

The very title of Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited*, largely inspired, according to a recent biography¹, by personal experience and whose 1981 TV adaptation definitely turned it into a classic, suggests an attempt to recapture the past and reminisce about a long-gone way of life, that of post-first-world-war Oxford and that of the aristocratic Flytes, Sebastian's family. Such reminiscence is precisely one of the points of this text set at the very beginning of Book 1, and preceded by a prologue in which eponymous Charles Ryder, a captain in the Army during WWII recalls arriving at new billets during the night, only to find the following morning they are located in Brideshead's grounds, which explains the very first words of the text. What prevails here is the sense of a heavenly world but a world threatened by novelty (the post-war impact of women) and destroyed by war (world wars one and two), hence the title given to Book 1, *Et in Arcadia Ego*. Such a name is of course reminiscent of pastoral paintings like Nicolas Poussin's showing shepherds gathering around a tomb bearing the inscription, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, blending the theme of death with that of a rural, idyllic life – the inscription suggesting that either the person buried there also lived in Arcadia, or that death also lurks in Arcadia, the absence of verb in the Latin phrase making these two interpretations possible. These contrasting points which account for the nostalgia the text is suffused with, will lead me to consider first the shifts in points of view and the way deixis is used here, maybe to confuse the reader. Then I will show that a new world is emerging, threatening the old order, the feeling that 'town' is invading 'gown' in Oxford. And I will finally examine the description of the surroundings and the character of Sebastian which both contribute to reinforcing the overall impression of Eden on earth.

To a new reader the text may first appear confusing in that this is the beginning of memoirs written by Charles Ryder looking back at two different periods of time, being some time towards the end of world war two when he was billeted at Brideshead, and the 1920s when as a student at Oxford he left his college invaded by women for Eights Week and went on an outing for an unknown destination with Sebastian. If the points of reference are complex, it is because they are part of a mesh of time and location markers whose aim could be to show how past and present are intricately mixed in Charles's mind. The adverb "here" (l.1) from the beginning refers of course to where Charles is when talking to someone in 1943 (Hooper, his platoon-commander as it turns out) and therefore it is no surprise that in the following reported speech sentence "here" should become "there" (l.1), but just like Charles back in 1923 the reader is at a loss as to what "here" or "there" refers to, "not knowing [his] destination" (l.6). Similarly the use of demonstrative adjectives such as "that day" line 6 (to refer to the day of the mysterious outing) or "Oxford, in those days" line 8 (to refer to post-world-war-one Oxford) or again "such as that day" line 10 (referring once more to the outing) makes perfect sense, whether one considers it is Charles remembering when writing or Charles remembering when billeted at Brideshead.

Such logic does not always apply as some deictic markers are more puzzling and should be viewed as Charles's attempt to revive and relive the past as part of the ambient nostalgia. What is to be understood for example of "this cloistral hush" (l.12) in the description of 1920s Oxford if not a deep feeling of reverence for the secluded atmosphere of the place, almost turning the colleges into a monastery cut off from the outside world? In the same way, the adverb "here" (l.13) used to allude to Oxford during Eights Week makes the memory of the women's invasion very vivid, all the more so as it is the first word of the longest sentence in the whole passage. An interesting mixture is to be found at the end of the first paragraph when Charles recalls the special nature of the first visit to Brideshead: "It was to that first visit that my heart returned on this, my latest." (l.4-5). If the first deictic marker, "that" logically hints at the first visit, what can one make of "on [the occasion of] this [visit], my latest"? The most probable answer is "this [visit]" is the 1943 one during the war, but then the reader might wonder about the use of "my latest", as it presupposes that it was not to be the last one. Does it mean Charles Ryder, as the writer of his memories was hoping to go back to Brideshead at a later stage, or was unable to consider severing links with the place even in his mind and therefore using "latest" rather than 'last'?

The passage of time so painful to Charles that he cannot help intertwining past and present as I have just shown, is particularly obvious at the beginning of his description of Oxford which is the only time there is a direct reference to the narrator, Charles Ryder as the writer of his own memoirs, with the use of present perfect in "Oxford – submerged now

¹ *A Life Revisited* by Philip Eade published in July 2016.

and obliterated, irrecoverable as Lyonesse, so quickly have the waters come flooding in" (l.6-8). Not only is Oxford's state of collapse due to the impact of the war (in a figurative sort of way since the town was not actually "obliterated" as such by any bombing), but also to the natural flow of time causing the old order to disappear. The fact that Oxford should be compared to Lyonesse, the imaginary country in Arthurian legend that sank beneath the sea, adds to the feeling that 1920s Oxford is but a lost world almost endowed with mythical qualities.

