

BETWEEN A BUTTERFLY AND A CATHEDRAL: THE QUESTION OF ART IN BRIDESHEAD REVISITED BY EVELYN WAUGH

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Before he became a writer, Evelyn Waugh considered a career as a graphic artist. He became seriously interested in graphic design at Lancing and then, during his studies at Oxford, he designed book jackets and contributed prints to various periodicals. At that time, as Martin Stannard points out, “Waugh was committed to the idea of being an artist and was well-read in aesthetic theory” (1986: 88). After leaving Oxford he enrolled in an art school with the aim of becoming a professional artist. However, he eventually realized that his ambitions in this field were bigger than his talent and he reluctantly gave up his dream.¹

When he finally became a writer, Waugh often drew on his knowledge of art and aesthetic theory, both in his novels and in his non-fiction. Art plays an important role in one of his most important works, *Brideshead Revisited*, whose protagonist, Charles Ryder, is a painter. Waugh used the novel to voice his reflections on aesthetic theory, especially his views concerning the value of art. The aim of this article is to examine these views through a close reading of key fragments of the novel dealing with the question of the meaning and function of art.

At the beginning of the main story told in the novel Charles is a student of history at Oxford and only vaguely thinks of becoming an artist. At Oxford he befriends Sebastian Flyte, who becomes a major driving force behind a change in his aesthetic views. After their first lunch together Sebastian takes Charles to the Botanical Gardens to “see the ivy”. On returning to his rooms in college he “found them

exactly as I had left them that morning, I detected a jejune air that had not irked me before. What was wrong? Nothing except the golden daffodils seemed to be real. Was it the screen? I turned it face to the wall. That was better” (Waugh 2000: 35).² The gesture is symbolic, for the screen is painted by Roger Fry, who, along with Clive Bell (another of Charles’s favourites), was the main champion of modern visual art in Great Britain and was especially associated with the theory of Significant Form, which Charles equates with modern aesthetics. Thus, with this gesture (which is still only instinctive) Charles repudiates not only one painting or one painter but a particular approach to art.

The theory of Significant Form, on which this approach is based, was put forward in Great Britain by Clive Bell in his *Art*. In this book, Bell wonders about the qualities common to several works of visual art, representative of various periods and various kinds of this art. After dismissing several ideas, he eventually comes to the conclusion that what these works have in common is “lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms”, which have the power to stir “our aesthetic emotion. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call ‘Significant Form’; and ‘Significant Form’ is the one quality common to all works of visual art” (Bell 1914: Ch. I, para. 4).

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Some time after their visit to the Botanical Gardens Sebastian attacks Bell directly. As Charles remembers, “it was not until Sebastian, idly turning the page of Clive Bell’s *Art*, read: ‘Does anyone feel the same kind of emotion for a butterfly or a flower that he feels for a cathedral or a picture? Yes. *I do*’, that my eyes were opened” (30)³. This is essentially the reiteration of his first lesson in the Botanical Gardens, which Charles now seems to understand fully.⁴ Although Charles does not explain what he saw with his open eyes, the nature of his new insight can be guessed at in the context of Bell’s *Art*.

At one point Bell writes in his work: “what I call material beauty (e.g. the wing of a butterfly) does not move most of us in at all the same way as a work of art moves us. It is beautiful form, but it is not significant form. It moves us, but it does not move us aesthetically” (Bell 1914: Ch. III, para. 2). The reason why natural objects do not move us aesthetically is that they are “clogged with unaesthetic matter (e.g. associations)”, which makes it difficult for us to enjoy their aesthetic form, whereas real works of art “have been so purified that we can feel them aesthetically” (Bell 1914: Ch. III, para. 7). That is, we can focus solely on their significant form.

With his eye-opening remark Sebastian admits that he appreciates art in the same way that he enjoys nature. Therefore, it could be guessed, unaesthetic matter is—at least—as important for him as the aesthetic form.⁵ For Charles such an approach to art is completely different from what he had hitherto believed in, but

he has no difficulty in embracing it, as he has always been highly responsive to the beauty of nature.

