On the Relation of the Characterization of Charles Ryder, the Narrator, to the Theme in "Brideshead Revisited"

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I

"Brideshead Revisited" is the story of the intercourse between the agnostic protagonist Charles Ryber and the Flytes, especially Sebastian and Julia who try to escape from the hold of Catholicism, and of the process where Charles' own faith is prepared. The former half relates Charles' acquaintance with Sebastian, and the latter his love for Julia. His friendship with Sebastian comes to an end when Sebastian goes to ruin through dipsomania in an effort to get away from the hardships of being a Catholic, whereas his love with Julia ends in a failure when she resolves to live as a Catholic at the death of her father. Thus the former and the latter part are clearly divided into two parts in terms of story. This novel is designed to convey the aspects of the living of the Flytes. Charles, the narrator, not only plays the role of a mirror which reflects them but is one of the main characters. The biggest point of this work is his love with Julia, the breakdown of which shows the domination of faith in the conflict of love and faith. But love is not so skillfully written in this work, compared with "The End of the Affair" by Greene which treats the same kind of theme as this. Serious love seems to be difficult for Waugh to deal with. In "Work Suspended" antecedent to this work, the hero Plant says 'love is a problem beyond the proper scope of letters', which sounds like Waugh's own confession. Waugh's fundamental attitude toward creation is to show the barrenness of the contemporary life including that of the relation between man and woman, but the balance between the strength of love and that of faith must be kept in a work whose theme is the conflict between the two. For readers cannot be deeply moved unless they are impressed by the sufferings of the characters resulting from the conflict.

One of the reasons why love is inferior to faith in this work lies in the inadequate characterization of Charles. He is one of the most uninteresting characters in Waugh's novels. He is passive in his conduct and short of understanding. He is basically lacking in charity, as Spender points out. Such a theme of consequence as this is too heavy a load for him to bear. When we overlap

his attitude on Waugh's own we cannot deny that his religious attitude is doubt ful including his conversion. We can presume the author's experience of conversion is reflected on Charles' conversion, for Waugh's experiences often take the shape of works, 'by some odd time lag', as Hall suggests. The author has exposed himself partly by adopting the first person narrative. Waugh does not seem to have a definite intention about how to chatacterize Charles and often identifies Charles with himself. He seems to have lost the detachment he held in his earlier farcical works. As a result, Charles is not characterized from an objective point of view. His character is ambiguous, and the author seems to share and approve of his defects. However, we readers can comprehend his faults as faults, and it is doubtful to us whether Charles' love for Julia is serious or not. This considerably reduces the effect to be expected at the finale where their love comes to a rupture. In the following, I will explain these matters in detail according to the text.

II

Charles becomes intimate with Sebastian at Oxford, but he pays little attention since Sebastian has got in reduced circumstances because of indulgence in wine. Now, Julia is his mistress. This transfer of Charles from Sebastian to Julia is not convincing. Julia's physical likeness to her brother attracts him before, but there happens nothing particular between them. However, when they meet aboard a ship in the Atlantic, Julia approaches Charles with such active familiarity as was hardly expected ten years before. This scene is not quite natural, which Waugh admits himself, and says that it was dead contrary to the common experience of such an encounter.

Let us consider next the interrelation between Julia and Sebastian in Charles' consciousness.

> 'It's frightening,' Julia once said, 'to think how completely you have forgotten Sebastian.'
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> 'He was the forerunner.'
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> 'That's what you said in the storm. I've thought since; perhaps I am only a forerunner, too.'
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> .....
>
> I had not forgotten Sebasian. He was with me daily in Julia; or rather it was Julia I had known in him, in those distant Arcadian days.
>
> 'That's cold comfort for a girl,' she said when I tried to explain. 'How do I know I shan't suddenly turn out to be somebody else? It's an easy way to chuck.'

Julia is afraid that she also is only a forerunner of somebody else as Sebastian was. Her words express her sorrow over Charles, who does not consider

her as an ipdeoendent woman different from Sebastian or anybody else. No woman would be satisfied with being loved as a substitute for somebody else. Then what does this mean? It is the nobility to which Julia belongs that Charles longs for, and it makes no difference to him whether the object of his love is a man or a woman, so long as he or she is a member of the nobility.

