"Only the church explained why the world was as horrible as it was, explained the vile bodies in it, and why Waugh himself … will be redeemed" (Noel Annan).

Examine the explanatory value of organised religion in one or more of Waugh's novels.

Rupert Swallow — March 2017
Word Count: 2997

Religion, in the sense of a guiding passion 'followed with great devotion',[1] in *Brideshead Revisited*[2] (henceforth *Brideshead*) comes in several guises. Organised religion is most prominently represented by Roman Catholicism.[3] However, alongside Catholic faith, critics have also noted veneration for material pleasures, art, money, the aristocracy and power.[4] In *Brideshead* these discourses, religions if you will, act as modes of seeing, explaining the world of the novel from different perspectives.[5] These perspectives have often been seen in competition with one another, one supplanting another to establish its own authority.[6] However, my aim, by considering the competing discourses in the narrative, is to support the conclusion of an early critic of *Brideshead*, Donat O'Donnell, who wrote that 'alien pieties [such as those mentioned above] were perhaps for Mr Waugh the forerunners of a more articulated faith'.[7] Through the narrative consciousness of Charles Ryder and his choice of metaphors, Waugh posits Catholicism as the *status quo*; those who adhere to other competing discourses are presented as insufficient under its normative pressure. Waugh's

[1] "religion, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 20 April 2017.
[2] Unless stated, all quotations are taken from Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000).
[3] Entangled though they are, I will try as much as possible to separate the theology of Catholicism from its socio-political trappings.
[4] See Martin Stannard, ed., *Evelyn Waugh: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1984).
[5] As has been discussed by Hynes, Waugh undertook the difficult task of presenting a religious conversion to a secular society. Unlike in previous comic novels, the serious tone of *Brideshead* did not allow such scope to convey an implicit moral message through satire. (See Jonathan Greenberg, 'Cannibals and Catholics: Reading the Reading of Evelyn Waugh's *Black Mischief*.) Thus this eventual triumph of the religious discourse has, for several critics, hindered their sense of the novel's artistic merit. To mention a few, the anonymous TLS reviewer complained of the novel's 'too obviously preconceived idea', (see Martin Stannard, ed., Evelyn Waugh: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge, 1984), pp.7-9 and pp.34-8.) Rose Macaulay lamented that Waugh reduced what was good to what was Catholic and Martin Amis asserts that there 'is something barefaced [...] in the programmatic way that the novel arranges for its three most unregenerate characters — Sebastian, Lord Marchmain, Julia — to claim the highest spiritual honours' (Martin Amis, 1981, quoted by Jason Harding in a seminar on *Brideshead Revisited*, 7th March 2017). For Amis in particular, the theme of the universal redemptive power of Catholicism is stressed too strongly and thus, by implication, compromises the veracity of the novel's realism. Whatever the strengths of these arguments, they do at least all agree on the importance of the church as an explanatory device within the novel.
[6] For example, Edmund Wilson writes that in Brideshead social climbing replaces genuine piety; 'Waugh's snobbery [...] so rapturous and solemn [...] finally gives the impression of being the only real religion in the book'. Edmund Wilson, *New Yorker*, quoted by Jason Harding in a seminar on *Brideshead Revisited*, 7th March 2017.
[7] Donat O'Donnell, 'The Pieties of Evelyn Waugh', *The Kenyon Review, Vol. 9, No. 3* (Ohio: Kenyon College, 1947) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4332865> last accessed: 07-04-2017. pp.400-1.

resolution of the differends resulting from clashes between these explanatory discourses also invite and coerce the reader to accept the Catholic metanarrative as sovereign. Thus, finally, by subordinating other discourses and triumphing Catholicism as the only way of explaining the horrible world, Waugh shows the redemptive power of organised religion.

Firstly, I will briefly consider the message of the text of *Brideshead* in its relation to Waugh's intentions. For Patrick Gray it is 'axiomatic that the meaning of a text is inseparable from the author's intention'[8] and Waugh himself is clear that 'the book is about God'.[9] For him *Brideshead* is a novel 'steeped in theology'.[10] However, one must be wary of trusting the teller and not the tale. Waugh himself is aware of this danger, warning, in the author's note, against any too closely autobiographical links: 'I am not I; thou art not he or she; they are not they'.[11] Despite this, the tale may say a great deal about the teller and their intentions; in Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels's words, 'meaning is just another name for expressed intention'.[12] Thus, the meanings I derive from my interpretation of *Brideshead* must be some, necessarily distorted, reflection of Waugh's own beliefs. For example, Charles, as the author of his own story, is, at least, a partial projection of Waugh himself. There is also considerable consonance between Ryder's life and the one Waugh maps out for himself: Waugh says of himself '[In public life] I wish to offer the spectacle of a man born with every aptitude and sensibility that make for literary eminence, who has