First of all, it was his fondness for the gillyflowers under his ground-floor windows that made him refuse his cousin's advice to change his rooms —thanks to this decision he was to meet Sebastian several months later. In *The Life of Evelyn Waugh* D. L. Patey notes that Charles from the outset “possesses not only an intense sensitivity to beauty —to the beauty of fields and flowers, most often described as drenched in scent and rich in the colours white and gold, green and blue— but also an inchoate sense of natural beauty as a kind of gift or bounty” (2001: 234). Although it may be the converted Charles, narrating the story, who is responsible for conveying this transcendental sense of natural beauty, he is “drawing out notions already present, if unformed, in his earlier responses” (2001: 234). Given the fact that, at the beginning of the story, Charles is an agnostic, this transcendental sense of the beauty of nature, as pointing to something else, is not clearly associated by him with God, but he is nevertheless aware that there is something more to natural beauty than the pleasure of the senses.

That this is the case is made clear by an analysis of one change that Waugh made in the revised edition of *Brideshead Revisited*.⁶ In the first edition Charles describes the day of his first visit to Brideshead as a time “when leaf and flower and bird and sun-lit stone and shadow seem all to proclaim the glory of God” (1999: 21). As it is difficult to believe that an agnostic would make such a remark, it must be the converted Charles who uses this expression when remembering the visit. But then, at this point of the novel, the agnosticism of the young Charles is not known to the reader, who might therefore assume that he believes in God. To avoid this ambiguity, in the revised edition Waugh changed the sentence. Now the day of his first visit is described as the time “when the ditches were creamy with meadowsweet and the air heavy with all the scents of summer; it was a day of peculiar splendour” (23). The beauty of nature as revealing the glory of God is replaced with the beauty of nature as evoking a peculiar splendour. This is, clearly, a rendering of the feelings of the young Charles —the converted would have referred to the glory of God.

Such a perception of nature —as having a peculiar splendour— is, according to Mircea Eliade, an echo of a religious attitude to nature in a desacralized world, an unclear feeling which is difficult to elucidate, and in which one can discern the memory of a degraded religious experience: “Experience of a radically desacralized nature is a recent discovery; moreover, it is an experience accessible only to a minority in modern societies, especially to scientists. For others, nature still exhibits a charm, a mystery, a majesty in which it is possible to decipher traces of ancient religious values” (1968: 151).

Interestingly, Eliade claims that one of the directions in which this desacralization of nature went was towards its aestheticization. He illustrates this movement with the example of Chinese miniature gardens, which at first had a strictly religious sense but which, in the 17th century, began to be treated as works of art by secular people. And although in China, according to Eliade, the aesthetic feeling always retains a religious dimension, “the example of the miniature gardens shows us in what direction and by what means the desacralization of the world is accomplished. We need only imagine what an aesthetic emotion of this sort could become in a modern society, and we shall understand how the experience of cosmic sanctity can be rarefied and transformed until it becomes a purely human emotion —that, for example, of art for art’s sake” (154-155).

Sebastian’s teachings are supposed to reverse this process. Although Sebastian is never explicit (evidently because his own knowledge is rather instinctive), and, at first, Charles does not clearly realize the direction in which he is being pushed, the rehabilitation of the beauty of nature makes him impatient with art for art’s sake, and thus with modern aesthetics. Being dimly aware that nature owes its beauty to something beyond itself, he begins to look for something in art beyond its form, which could give it meaning.

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Thus, already when he returns from the first lunch and the first lesson in the Botanical Gardens with Sebastian, he senses in his rooms a “jejune air” which did not irk him before. After a moment he guesses that it is Fry’s screen that is responsible for this atmosphere and when he turns the screen to the wall he knows that he was right. He has realized that the painting is jejune; that is, it lacks substance. What could the substance that the painting lacks be? Paradoxically, the answer to this question may be found in the writings of Roger Fry himself, whose ideas on art were sometimes far closer to Sebastian’s teachings than Charles (and Waugh himself) seemed to be aware of.