Now let us think about the lovers' attitudes to their marriage. The following is their dialogue on a day when their affair is tacitly permitted among the people around them.

> 'What do you mean by 'peace', if not this?'
>
> 'So much more'; and then in a chill, matter-of-fact tone she continued: 'Marriage isn't a thing we can take when the impulse moves us. There must be a divorce—two divorces. We must make plans.'
>
> 'Plans, divorce, war—on an evening like this.'
>
> 'Sometimes,' said Julia, 'I feel the past and the future pressing so hard on either side that there's no room for the present at all.'

The attitude of Julia, who bends her mind on building a happy home (which she believes is the best way to atone for her faults), forms a striking contrast with Charles' easy-going and, essentially, hedonistic attitude. Here the disparity between the lovers is evident. Their thoughts do not keep pace for the first time in their companionship. When Brideshead says his fiancee will not live in the same house with Julia and reminds her of the immorality of their relation, she is afflicted by consciousness of sin. But Charles do nothing but stand by and watch. He has no handy words to comfort her, and feels himself failing her in sympathy.

> Between her tears she talked herself into silence. I could do nothing; I was adrift in a strange sea; my hands on the metal-spun threads of her tunic were cold and stiff, my eyes dry; I was as far from her in spirit, as she clung to me in the darkness, as when years ago I had lit her cigarette on the way from the station; as far as when she was out of mind, in the dry, empty years at the Old Rectory and in the jungle.

Here the essential difference between them is evident. Charles' spirit is clearly of a different nature from Julia's religious makings, which fact makes it impossible for him to fully sympathize with her. And he makes her furious soon after this scene, saying something to make fun of her who is in tumult. This insensible behaviour of his is too much. It shows not only the lack of his understanding but the weakness of his love.

It is the same with his attitude toward religion as with his attitude toward human relations. He argues for argument's sake about religion without trying to understand its essence. It does not occur to him that it is wrong to discuss

religion from the viewpoint that it should bring us some benefit. He does not know what religion is. The following is his response to Julia's outburst about sin.

> 'Of course it's a thing psychologists could explain ; a preconditioning from childhood ; feelings of guilt from the nonsense you were taught in the nursery. You do not know at heart that it's all bosh, don't you ?'
> 'How I wish it was !'

This shows their entirely different bases of arguments. We do not believe in God through reason. Julia's affliction comes from the fact that she cannot escape from religion through reason. Charles occasionally makes unnecessaarily anti-Catholic remarks. His behaviour is not normal, even though we allow for the fact that he is conscious that Julia's religious conscience is against their love affair. If her faith is a kind of obstacle to their love, he should strive to overcome it by understanding it. No doubt it is in vain if only Charles rebels against Catholicism which has nearly two thousand years' tradition. It is a matter for the Flytes to decide whether or not Father Mackay should be brought to the dying Marchmain ; it is no matter for Charles to interfere with. He may be a rationalist, but cannot be said to be very sensible or understanding. It is quite natural for him to fail to understand the souls of the Flytes till the end.

His impression by Marchmain's penitence on his death-bed is only temporary. It seems to have no influence on Charles' conduct since then. His own conversion is meant by the subtitle of this work, but the necessity of his conversion whose process is not stated consistently has no sufficient persuasive power. As 1 have already discussed, if Charles' conversion applies to Waugh's own, we suspect his may also be only formal, though Catholicism is said to be on a particular aspect in the Anglican-ruled England, and I am not familiar with it.

Now we can perceive a subtle shade of change in Charles' psychology near the end of the book where he criticizes himself for the first time. Cordelia, who has finished her duties in Spain, brings back some information about Sebastian. Charles talks with her and that night he ruminates what he said unconsciously during the talk.

> That night I awoke in the darkness and lay awake turning over in my mind the conversation with Cordelia : how I had said, 'You knew I would not understand.' How often, it seemed to me, I was brought up short, like a horse in full stride suddenly refusing an obstacle, backing against the spurs, too shy even to put his nose at and look at the thing.