Charles's 1923 Oxford is itself the victim of some change, threatened by the emergence of a new world in the person of the women² invading the university on the occasion of Eights Week. Eights Week also known as Summer Eights was – and still is – an inter-college rowing competition on the River Isis over four days, and the 1923 event was in Charles's memory of it much disrupted by the "discordant" (l.13) arrival of "a rabble of womankind" (l.13-14). Such disruption is viewed by two people in the text, being Charles himself and his scout, Lunt, and therefore from two different angles. Charles's description of it insists on the havoc wreaked by the women whose femininity he denies as he sees them as ordinary, socially inferior people (as in "the rabble" l.13), or even as animals (first as noisy annoying birds – "twittering and fluttering" l. 14 – and then as mere cattle – "herded in droves" l.16). The fact that a number of passive forms should be used to describe them ("pushed in punts (...) herded in droves (...) greeted in the Isis" – not the river obviously but the university newspaper – l.15-16) confirms the negative impression Charles wants to convey about these "intruders" (l.18) unable to act of their own accord, or if they do so, just able to "drink claret cup, eat cucumber sandwiches" (l.15). The mention of such plain middle-class drinking and eating activities sharply contrasts with the later mention of much greater delicacies such as "a basket of strawberries and a bottle of Château Peyraguey" (a Premier Cru classé Sauternes wine) which Charles and Sebastian have on their outing (l.43-44). What is also disquieting to Charles is the sweeping change those women produce on Oxford, from sound effects to visual effects. Their invasion of the place is made clear with the use of such prepositions as "over the cobbles and up the steps" (l.14) to describe their moves, or the verb "penetrated" (l.18) to refer to their voices. Another source of discomfort for Charles is to see the way their manners 'contaminate' other students: when visiting the university newspaper, the Isis, and the debating society, the Oxford Union, the women are said to be met by "a sudden display of peculiar, facetious, wholly distressing Gilbert-and-Sullivan badinage" (l.16-17), as if the students in charge of greeting them performed a role worthy of the famous Victorian duet's operas, synonymous with cheap entertainment for Charles. Interestingly enough the world created by the librettist and the composer in their operas was said to be a fanciful topsy-turvy world which is totally in keeping with the effect those women are said to have on Oxford. Charles's distress is also recounted through the visual transformation of his own college: not only the change the quad is made to undergo (more passive forms there, with "floored and tented" for example line 20), but also further 'contamination' in the form of a don agreeing to have his rooms turned into a cloakroom for the visiting ladies. There Charles's sense of outrage is at its highest particularly when pointing to the presence of the notice tainting his own door – a touch of exaggeration, the reader might perceive with the detailed mention of the number of inches between his door (referred to as his "oak" line 23, the traditional word for it, which he probably uses to show how he resists the intrusion) and the notice for the cloakroom.

The other person said to feel "strongly" about the invasion is Lunt, Charles's scout³, which actually leads to a scene worthy of a social comedy, in which Lunt laments the disappearance of pre-world-war-one Oxford. In that short scene which precedes Sebastian's arrival the scout performs the cliché role of a maid-servant producing rhetorical questions as in "What do they want with dancing?" (l.29) or "If you ask me, sir" (l.31), and immediately providing answers to his own questions. The comic effect continues with him being described as being "half in and half out of the door" (l.34), and above all with his final words, "I mustn't stand here talking when there's pin-cushions to get" (l.38), which is

² They are presumably young women invited by the male students, and not the female students, of whom there were few at the time anyway. Women were allowed into Oxford university for the first time in the 1870s – 5 women-only colleges opened between the 1870s and the 1890s –, but it was only in 1920 they were eligible to receive degrees and be part of university government (in 1947 for Cambridge), and in 1974 the first men's colleges admitted women.

³ Charles himself feels strongly about it, as seen in his use of superlative forms, such as "the grossest disturbance" (l.19), or intensive words like "wholly distressing" (l.17), both forms mimicking Sebastian's own style.

more reminiscent of what an outspoken lady's maid would say rather than a male servant in an Oxford college. What appears through Lunt's discourse is not only the effect of the war on Oxford's habits, but also the unfortunate mixture between 'town' and 'gown' as a result: "there's some even goes dancing with the town at the Masonic" (l.37). The two words refer to the two distinct communities living side by side, being the academic world of the colleges and the non-academic population. The phrase does not just apply to Oxford, but in Oxford the relations between the two communities were often marked by tension, with even scholars killed as in the events of St Scholastica's Day in the 14th c (after some scholars complained about the low quality of the wine in a tavern at Carfax and hit the taverner), or disputes between young, uneducated working men of the Town and arrogant undergraduates from privileged backgrounds in the 18th and 19th c. It is therefore quite striking (and ironical since he is no educated man himself) that Lunt representing Gown in a way should complain about the unity of the two, but then it fits in with Charles's first remark about his strong feelings⁴.