In *A Roger Fry Reader*, Christopher Reed argues that in Fry’s critical texts there are inconsistencies which make “clear how far Fry was from the ‘purely technical’ and ‘rigid doctrine of significant form’ now attributed to him” (1996: 126)—for example, what Fry values in Cézanne is “the intensity and the spontaneity of his imaginative reaction to nature” (126). In general, Fry’s texts promoting Post-Impressionism “demonstrate the tenaciousness of the old expressionistic vocabulary”, while his reactions to competing avant-garde movements “document the overlapping of moral and aesthetic values that reveal Fry’s formalism to be neither mechanical nor hermetic” (126). Thus, “it is only through the retrospective filter of formalism’s later sway over the arts that Fry’s tentative and inconsistent writings have come to seem systematic and rigid” (127). It seems that Charles makes the same mistake when, remembering his aesthetic education, he mentions “the puritanism of Roger Fry” (Waugh 2000: 79).

The fact is that Fry's response to Clive Bell's *Art* could open Charles's eyes as effectively as Sebastian's casual remark. In a review of *Art*, Fry identified a weakness in Bell's theory concerning the purposes of the artist and the expectations of the spectator. In his book, Bell claims that, "in the artist an inclination to play upon the emotions of life is often the sign of a flickering inspiration" (Bell 1914, Ch. I, para. 18), and that, once the artist's interest has been aroused, he should suppress these emotions in favour of provoking an aesthetic emotion, a failure to do which being "a sign of weakness in an artist" (Bell 1914, Ch. I, para. 18). The spectator should always focus only on the aesthetic emotions: "in the spectator the tendency to seek, behind form, the emotions of life is the sign of defective sensibility always" (Bell 1914, Ch. I, para. 18).⁷

In his review, Fry makes it clear that he does not agree with Bell's approach to art, for, according to him, in art there is something else besides Significant Form which gives it meaning: "why must the painter begin by abandoning himself to the love of God or man or Nature unless it is that in all art there is a fusion of something with form in order that form may become significant[?]" Fry claims that "this something, this x in the equation", which sometimes affects the spectator in a far stronger manner than the form, "might be of almost any conceivable nature", and he continues:

I believe it would be possible, applying Mr. Bell's logical methods of deduction, to restate his answer to the inquiry what is common and peculiar to all works of art in some such way as this: The common quality is significant form, that is to say, forms related to one another in a particular manner, which is always the outcome of their relation to x (where x is anything that is not of itself form). (1996a: 160-161)

Fry believes that in art the end (that is, what motivates the artist and what is finally reflected in art) should be different from the means (the aesthetic form of the work). Obviously, in the case of painting this something to which the painter abandons himself, and which is different from the form, has to be reflected in what is represented in the painting.

When Charles turns Fry's painting face to the wall he no longer behaves like Bell's spectator, who seeks in a work of art only aesthetic emotions. He feels that the painting is responsible for the "jejune air" in the room. Fry's painting lacks substance, for it does not evoke anything outside itself. Using Bell's words, one could say that it is one of those works of art which "have been so purified that we can feel them aesthetically" (Bell 1914: Ch. III, para. 7). Thus Charles apparently sees the painting as a reflection of Bell's theory, an exemplary work of the "Significant Form" variety of art created to suppress in the spectator all feelings apart from the aesthetic emotion.

Sebastian's teachings are supposed to be aimed at making Charles sensitive to the extra-aesthetic qualities of art. He educates Charles not only by means of casual remarks, but also by inviting him to Brideshead, his family house. At Brideshead Charles becomes seriously engaged in the practice of art, and the success of these first attempts are evidently quite important in the forming of his later decision to become a professional painter.

Charles first visits Brideshead with Sebastian at the end of his first year at Oxford. This visit turns out to be very short, but he returns to Brideshead for his summer holidays. As he explores "the enchanted palace", as he calls Brideshead, at a leisurely pace, his aesthetic education continues, the education which Sebastian began by inviting him to see the ivy in the Botanical Gardens.

Although Charles is impressed with the whole house, it is the baroque fountain which is most important in the development of his artistic sensibility. Reflecting on the beauty of the fountain, Charles registers the development of his taste:

Since the days when, as a schoolboy, I used to bicycle round the neighbouring parishes, rubbing brasses and photographing fonts, I had nursed a love of architecture, but, though in opinion I had made that easy leap, characteristic of my generation, from the puritanism of Ruskin to the puritanism of Roger Fry, my sentiments at heart were insular and medieval.