[8] Patrick Gray, 'Literature vs Propaganda: Ambiguity and the Catharsis of Doubt', transcript of talk at Fudan University, 17th May 2016, <https://www.academia.edu/31047286/_Literature_vs._Propaganda_Ambiguity_and_the_Catharsis_of_Doubt_Fudan_University_17_May_2016> last accessed 08-04-2017.
[9] Quoted in William Myers, *Evelyn Waugh and the Problem of Evil* (Faber and Faber: London, 1991) p.76.
[10] Quoted in Myers, p.76.
[11] Waugh, *Brideshead*, cover page.
[12] Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, 'Against Theory' in Simon, Peter, ed., The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, 2nd Edition (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2010), p.2493.

without betrayal of his vocation subordinated it to [...] a higher.'[13] Thus, the way Charles narrates his own tale, which as I will show urges the strength of the redemptive power of Catholic faith, is also indicative of Waugh's own belief in the redemptive power of organised religion.

Though vile bodies are numerous in the novel, from the philistine aristocrat Boy Mulcaster to the subversively homosexual, aesthete-par-excellence Anthony Blanche,[14] I will focus on the character of Rex Mottram as the embodiment of certain aspects of what is horrible about the world. At a first glance Rex appears to exemplify much that is attractive about modern society. He is rich, powerful and a smooth talker. However Charles's narration hints that this is just a gloss obscuring a disreputable character. By the nature of the first person narrative voice Rex is presented entirely from Charles's point of view and so subject to his scathing, often snobbish, commentary. For example, Charles rather unflatteringly describes Rex's treatment of Lady Marchmain as 'masterly' (p.179). Moreover Rex, being an American, is of indeterminate social status and is never precisely located either socially or politically. Instead he remains slightly shady with 'an air of mystery, even of crime' (p.172) about him. He brings the shadow of politics and Capitalism into the novel, 'the flavour of [...] the big table at the Sporting Club, the second magnum, and the fourth cigar' (*Ibid).* Heath has shown that 'Waugh repeatedly uses examples of bad taste as hallmarks of corruption'.[15] Rex's present of the jewelled tortoise — described by

[13] Evelyn Waugh, "to Mgr Ronald Knox" quoted in D. Marcel DeCoste, *The Vocation of Evelyn Waugh: Faith and Art in the Post-War Fiction* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015) p.1.
[14] See Robert Murray Davis, '"Clarifying and Enriching": Waugh's Changing Concept of Anthony Blanche', *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America, Vol. 72, No. 3,* pp. 305-320 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24302122> accessed: 07-04-2017.
[15] Heath Jeffrey, *The Picturesque Prison: Evelyn Waugh and His Writing* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1982) p.77.

Charles with typically understated dismissal as a 'slightly obscene object'[16] — is a perfect example of generosity become excess. As Charles notes, when he enters the police station after Sebastian's arrest he looks slightly preposterous, 'the embodiment — indeed, the burlesque — of power and prosperity; he wore a fur-lined overcoat with broad astrakhan lapels and a silk hat' (p.108). He courts Julia, 'by all accounts the top debutante' (p.173) like a big game hunter. Thinking only 'in terms of immediate tactical advantage'[17] he finds her 'a suitable prize' (*Ibid*) to add to his growing reputation.

However, more than being merely crass or disreputable, Waugh also shows that Rex, for all his savoir vivre, is woefully lacking by spiritual criteria; his conspicuous consumption fails to compensate for his lack of Christian understanding, in both senses of that phrase. Interestingly, though it takes Julia, when outcast from the church, a year to realise her mistake, Father Mowbray, representative of organised religion, is contrastingly presented as being blessed with immediate insight; 'you know Father Mowbray hit on the truth about Rex at once, he wasn't a complete human being at all' (p.186). At another point Waugh uses the differend created by Rex's attempt to marry Julia to explain his deficiencies. He is wonderfully inept at converting to Catholicism.