This sense of loss felt by Charles and Lunt is also deplored by the last character to be fully introduced in the text – his name was only mentioned at the very beginning –, being Sebastian, and introduced in a very theatrical sort of way by Lunt still in 'maid-like' mode (l.38). The feeling of exaggeration already noticed in Charles's description of the transformation of Oxford continues with Sebastian's linguistic excess: Charles's college is becoming "a circus" (l.41) – very probably a cheap form of entertainment for Sebastian – and to him the whole place is "pullulating with women" (l.42) – suggesting unrefined masses, the exact opposite of what he looks like according to Charles's description. All this exaggeration is summed up in Sebastian's final comment on the situation and unconditional order he gives Charles: "You're to come away at once, out of danger" (l.42-43). Even for 1923 Oxford Sebastian does look unique and from his character emerges an impression of ease and sophistication which helps build up the image of a heavenly world, almost surreal at times, and Charles's admiration surfaces even through the short yet detailed description of his clothes. The "dove-grey flannel" (l.39) to refer to his trousers suggests softness and fineness as does the "white *crêpe de Chine*" to refer to his shirt – here clearly what matters to Charles is not the item of clothing itself but the fabric evocative of luxury. The sense of ease is also conveyed by the way Sebastian is said to relate to possessions: if the flannels and the shirt are said to be his, he is wearing one of Charles's ties (another item of luxury); he has borrowed a car not from a friend, but from "a man called Hardcastle" (l.50) despite not being an accomplished driver; he tells Charles to take some money with him in case "[they] see anything [they] want to buy" (l.49). All this gives the impression of a straightforward life where who possesses what is of little importance, what matters is the enjoyment of those possessions. To such an extent that even the prospect of death is mocked, or at least considered with an air of detachment, thus confirming the eccentricity of the character. If the reader needed more proof of Sebastian's bizarreness he definitely gets it with the mention of the "teddy bear s[itting] at the wheel" (l.53) and Sebastian's recommendation to Charles about the bear feeling carsick. Too little is said here about the bear to conclude much about it apart from it being another sign of eccentricity, and it is only in the following pages when the identity of "Hawkins" (l.49) is revealed that the reader will start to understand how attached to his childhood and to a world of innocence Sebastian is – Hawkins being Nanny Hawkins, the person he wants Charles most to meet at Brideshead.

Finally the idea of a pastoral paradise suggested by the title of Book 1 takes on its full dimension in the way Charles describes Oxford in "those days (...) a city of aquatint" (l.8). This is no Poussin-type painting here but the phrase itself turns the city into a watercolour or an etching having left its indelible imprint on the narrator's mind, in the same way as the aquatint technique leaves its mark on the sheet of paper. The impression of perfection is gained within a few lines with the feeling that nothing can disturb the peacefulness of its streets or the cycle of the seasons (it looks as if autumns would always be misty, springs always grey and summers always glorious – no mention of winter though as if winter should not be heard of since it marks the end of a cycle?). What also pervades the description with a sense of continuity despite the threat hanging in the air (from Eights Week or war as mentioned before) is the elevation one feels (almost in the religious meaning of the word) when the narrator leaving the streets rises, goes above "the chestnut (...) in flower" and reaches the "gables and cupolas" (l.11), particularly as they are said to "exhale the soft airs of centuries of youth" (l.11-12). One may detect here the wish of the narrator to be part of a long-established tradition and leave his imprint, as

⁴ Giving a vision of Lunt more catholic than the pope? Ironical again in a novel also about Catholicism.

confirmed by the following sentence about their “laughter (...) carried (...) over the intervening clamour” (l.12-13). In spite of the dangers of “the waters ... flooding in” (l.7-8) I cannot but feel that thanks to the “resonance” (l.12) of the laughter, and particularly the presence of the adverb “still” (as in “carried it still” l.12-13) Charles Ryder’s memories are set in stone.

It is no coincidence that the subtitle of *Brideshead Revisited* should be *The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder*, using the word ‘memories’ rather than the usual ‘memoirs’. Here is no stilted historical account or autobiography by fictional character Charles Ryder, but the fruit of a remembering process which can almost be felt as some sort of therapy. Whereas the prologue entitled ‘Brideshead revisited’ includes the famous ominous sentence ‘Here at the age of thirty-nine I began to be old’, the epilogue also entitled ‘Brideshead revisited’ ends, after a visit to Nanny Hawkins, on the following remark of the second-in-command addressed to Captain Charles Ryder, “You’re looking unusually cheerful today”, as if the act of remembrance had helped the narrator cope with the pain of the present induced by nostalgia for the past. Nostalgia, this feeling of longing for the – sometimes idealised – past is precisely what this text ends on with the image of “the open country (...) easily reached in those days” (l.57). The pastoral setting of *Et in Arcadia Ego* 1 is illustrated here with the image of the open country as the promise of freedom and ease, and yet there is also the idea that the idyllic world came to an end through the ominous deictic marker marking a clear break with the past.