This was my conversion to the Baroque. (79)

Thus, before his conversion to the Baroque, instigated by the fountain, there are three stages in the development of Charles's taste. It appears that the insular and medieval sentiments were the first —natural, as it were— stage, replaced later on a theoretical level by the puritanisms of Ruskin and Fry, but still constantly present "at heart". In 1954 Waugh described English taste in architecture, and this description clearly shows what Charles has in mind when he is reflecting on his insular and medieval sentiments: "English taste does not normally run to invention and display. We like, in our dwellings, dignity, repose and elegance. The Adams gave us just what Dr Johnson ordered. In our more fanciful, poetic moods we turn naturally to Gothic" (Waugh 1984: 459). Thus, according to Waugh the English usually like the dignity and elegance of the Adams, which were favoured by Dr Johnson. However, in more fanciful moods, they turn to Gothic, as, one can guess, it is a style which is 'wilder' in a Romantic way. And this is what Charles's sentiments were at heart, in spite of the fact that 'in opinion', that is, on the level of theoretical reasoning, he made this easy leap to the modernist puritanisms, following the fashion of the day.

Although the two aesthetic "puritanisms" represented by John Ruskin (1819-1900) and Roger Fry (1866-1934) were created in different centuries, it was not difficult, Charles claims, to leave Ruskin's for Fry's. In fact, Ruskin's theories anticipate those put forward in the early decades of the following century. In his

Seven Lamps of Architecture, Ruskin defines architecture as the art that “adorns the edifices raised by man for whatsoever uses”. According to Ruskin, “the question of greatest external or internal decoration depends entirely on the conditions of probable repose” (Ruskin 1849: 119), because to contemplate beauty one needs time: “Wherever you can rest, there decorate; where rest is forbidden, so is beauty. You must not mix ornament with business, any more than you may mix play. Work first, and then rest” (115). Therefore, like the modernists over half a century later, Ruskin claims that functional buildings—or, in fact, any “things belonging to purposes of active and occupied life”—have no need of useless decoration (115). The gap in the easy leap between Ruskin and Roger Fry mentioned by Charles seems to come from the fact that Ruskin defended the use of decoration in the case of houses, as they allow time for contemplation of beauty, but was against it in the case of functional buildings like banks and shops. Fry, on the other hand, saw no need for any categories in architecture such as the division into houses and functional buildings. He thought that all modern buildings should reflect the idea of functionalism and thus be free of unnecessary decoration.⁸ In an article describing the house which he himself had designed—and which he obviously considered as a model to be imitated—Fry wrote: “The artistic or architectural part of this house was confined, then, merely to the careful choice of proportions within certain fixed limits defined by needs” (1920: 182).⁹

In this context the beauty of the fountain is for Charles “new-found”:

This was my conversion to the Baroque. Here under that high and insolent dome, under those coffered ceilings; here, as I passed through those arches and broken pediments to the pillared shade beyond and sat, hour by hour, before the fountain, probing its shadows, tracing its lingering echoes, rejoicing in all its clustered feats of daring and invention, I felt a whole new system of nerves alive within me, as though the water that spurting and bubbled among its stones, was indeed a life-giving spring. (79-80)

This is art: it represents life and nature, it has “this something” which makes it significant. There is no “jejune air” about the fountain and the contrast with the screen by Fry is obvious. The vitality of the Baroque overshadows even the insular and medieval sentiments that Charles has nurtured from his childhood. This is the style that lessons with Sebastian, beginning in the Botanical Gardens, prepared him for.