> [Rex] "Look, Lady Marchmain, I haven't the time. Instruction will be wasted on me. Just give me the form and I'll sign on the dotted line."
> [Lady Marchmain] "it usually take some months — often a lifetime."
> [Rex, completely misunderstanding her] "Well, I'm a quick learner. Try me." (p.179)

Living in an age of surfaces Rex thinks he only has to memorise Catholic dogma to convert; faith has no meaning in his conception of the world. Within the Catholic frame of Charles's narration, this is a problem. Rex refuses to alter his Capitalist outlook and instead sees the

[16] Waugh, *Brideshead*, quoted in DeCoste, p.35.
[17] Robert Murray Davis, *Brideshead Revisited: The Past Redeemed* (Boston, MA: Twayne, 1990) p.99.

marriage like a merger between two companies. It only requires the signing of contracts to validate it. In the same manner he refuses to relinquish his strongly held beliefs in rationalism. Thinking organised religion, in Charles's words '[a]ll bosh' (p.272), he takes every one of its structures as equally fictitious. This leaves him comically vulnerable to Cordelia, his antithesis in many ways. For all his worldly wealth and political, masculine power he cannot conceive the Catholic perspective and so falls victim to Cordelia's various fictions about Vatican monkeys. Later dismissed by his wife as 'a tiny bit of a man pretending he was the whole' (p.186), he is marginalised by Charles's narrative in the second half of the novel. In this manner, Waugh presents aspects of the modern world such as secular Capitalism as horrible, its lack of taste signaling its moral corruption, and yet simultaneously deficient. Through Charles's narrative voice Waugh thus dismisses, marginalises, and so de-legitimises this discourse and urges the necessity of adopting an alternative Catholic explanatory perspective instead.

As above, one might see the conflicts between the different religions in *Brideshead* as discourse struggles for prominence.[18] They enact what Benhabib has described as 'the endless struggle of local narratives vying with one another for legitimation'.[19] For example, early on, Charles's aesthetic judgements are hijacked by Brideshead to make a religious point; 'You take art as a means not an end. That is strict theology, but it is unusual to find

[18] A metatextual streak in the novel encourages this discourse analysis. *Brideshead* foregrounds its own textuality in two main ways. The first is Charles's mode of narration through memory, with the revisionary processes that entails — 'it is easy, retrospectively, to endow one's youth with a false precocity or a false innocence. [...] But this was not the truth.' — and the second his inclusion of the reader in his memories and thoughts — 'perhaps all *our* loves are merely hints and symbols' (p.284, my italics) — which presupposes a collective containing both reader and narrator. These two devices go some way to creating a self-justifying reflexivity in the narrative which convinces the reader both of Charles's authority as narrator and of the veracity of his conversion. To put it differently, the self-consciousness of Charles's narration makes the reader more aware of his presentation of it, thus making the competition between discourses more prominent.

[19] Seyla Benhabib, 'Situating the Self', 1992, quoted in Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p.29.

an agnostic believing it' (p.83). Charles makes 'the chapel's worth dependent on fashion'[20] but Bridey, quoting the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* — 'art is not an absolute end in itself, but is ordered to and ennobled by the ultimate end of man'[21] — shows Charles 'that art [...] properly serves purposes beyond the aesthetic.'[22] In a similar way to the chapel here, Charles himself is the site for the play of a succession of discourses throughout the narrative. After he first breaks with the Marchmains he says:

> "I have left behind illusion," I said to myself. "Henceforth I live in a world of three dimensions — with the aid of my five senses." I have since learned that there is no such world (p.158.)

The material pleasures he enjoyed with Sebastian, 'the languor of Youth' (p.71), are dismissed as illusory, the magic tricks of 'the Young Magician's Compendium' (p.158). In their stead Charles takes up a rational aesthetic vocation in Paris. However, due to his Catholic faith in the present (from Charles's retrospective narrative perspective), this world in its turn is just as illusory as its predecessor. He has 'come to accept claims that, in 1923, I never troubled to examine, and to accept the supernatural as real' (p.77) incidentally showing, through his use of scientific language — 'examine' (*Ibid*) — the possibility of religious belief from atheistic beginnings. Similarly, Charles's love of art gives way in its turn to his love for Julia. Their conversation at the start of their affair shows this succession of passions. Charles's question — 'I wonder which is the more horrible, [...] Celia's Art and Fashion or Rex's Politics and Money' (p.258) — raises the spectre of two aspects of the horrible world. 'Why worry about them?' (*Ibid*) Julia replies, dismissing these spectres in favour of her and Charles's romantic narrative. Charles's response, 'we've got our happiness in spite of them; here and now [...] for how many nights?' (*Ibid*), acquiesces in her dismissal

[20] DeCoste, p.34.
[21] Quoted in DeCoste, p.34.
[22] DeCoste, p.34.

