Grace. The lovers are not aware of this yet, though. They rather feel their love to be a stand against a general conspiracy, where not only their respective spouses, but also God is involved (261, 276). The awareness they still need will be provided by Lord Marchmain's unexpected arrival at his ancestral home, a man about to die. Of all vessels available for the dispensation of divine Grace, the great uncaring barbarian will be chosen for such a high task.

In this mythical context, where signs become signifiers of further, arcane signifieds, a symbol of tradition is hoisted over the house after many years: the marquess's banner and coat of arms, 'against the leaden sky' that threatens to destroy a place felt by Charles to be 'a world of its own of peace and love and beauty' (313, 321). A mythically apologetic discourse develops henceforth, entwining the authority of the old landed nobility of England and the cause of God, which is also that of Christian civilization and its imperishable principles and values.

In this respect, an 'argument of authority' is conveyed through the trope of *tautology*. Compared with the ancient Marchmain banner, the Union Jack, the flag under which Charles will serve his country soon, is but a recent rag, a piece of cloth (332). The old, landed, Catholic aristocracy is the real depository of England's warrior spirit, and its arms are its only real safeguard in times of trouble such as these. No reasons are given: to Waugh, this is evident. To Ryder, such values have become a part of himself. He just needs a little stimulus to dive headlong into this universe of taken-for-granted authority and sense. A miracle will open his eyes: there is more than meets the (painter's) eye (338-39). It will be granted in the fashion of Lord Marchmain's acceptance of God's Grace and forgiveness just before dying, after becoming aware of his great sin in the name of freedom, abandoning his wife and his children. God has directly intervened in history, in rescue of a soul and setting an example to others.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Inevitably, this *Deus-ex-machina* climax constitutes a real stumbling block for many readers. For all of them, see Orwell: 'One cannot really be Catholic and grown-up.' Cited in Christopher Hitchens, 'The Permanent Adolescent', *Atlantic Monthly*, 291.4 (2003), pp. 107-16  
<<http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/2003/05/hitchens.htm>> [accessed 24 May 2012] [para. 4 of 38]

An ingenious theory has been developed to make Ryder's conversion seem less miraculous: Laura Mooneyham, 'The Triple Conversions of *Brideshead Revisited*', *Renascence*, 45.4 (1993), 225-36 (pp.

Reactions are prompt and final: Julia leaves Charles in atoning sacrifice for her past sins. She resolutely seizes God's Grace, desperate as she had been that she would never be able to any more. Charles, though overwhelmed by suffering, says he *does* understand (*BR*, 340-41). He has also accepted the charisma of an authoritative sacrament, the anointing of the dying. Of course, he can only understand according to an argument of authority, essentially tautological: this you have just been a witness to was God's saving act, and that is all there is to it. *Credo quia absurdum*.<sup>109</sup> In the epilogue, as Charles comes down to his knees before the Blessed Sacrament in Brideshead chapel, open once again, the themes of aristocratic ethos and conversion become finally united.<sup>110</sup>

The novel finishes with a conveniently edifying ending, using another mythological trope: the statement of fact, closely linked to tautology. According to Barthes, this figure implies a 'plenary naturalization' of the signified concept, by means of fixating reality, always in flux, into an unalterable hierarchy (*Mythol.*, 155). Here, the statement is, yet again, a symbolic one: a little red lamp flickering by the tabernacle in Brideshead chapel. It does not signify just the presence of a Catholic sacrament for the few faithful ones still attending during army requisition. Far more than that, the lamp shines announcing the ever-novel fact that God is there Himself, filling that place with His majesty and glory, despite the deplorable design of its container, one of the fragile and vain makings of man's hands. In its utter Glory and transcendent Beauty, it involves something incomparably dissimilar to any human idea of beauty, which can only be predicated of material objects, implying certain arbitrary judgments of aesthetic value. It means God is providential, History is His language. He makes it shine for the members of this caste of upholders and defenders of the faith, now fighting on the war's several fronts, Palestine, the Holy Land, included. It shines for the earl of Brideshead, who is there following his father's example in the same regiment he fought with in WWI. It shines to remember one Captain Ryder that