Art of the Baroque period was to a great extent a reflection of the spirit of the Counter Reformation, which sought to “brighten up the gloom of militant Catholicism, to enlist the senses in the propagation of the faith” (Hauser 1999: 110). Although austere Mannerism was chronologically closer to the peak of the Counter Reformation represented by the Council of Trent, it was only in the

voluptuous art of the Baroque period, more attractive to the masses, that the artistic programme of the Council was truly accomplished (Hauser 1999: 114). During the period of the Counter Reformation the theory of art also moved in the direction of closer ties with religion. Whereas during the Renaissance, nature was considered to be the source of the artistic form, the Mannerist art theorists introduced the view “that the true forms of things arise in the artist’s soul as a result of his direct participation in the divine mind” (117). In other words “God creates an agreement between nature, which produces real things, and man, who brings forth works of art” (117). Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, the greatest authority in matters of art theory during the period of Mannerism, desired “explicitly that the painter should seek the advice of theologians in the representation of religious subjects” (110). This attitude to art is certainly visible in the life of the Baroque master of the Counter Reformation, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who “not only communicated twice a week, but, following the counsel of Ignatius, withdrew once a year into the solitude of a monastery, to devote himself to spiritual exercises” (170). And it was Bernini that Waugh had in mind when he was describing the fountain—in 1947 he wrote that he saw it as a combination of three famous works by Bernini (Patey 2001: 236)

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In fact, it could be said that in *Brideshead Revisited* Charles’s conversion to the Baroque parallels the conversion of Waugh himself, for whom, under the influence of his Oxford friend Harold Acton, the style “came to represent the last great international style in art that could bring rich variety of ornament into satisfying artistic wholeness, uniting integrity of design (as opposed to ‘disintegration and diffusion’) with fullness of representation” (Patey 2001: 12). But for Waugh the importance of styles went beyond aesthetic considerations: “His discussions with Acton (and Robert Byron) fostered a sense of period styles in the arts as expressions of each age’s fundamental moral and intellectual commitments, which would lead in the novels to a dense symbolic shorthand whereby the style of a building becomes a clue to the mind of its owner, artistic taste an index of moral character” (12). This extra-aesthetic significance of the style of the fountain is suggested in *Brideshead Revisited* by Charles’s comparison of the effect that the fountain has on him to that of a life-giving spring. For Charles, the beauty of the fountain apparently seems to point even beyond the world of nature which it renders so magnificently.

When Charles contemplates the fountain as a life-giving spring its spiritual significance, although tangible, is still veiled for him. The attentive reader, however, can try at this point to make an educated guess at what is hidden behind the veil. According to Patey, Charles’s openness to the Baroque “signals an openness to the values that inform it, his artistic ‘conversion’ prefiguring his later religious

conversion” (236). For Waugh, the Baroque is the manner of the Catholic Counter-Reformation (236). Waugh underlined this aspect of the style of the fountain, when he admitted that he saw the fountain as modeled on works by Bernini (236). As Patey indicates, in “Converted to Rome” Waugh identifies the age of classicism —the period following the Baroque— “as an age of ‘polite and highly attractive scepticism’, the time when the erosion of Christian faith really began” (78). Thus, for Waugh, the Baroque clearly indicates the end of a truly Christian epoch in Europe.¹⁰

However, although Charles feels himself very near heaven during that summer, he is an avowed agnostic and does not seem inclined to connect the style of the fountain with religious issues. Nevertheless, when Sebastian’s older brother, Brideshead, and his ten-year-old sister, Cordelia, visit the estate, one of the conversations which starts with religious matters leads on into the sphere of art. During dinner, Bridey reveals to Sebastian that the Bishop wants to close the chapel at Brideshead. And then he surprises Charles with a question about the chapel:

[...] You are an artist, Ryder, what do you think of it aesthetically?’

‘I think it’s *beautiful*’, said Cordelia with tears in her eyes.

‘Is it Good Art?’

‘Well, I don’t quite know what you mean’, I said warily. ‘I think it’s a remarkable example of its period. Probably in eighty years it will be greatly admired.’

‘But surely it can’t be good twenty years ago and good in eighty years, and not good now?’

‘Well, it may be *good* now. All I mean is that I don’t happen to like it much.’

‘But is there a difference between liking a thing and thinking it good?’

‘Bridey, don’t be so Jesuitical’, said Sebastian, but I knew that this disagreement was not a matter of words only, but expressed a deep and impassable division between us; neither had any understanding of the other, nor ever could.

‘Isn’t that just the distinction you made about wine?’

‘No. I like and think good the end to which wine is sometimes the means —the promotion of sympathy between man and man. But in my own case it does not achieve that end, so I neither like it nor think it good for me.’