but roots their love in the present and so renders it subject to the ravages of time. This temporal instability implies that his love for Julia is merely a stepping stone, a forerunner, for love of God. The potential of this idea is then realised later in the syuzhet with his epiphany that 'perhaps all our loves are merely hints and symbols [...] paving stones along the weary road that others have tramped before us' (p.284). As Robert Davis has noted, by the end Charles has 'learned to see all places and all actions in light of a larger purpose',[23] faith in God.[24] By presenting a succession of discourses, each asserting themselves over the one preceding it, and so making love of God the fulfilment of Charles's spiritual bildungsroman, Waugh asserts the primacy of the Catholic faith as a way of seeing.

More than this, Waugh uses the descriptive and metaphoric language of the text to urge the normative state of Catholicism, and so establish it as the explanatory discourse. Waugh presents those who cannot understand the central values of Catholicism, such as selflessness and devotion, as deficient. Just as Rex, as seen above, is dismissed as 'something absolutely modern and up-to-date [...] only this ghastly world could produce, [...] an organ kept alive in a laboratory' (p.186), Charles's Aestheticism is shown as equally lacking.[25] Several examples will serve to illustrate this point. Firstly, at their dinner in Paris at Rex's expense Charles notes 'I rejoiced in the Burgundy. It seemed a reminder that the world was an older and better place than Rex new, and that mankind in its long passion had learned

[23] Blayac, Alain, ed., *Evelyn Waugh: New Directions* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992) p.33.

[24] The primacy of organised religion, in the form of Catholicism, may also be seen through the heteronormative strain that runs through the novel; Charles's love for Sebastian is childish and matures into his love for Julia, which then becomes a fully-formed love of God.

[25] Martin Stannard, in a lecture at Durham university, 9th Feb 2017, talked about the 'compression of two discourses', Catholicism, with its attendant conservative baggage, and Aestheticism. While this idea has some presence in critical studies — it is the subject of DeCosta's book *Vocation* — it is also productive to consider the two as mutually exclusive binaries. This gives a better sense of the ideological conflicts in *Bridehead* and allows for a more focused discussion of the novel's theological values.

another wisdom than his'.[26] As DeCoste fairly notes, 'this scene features a Ryder whose callow snobbery and measurement of all worth on a scale of worldly pleasures betrays a deformed character'.[27] Charles is as deficient as Rex, a vile body of a different kind. At another point early in the novel, Charles again dismisses his dinner companion, this time Cordelia, for her 'convent chatter' (p.208); he writes 'I was a man of the Renaissance that evening [...] I, who had walked the streets of Rome in Genoa velvet and had seen the stars through Galileo's tube' (*Ibid*). *Brideshead*'s nostalgia notwithstanding, by setting the material and scientific (velvet and Galileo respectively) in a distant Renaissance past, Waugh 'others' it. He links Charles's mental state to a previous historical period in the growth of Western culture and so implies that it is a formative step in his progress towards maturity. The fact he dismisses Cordelia so cursorily implies that he currently lacks any sense of religious understanding. He has instead swallowed the accepted values of contemporary secular society, his school teaching that 'biblical texts [and by extension religions] were highly untrustworthy' (p.77), without trying to understand them. The novel hence suggests that the explanatory discourse of religion is restricted, not by something inherent, but by external influences. Its explanatory value is dependent on its accessibility and institutions such as schools have created societal prejudice and hence barriers to entry. In spite of this, in a later discussion with Cordelia on religious matters, Charles shows that his past self was aware of his lack of understanding; 'How often, it seemed to me [in my past state], I was brought up short, like a horse in full stride suddenly refusing an obstacle [...] too shy even to put his nose at it and look at the thing' (p.291). Here the image of a horse failing to jump a fence implies a lack in Charles's past state; not to look at the obstacle at all is not even to consider the validity of organised Catholicism. Similarly, the fact that this

[26] Waugh, *Brideshead*, quoted in DeCoste, p.36.
[27] DeCoste, p.36.

obstacle is even there to be surmounted, is part of his journey along the road of life, implies that the process of understanding Catholicism is a necessary one. To give a final example of how Waugh others non-Catholics, after his barren decade, but before his epiphany, Charles echoes Julia's description of Rex, describing himself as 'still a small part of myself pretending to be whole'.[28] Thus through subtle linguistic turns Waugh implies that those who cannot understand the world in religious terms, that is to say, those without Catholic faith, are deficient. Kermode says '[o]pinion — or truth if you are Catholic — breaks into the text'[29] and Charles's opinionated narrative voice, and hence the truth *Brideshead* expounds, is Catholic. In this way, by presenting non-adherents of organised religion as an incomplete other, Waugh uses Charles's organising consciousness to imply the normative state of Catholicism.