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225-26, 232). See also the following: Dustin Faulstick, 'A Pilgrimage to Passion: Charles Ryder's Emotional Conversion in *Brideshead Revisited*', *Religion and the Arts*, 15.1/2 (2011), 172-192 (p. 186); Robert M. Davis, *Evelyn Waugh, Writer*, as cited in Kennedy, p. 38, n. 7; Mooneyham, p. 234.<sup>109</sup> 'Fideism', in *New Advent: Catholic Encyclopedia*,

<<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06068b.htm>> [accessed 31 May 2012] [para. 1 of 5]

<sup>110</sup> His conversion is implicit in his repeating 'a *newly learned* form of words' (*BR*, p. 350, emphasis mine).

her beloved Julia is also a soldier now, along with her sister Cordelia, in this war of Light and Order against the forces of Darkness and Chaos. It shines as a memorial to Lord Sebastian Flyte, Saint Sebastian the Alcoholic, who deserved to be led to the presence of God, the ultimate soother, as he loved and cared and suffered, contributing to the salvation of other souls. It shines for the everlasting bliss of Lord and Lady Marchmain, who, despite their many weaknesses, died in the grace of God. It shines for their ancestors, those knights sleeping in the hope of resurrection among the stones brought down to the valley from the castle they once inhabited (*BR*, 348-49, 79).

According to this hierarchical discourse, one can only be free if acknowledging the obligations of one's nature. The obligations of the nobility are to defend the realm and to uphold the faith: exactly what all the Flyte siblings end up doing by the end of the novel, despite their years of suffering, not finding their true calling in life. Thus, Sebastian may be a drunkard, Bridey an ineffectual matchbox collector, Julia an adulteress and Cordelia a thwarted young woman; yet, although their aristocratic condition can be contradicted, it cannot be denied: they have all fallen prey to 'an inner god that speaks at all times'. That 'god' of Barthes is Waugh's Catholic God, divine Grace, and tradition. That is why the Flytes' condition is 'mythically singular', when not directly 'miraculous' (*Mythol.*, 28-29).

The lamp, moreover, shines for Ryder, too, so that he understands that he was brought amidst the Flytes with a purpose. At last, there is meaning and sense in his life, despite being homeless, childless, middle-aged and loveless, and in spite of the disappearance of the landed orders of society in the disgraced, modern world. Those are mere circumstances. No wonder that he looks 'unusually cheerful to-day' (*BR*, 350-51).<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> We can understand this, *a contrario*, from the testimony of another convert: the author himself. According to him, life was 'unintelligible and unbearable without God': John O'Brien (ed.), *The Road to Damascus*, as cited in Pearce, p. 165.

## *Nostalgia*

Nostalgia in *Brideshead Revisited* is related to Charles's love for the aristocracy. If he falls in love with a dying world, his feeling of disappointment with the present goes together with the scandal of recognizing the purported causes of its mortal illness. The past is a place to find spiritual comfort in the face of a senseless world in which recovery is impossible, except in memory. It cannot be otherwise: the national ethos, according to Waugh, is based on nine centuries of Christianity, which is the same as to say of Roman Catholicism. Brideshead Chapel is but a synecdoche of this essential, unchanging, uncontestable component of Englishness, betrayed by the Reformation, and now given the last blow by Hooper and his likes. It extends to Brideshead's drawing room and the refined aristocratic life that Ryder has learnt to cherish there; it extends to the entire stately house, and to the social relationships constituted under the regime of benevolent and paternal care, now lost for ever, that the aristocracy inhabiting it guaranteed (*BR*, 227).