‘Bridey, do stop.’

‘I’m sorry’, he said, ‘I thought it rather an interesting point’. (89-90)

The point is interesting indeed. Charles does not like the chapel, built in the art nouveau style, but apparently at first he does not want to disappoint his hosts —particularly Cordelia— so in his first answer he assumes (evasively or cynically) that the value of art is identical with its popularity. In the modern world, styles go

in and out of fashion, and the fact that a style is currently out of fashion does not mean that it is bad. Charles's scorn for such an approach to art is more clearly seen when over a year later he tells Sebastian about his experiences of the art school in Paris which he attends after leaving Oxford: "They never go near the Louvre", I said, 'or, if they do, it's only because one of their absurd reviews has suddenly "discovered" a master who fits in with that month's aesthetic theory'" (147).

But Bridey is clearly not to be fobbed off with such an answer. With his back to the wall, Charles makes a clean breast of his dislike for the chapel, but simultaneously he concedes that it may be good art. Obviously this "may" means that he himself is not able to evaluate the chapel. His notion of the value of art is clearly different here from that in his first answer—his tentative "may" certainly does not reflect the fact that art nouveau is not popular at the time. So, there must be some other general standard according to which one may evaluate art and clearly Charles is not sure about using this standard. This standard is, of course, what he has learnt from Sebastian. His understanding of it is still based on intuition rather than on a stable conceptual framework, but he is aware that art should point to something else beyond itself. Or, to use Fry's terminology, he is aware that good art should first of all point to this something which motivated the artist. In the case of Fry's painting of the Provençal landscape on the screen, Charles knew what he should expect. Now the situation is different—the chapel is a piece of religious art and Charles, as an agnostic, feels that he may not be in a position to evaluate it.

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What puzzles Bridey, however, is the idea that one may dislike a thing, and still think that it may be good. As Charles himself answers his doubts with a question, Bridey clarifies his own point of view using wine as an example. And here the distinction between means and ends is vital. What for Bridey is of greatest importance is the end a thing serves. If he considers this end good, he likes the means; that is, the thing itself. What is significant here is that the quality of the thing itself seems unimportant to him. If wine achieved a good end for him then he would probably like it, regardless of its taste. Thus his dislike for wine does not indicate a dislike for the taste of wine, but for the effect it has on him. Hence he does not see the difference between liking a thing and thinking it good.

Thus, when he asks Charles for his opinion of the chapel, he does not seek an opinion about a means (the chapel as an aesthetic object) to an end which he considers good (the religious function of the chapel). When he thought the chapel was needed, he probably did not think its aesthetic aspect important on its own—it was serving a good end. Now that he is no longer sure about its religious ends, Bridey is at a loss about the means; that is, its aesthetic side.¹¹ He wonders if, after being closed for religious services, the chapel could be worth anything on its own.

Thus, he asks Charles about the aesthetic side of the chapel as an end in itself, not as a means. The answer that he expects from Charles is the answer of an adherent of the modern approach to art —art for art’s sake. Here the aesthetic level of a work of art —the means— is an end in itself. The reason behind Charles’s initial hesitation is that Bridey asks two questions that could be interpreted differently. He first asks: What do you think of it aesthetically? And then: Is it good art? For the follower of the art for art’s sake theory, the two questions have the same meaning. But for someone who seeks in art something beyond aesthetic impression, these are two different questions. At first, Bridey assumes that Charles is in the former category. It is only when, some time later, he returns to their discussion that he realizes that Charles does not approach art in this way: “‘Of course, you are right really’, he said. ‘You take art as a means not as an end. That is strict theology, but it’s unusual to find an agnostic believing it’” (91).

Two things are apparent in this statement. First, that Bridey eventually agrees with Charles that acknowledging good ends does not always imply a liking for the means —and vice versa. This is why he says that Charles is really right. But what is also evident in his words is that Bridey thinks that, in modern times, only religious people do not approach art with the notion of art for art’s sake. This is why he says that it is unusual to find an agnostic believing that in art the means are different from the ends. To return to Fry’s definition of art, Bridey would think that if an artist is motivated by something other than the aesthetic form of his work itself (the means), that motivation must always be love of God (to use Fry’s example), or any other acknowledgement of the spiritual dimension of the world (the ends —that is, what motivates the artist— are always spiritual).