In contrast to the largely implicit effects of Charles's narration, the resolution of the differends Waugh presents in the events of *Brideshead* show most explicitly the sovereignty of the Catholic metanarrative. For example, Charles and Brideshead's disagreement about the artistic merits of the chapel, a clash between aestheticism and 'strict theology' (p.83), is 'not [just] a matter of words, but expressed a deep and impassable division between us; neither had any understanding of the other' (*Ibid*). However, despite this statement, after his conversion Charles is able to bridge this divide and understand Brideshead's theological point. By favouring the Catholic discourse Waugh shows its explanatory legitimacy.

Brideshead's climax, the death of Lord Marchmain, provides the crucial differend in the narrative. Charles, still retaining his scientific and artistic value systems — he rejoices

[28] Waugh, *Brideshead*, quoted in DeCoste, p.36.
[29] Frank Kermode, 1960, quoted by Jason Harding in a seminar on *Brideshead Revisited*, 7th March 2017.

that 'mumbo jumbo is off [...] the witch-doctor has gone' (p.307) — cannot initially comprehend Julia's religious conception of peace. The conflict between the two can only be resolved by the suppression of alternative discourses in favour of the religious one. Myers shows an awareness of this when he says 'Lord Marchmain's repentance [...] signifies the triumph of eschatology over romance, and [...] over design and every other imaginable human value'[30] but he does not explore its effect on Julia and Charles. As her outburst by the fountain shows, Julia cannot reject Catholicism; as she says, '[i]t becomes a part of one, if they give it to you early enough' (p.269). Thus she must reject her romantic attachment to Charles. With that, and the failure of compassion Charles shows when, afterwards, he compares her 'conscience [to] a pre-Raphaelite picture' (p.273), the novel subordinates the values of aestheticism which Charles still embraced at that point. Just as Julia in her outburst cannot forget the image of Christ on the cross 'hanging over the bed in the night nursery' (p.269) the theme of memory recurs for Charles and, in a 'phrase [...] from [his] childhood' (p.317), he thinks of 'the veil of the temple being rent from top to bottom' (*Ibid*) and thus catches a glimpse of God's all-encompassing redemption. He realises that his love for Julia, his previous love for Sebastian, and its attendant artistic 'conversion to the Baroque' (p.73), and, in fact 'all [his] loves' (p.284), have been 'merely hints and symbols' (*Ibid*), forerunners of this more articulated Faith in God. The compelling shape of Lord Marchmain's conversion, analogous to the Biblical return of the lost lamb or prodigal son, allows Charles to break free of the intellectual impasse which had previously divided him and Julia.[31] His last words to her, 'I hope your heart may break, but I do understand' (p.319), shows that, grudgingly but inevitably, he has come to accept the previously inaccessible

[30] Myers, p.77.
[31] Whether or not Lord Marchmain does indeed genuinely come back to the Church, the import of the structure of his life remains persuasive.

truth of the Catholic conception of the world. His conversion, explaining the previously intractable conflict, in its turn urges the redemptive power of conversion on the reader.[32] Thus by resolving this conflict between Charles and Julia, the crux of the plot, in favour of organised religion, Waugh urges the all-encompassing redemptive power of Faith and implies that it is the best way of explaining the world.

To conclude, mediated largely through Charles's narrative consciousness, Catholicism triumphs as an explanatory discourse in *Brideshead* since alternatives are seen either as forerunners, or are dismissed as deficient or illusory. In the same way, those who inhabit these discourses, the representatives of aspects of what is horrible in the world, are rejected in favour of those who adhere to the Catholic metanarrative. The normative force of organised religion as an explanatory discourse, dramatised in the plot by Waugh with his metaphorical twitch upon the thread, offers the possibility of both conversion and redemption and so posits Catholicism as the only satisfactory, and possible, explanation of the unsavoury aspects of the novel.

[32] Hynes perceptively sees this as a result of Waugh's use of form. For him Brideshead's presentation of the necessity of redemption by the Catholic faith in spite of the horrible world is a specific result of the use of a first person narrator; 'only when the narrator has trained us to see, presume, conclude, take for granted as he had done, will he be ready to snap his trap on us as the trap had been snapped on him'. Hynes, p.235.

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