England's historical failure is a moral one. Along with Waugh, the only one to have an accurate memory of what England was is Captain Ryder, newly converted to the true Faith. Hence, he is the only one with enough authority to be the prophet of the neglected and lost identity, and the denouncer of the great crime. In this sense, Ryder's nostalgia for a time of gentlemanly, Catholic masters and rulers is even more authoritative than Stevens's, as it derives directly from a proper, conscious understanding of Providence and God's purposes for England. It is God that speaks through Ryder, his instrument, England's guardian and the ultimate representative of its true ethos (*Su*, 126-29, 132-33).

In this respect, unlike in *The Remains of the Day*, where nostalgia is on the one hand deconstructed to show its ideological dark side, on the other hand praised as a possibility of ethical renewal, in *Brideshead Revisited* nostalgia is true to its etymology: it is the pain to return to one's native land (180). If the beginnings of the 'narrative of return' in the West give us the image of a hero struggling to come back home against the alliance of Destiny and the gods, Waugh's Christian Ulysses is unconsciously, fatally attracted to the lost homeland, whence he has been expelled once. If Stevens's journey is a centrifugal one, the force behind Ryder's train ride is



centripetal, attracting him like a magnet through memories of his own youth sleeping in his ruined mural paintings of an immarcescible Sebastian. In other words, Brideshead is a paradise lost, and Ryder's unwitting return is a fatal rebellion against time and middle age, an intimate experience excluding anyone else and cut off from any reinvigorating social praxis.<sup>112</sup> His unexpected experience is merely that of a suffering soul, mourning for lost innocence and a world never to return, submerged in an inaccessible past (Su, 3-4).<sup>113</sup>

The little red lamp and the associated imagery of light vs. darkness marks therefore a site where the lack of social potential of Waugh's elaborate, nostalgic elegy for a lost, better world may coincide with that of some later yet rather less noble expressions of similar socio-political ideals. In Margaret Thatcher's words: '[Britain has] *rekindled* that spirit which has *fired* for her for generations past and which today has begun to *burn as brightly* as before.' We will never know what Captain Ryder might have thought of the alliterative rhetoric of the notoriously petit-bourgeois daughter of the Methodist preacher and *Hooperist* shopkeeper of Grantham, Lincolnshire.<sup>114</sup> History repeats itself, 'the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.'<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Michael M. Mason, 'The Cultivation of the Senses for Creative Nostalgia in the Essays of W.H. Hudson', as cited by Hutcheon [para. 13 of 27]

<sup>113</sup> 'As early as 1798, Immanuel Kant had noted that people who did return home were usually disappointed because, in fact, they did not want to return to a *place*, but to a *time*, a time of youth.' (Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (1798), as cited in Hutcheon [para. 8 of 27], emphasis original). Time, however, is irreversible; therefore, if 'Odysseus longs for home', 'Proust is in search of lost time.' (James Phillips, 'Distance, Absence, and Nostalgia', as cited *ibid*).

<sup>114</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People's Peace*, as cited in Su, p. 202 (emphasis mine).

Keith Nuthall, 'Thatcher's Dad: Mayor, Preacher, Groper', *Independent*, 22 June 1997

<<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/thatchers-dad-mayor-preacher-groper-1257249.html>> [accessed 29 May 2012] [para. 1-2 of 26] My mention of Thatcher's father being a preacher is not superfluous, as the imagery of light/darkness is prominent, among other instances, in one of the founding texts of Christian mythology, the Gospel of John; e.g., John 12.46, in *The Bible*, p. 134.

<sup>115</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *MIA: Marxists Internet Archive: Library* <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>> [accessed 6 April 2012], Chapter I [para. 1 of 20]

## CONCLUSION

*Brideshead Revisited* is a notorious example of apologetic literature based on a reactionary religious and ideological position, actively advocated by recourse to strong mythological rhetoric. It also seems to be, however, an especially achieved instance of nostalgic literature.<sup>1</sup>

If the oppressor's (or the *toff's*) speech was ever 'plenary, [...] gestural, theatrical', this is indeed a case in point (*Mythol.*, 150). It is difficult not to fall for such an alluring world, bankruptcy, 1926 General Strike and all included. We may feel tempted to convert, if not to Roman Catholicism, at least to this baroque, decadent world of crumbling certainties. Ryder catches our sympathy for ever.