In his later career as a painter, Charles will most often be motivated by his love of architecture —but not as seen in its transcendental dimension. The end of his art —the expression of his love for architecture— will not be spiritual, although it will be different from the means —the aesthetic form of his painting. Thus, Bridey’s conclusion will not apply to him. However, although Charles will have problems with realizing it, he will feel inspiration and will be creating truly good art only when he is motivated by the spiritual dimension of architecture and the world — even if perceived only instinctively. Further discussion with Bridey could shed some light on his understanding of art, but Charles is clearly not willing to delve into the problem at that moment.

The next lesson that he has the chance to learn comes again from the Flytes, this time from Cordelia. After the death of Lady Marchmain, Lord Marchmain decides to sell Marchmain House in London to balance the family budget and Bridey asks Charles to paint the house before it is sold. Charles readily agrees —this is to be his first commission.

When he gets down to work, he is surprised by the pace at which he paints: “I was normally a slow and deliberate painter; that afternoon and all next day, and the day after, I worked fast. I could do nothing wrong” (210). The way in which he works is an echo not only of the way in which he drew the fountain during his first summer at Brideshead, when, “by some odd chance, for the thing was far beyond [him, he] brought it off”, but also of the way in which he worked during the same summer on his first oil painting, when “the brush seemed somehow to do what was wanted of it” (80). This painting was immediately followed by another, which, in contrast to the first, was a failure. It is in the difference between these two paintings, to which Charles brought the same technical skills, that important hints as to the nature of his occasional mysterious successes may be found.

80 He paints the two pictures on the empty panels of the rococo decorated walls of one of the rooms opening on the colonnade. The first of these paintings is a romantic landscape: “It was a landscape without figures, a summer scene of white cloud and blue distances, with an ivy-clad ruin in the foreground, rocks and a waterfall affording a rugged introduction to the receding parkland behind” (80). The other is a “fête champêtre with a ribboned swing and a Negro page and a shepherd playing the pipes” (80). The themes seem to be similar, but this similarity is only apparent. The first picture is, in fact, an imaginative rendering of the house at Brideshead and its surroundings, and thus of the enchanted palace in which he lives. The ivy-clad ruin is the house itself (the ivy symbolising Sebastian and his teachings), and the rocky waterfall is evidently the fountain with its life-giving spring. It is his spiritual perception of the place which helps him to paint the picture, which creates this “luck and the happy mood of the moment” (80) to which he attributes his success—in the same way as his spiritual perception created an “odd chance” which helped him to draw the fountain.¹² On the other hand, the second painting, the “fête champêtre”, is, as Charles himself admits, an “elaborate pastiche”—its source is not spiritual perception, but an attempt to imitate a particular type of painting. Left with his meagre technical skills, he inevitably fails.

When he paints the Marchmain House several years later his work again seems better than he expected. Thus, again, it must be the spiritual dimension of the house which he senses—this is, after all, the second home of Sebastian—and which influences his work. Unfortunately, Charles once more misinterprets the sources of his mysterious achievement. This time it is not an odd chance or luck which he deems responsible for the infallibility of his work but his own improving technique. And he revels in his skill—when on the last day of his work Cordelia says: “It must be lovely to be able to do that”, he simply answers: “It is” (210).

But during his subsequent conversation with Cordelia he is given another hint of the real source of his success. Cordelia tells him about the closing of the chapel at Brideshead after her mother's Requiem, which was the last mass said there:

After she was buried the priest came in —I was there alone. I don't think he saw me— and took out the altar stone and put it in his bag; then he burned the wads of wool with the holy oil on them and threw the ash outside; he emptied the holy-water stoop and blew out the lamp in the sanctuary, and left the tabernacle open and empty, as though from now on it was always to be Good Friday. I suppose none of this makes any sense to you, Charles, poor agnostic. I stayed there till he was gone, and then, suddenly, there wasn't any chapel there any more, just an oddly decorated room. (211-212)