He reflects his passive, lukewarm attitude so far toward everthing, and seems to be conscious that he should reform it. But his behaviour does not still

change, though it is his task to make the most of this reflection. He reverts to himself in the former days. Waugh's description of Charles' mentality gives us an odd impression. We wonder if he really had an image of Charles in mind consistent from the beginning to the end of the story.

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In the part that is already cited, Julia says it is frightening to think how completely Charles has forgotten Sebastian, but Charles himself thinks, on the contrary, he has not forgotten him. Readers are uncertain who is telling the truth. It is made clear soon by the dialogue between Charles and Cordelia.

> '..... She never loved him, you know, as we do.'
> "Do." The word reproached me ; there was no past tense in Codelia's verb 'to love'.

Charles' words are a little too affected, calm and composed for those of a man really reflecting to give. His friendship may have been honest in those days when he realized that to know and love one other human being is the root of all wisdom, after he knew Sebastian was a Catholic, but it did not last long. It seems to us that it is not Sebastian himself but only the aristocratic atmosphere about him that attracted Charles.

When Charles comes back from his expedition for painting in Mexico and Central America, his wife Celia comes to meet him in America. A daughter is born during his journey and Celia names her after Charles, but he does not notice it. He is quite indifferent to his children. He seems to stay unmoved by Celia's account that John is praying every evening for his father's safety during the journey ; and he is also disinclined to meet his new daughter he has not yet seen. Celia may have once betrayed him, but his affection toward his children should be quite another thing. To hear him talk, we cannot but suspect that he is only evading meeting his daughter.

In the contrast between the old noble family and the modern upstarts, Celia is meant to be classified among the latter. But both Mulcaster and Charles' singular father admit that she is a good girl and say that he will not be able to get along well with another woman, if he cannot with Celia. I think they are right. Hollis says that Celia, who devotes her life to helping her husband rise in the world, is not 'all there', but can we say that Charles lives in meeting the challenge of religion ? It is obvious who is richer in charity.

Ⅳ

We are deeply impressed by the power of the church over the people who

are under its influence. All of the Flytes are drawn in the end toward the chruch with 'a twitch on the thread'. As Hollis says, Waugh is a writer, and not an apologist, so it may be all right with Waugh so long as the power of Catholicism is represented in the work. But the majority of the readers, who are not Catholics, will remain discontented after reading this. Naturally, they want to know what Catholicism has to appeal to them. This work does not give them such essential knowledge about it. O'Faolain who is a Catholic himself remarks that it is quite doubtful how much of what is proper to Catholicism this work contains.

Wilson says that Waugh is the only male writer of his generation who makes his woman attractive. It is true that his heroines are as attractive as lovable, whereas his male characters are often awkward or dull-witted. (Of course Waugh makes passive and stupid male characters enter on purpose.) Julia is a very attractive woman of unusual depth rarely found in his works. It is because she is not only a mere character in his work but also a symbol of his attachment to the upper classes.

> ..... She seems to say : 'Look at me. I have done my share. I am beautiful. It is something quite out of the ordinary, this beauty of mine. I am made for delight. But what do I get out of it ? Where is my reward ?'
>
> That was the change in her from ten years ago ; that indeed, was her reward, this haunting, magical sadness which spoke straight to the heart and struck silence ; it was the completion of her beauty.

We cannot but feel that in this appealing beauty of Julia's Waugh expresses his own mourning over the declining glory of the English aristocracy. As we have already seen, Waugh's inclination toward the nobility is so prevailing in the whole work that the theme of the conflict between love and faith has become ineffective. In this sense we may share Wilson's assertion that Waugh's snobbery is the only religion in the book, and Bergonzi's supposition that Charles had made it all up as part of a huge wish-fulfillment fantasy is very revealing of the essence of this work.

TEXT

Evelyn Waugh, "Brideshead Revisited" Chapman & Hall. 1945. [Revised 1960]

(This paper is based on the revised edition. The quotations are all from Book Ⅱ. The last one is from Chap. 1, the others from Chap. 3 or 4.)

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