In my opinion, this might have to do with the nature of literature and its function in respect of the historically and ideologically aware reader. If literature is essentially language, a verbal art, the signifying side of language should never be forgotten in favour of pure form, structure and style. Literature can certainly be a window to different human worlds, many of them alien to us in terms of direct experience. This is where imagination has an essential role to accomplish, actively engaging us in the exploration of such worlds, providing us with what I understand to be perfectly legitimate vicarious experience. As long as we can manage to interpret and to deconstruct the ideology conveyed by it, we cannot do away with great literature written from dubious or even downright despicable ideological positions.<sup>2</sup> The problem is not what Sade wrote in terms of violent fantasy in, for instance, *Justine*, but that he apparently tried to drug a number of prostitutes to bring his sexual nightmares into reality; something, besides, that should not concern, except tangentially, the literary critic, but rather the moralist, the legislator or the judge.<sup>3</sup> Such literature gives us access to those shadowy, murky parts of our atavistic selves or of our social superstructures that would otherwise pass as unperceived or unspoken. We need this literature to realize, in every generation, that metanarratives

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<sup>1</sup> If I am aware that this may amount to being *corrupted* by myth, as Barthes would put it (*Mythol.*, p. 132).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Hitchens, para. 5 of 38.

<sup>3</sup> The same could be said about Jünger's militarist, violent reveries, Céline's anti-Semitism, Genet's criminal life and his guilty wish for assassination, or Mishima's fascist and imperialist leanings.

on *natural* goodness or the *fairness* of the existing social system may and indeed must be questioned.

Taking this into account, we have to acknowledge that, among its many pros (in terms of structure, style, characterization, social satire, etc.), *Brideshead Revisited* stands in a meaningful central position in the history of the *toff* subgenre, just at the crossroads of WWII. On the one hand, it is indebted to a long tradition developed since Jane Austen, working on themes such as gentlemanliness. On the other hand, it is its swan song, anticipating works such as Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, where apology, if complex and often *self-contested* in Waugh, gives way to a systematically suspicious attitude, reflecting how dramatically ideas about the nature and the function of the nobility or the gentleman's ethos have changed.<sup>4</sup> There are no conversions in Ishiguro, but a debunking of Waugh's lost paradise as a setting for the luxurious life of a privileged minority, in the midst of a whole catalogue of weaknesses: snobbishness, repression, inequality, hypocrisy, political amateurism, unstoppable decline and twenty eight people whose lives revolve round a household of one member.

Thinking about Ishiguro's achievement and its connection with earlier *toff* literature, we have to stress the very relevant fact of his lack of deep historical research: admittedly, he drew from previous literature, even to the point of cliché. It proves how highly deserving literature on what could be considered, to some extent, an exhausted quarry can still be written. Just in the same way, however, as its entire panoply of characters, settings and *prefab* clichés can be concocted into pastiche and edgeless, commercial if archive-supported reconstruction of History in McEwan's *Atonement*. In both novels, myth is essential to the imaginary reconstruction of a period when British and English identity and destiny start being questioned, on the eve of the dissolution of Empire and the downfall or utter reconfiguration of a certain social, educational and political system. *The Remains of the Day* shows how we should not despair: there might be yet worthy heirs to Waugh and the mythology that

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<sup>4</sup> Those *self-contested* parts of Waugh's ideology could be, for instance: the doubtful, skeptic ideas creeping into the text, every now and then, about Catholic bigotry or academic life; the absolute lack of theological contention against Protestantism; the compassionate and dignified portrait of the servants, such as Wilcox and Plender, etc. Orwell's notes on Waugh's novel make this clear (see Hitchens, para. 4 of 38).

helped wrap his ideas about his country and his time's society. Even at the price of having to suffer the canonization of constructs such as *Atonement*. There might be yet converts to the cause of meaningful *toff* literature - which is to say, to the cause of good literature.

FINIS CORONAT OPUS

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