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre points out the complex character of what he calls absolute space—that is, social space invested with spiritual meaning. Such space, according to Lefebvre, is simultaneously mental and real:

There is thus a sense in which the existence of absolute space is purely mental, and hence "imaginary". In another sense, however, it also has a social existence, and hence a specific and powerful "reality". The "mental" is "realized" in a chain of "social" activities because, in the temple, in the city, in monuments and palaces, the imaginary is transformed into the real. (1991: 251)¹³

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If the imaginary can be "realized" in a chain of "social" activities, it can also be "de-realized". This is why Cordelia is so acutely aware of the difference after observing the priest deconsecrating the chapel. The space is no longer invested by her with symbolic meaning and it becomes an oddly decorated room.

The experience is important to her, and she wants to convey its nature to Charles:

'I can't tell you what it felt like. You've never been to Tenebrae, I suppose?'

'Never.'

'Well, if you had you'd know what the Jews felt about their temple. "Quomodo sedet sola civitas" [...] it's a beautiful chant. You ought to go once, just to hear it'. (212)

The chant *Quomodo sedet sola civitas* sung at matins on Maundy Thursday is in fact Jeremiah's lament for the destruction of the Temple: "How the city sits empty, that once was full of people", and it refers to situations in which space has been suddenly deprived of the spiritual dimension, and so is an ideal illustration of Cordelia's feelings about the contrast between the chapel and the oddly decorated room. If he understood this contrast Charles would understand the imaginary/spiritual dimension of space, and would thus understand that all his mysterious successes originated in his ability to sense this dimension.

But intoxicated with what he believes to be his growing mastery of art, Charles dismisses what Cordelia says as another attempt to convert him. And when she begins to talk about vocation he thinks:

But I had no patience with this convent chatter. I had felt the brush take life in my hand that afternoon; I had had my finger in the great, succulent pie of creation. I was a man of the Renaissance that evening —of Browning’s renaissance. I, who had walked the streets of Rome in Genoa velvet and had seen the stars through Galileo’s tube, spurned the friars, with their dusty tomes and their sunken, jealous eyes and their crabbed hair-splitting speech. (213)

This is clearly the reiteration of his wish to live in the world of three dimensions, expressed a few years earlier, when he was leaving Brideshead in disgrace with Lady Marchmain. Then he thought that to live in such a world was a sign of maturity. Now he also believes that the three-dimensional world is best suited to an artist.

The next ten years of his professional life show him how wrong he was. Encouraged by the success of his paintings of Marchmain House, he becomes an architectural painter. He loves architecture, but it is a love of the building seen in three dimensions, a love of its aesthetic qualities. Such an approach to architecture is most common in the modern world, and Charles becomes a prosperous painter. He himself, however, slowly begins to realize that there is nothing to distinguish him as an artist, except his growing skill and enthusiasm for his subject: “as the years passed, I began to mourn the loss of something I had known in the drawing-room of Marchmain House and once or twice since, the intensity and singleness and the belief that it was not all done by hand —in a word, the inspiration” (216). At last he understands that the ease with which he painted Marchmain House was not the result of his growing skill but of inspiration. But the source of this inspiration still remains a mystery to him.

Charles eventually returns to Brideshead, but even here, at first, he cannot break from the routine of seeing everything from a purely aesthetic perspective. During his sea voyage home from America, where he vainly sought inspiration, Charles meets Sebastian’s sister Julia and falls in love with her. Both Charles and Julia are married at the time, but are no longer in love with their unfaithful spouses, Celia and Rex, both of whom are firmly anchored in the world of three dimensions. After their return Julia and Charles settle at Brideshead and try to find happiness in their life, ignoring Rex, who also lives there, and the parties he throws with his war-minded friends.

Charles soon realizes that Julia makes a graceful subject for painting: “I never tired of painting her, forever finding in her new wealth and delicacy” (263). One evening, when he learns that Charles is painting his sister, Bridey notes that it is “a change from architecture and much more difficult” (268). The point is, however, that Charles’s pictures of Julia do not reflect such a difficult change as Bridey has in mind. A moment later Bridey says that if he himself were a painter, he would

paint “subjects with plenty of action in them like...” Waiting for him to finish the sentence, Charles summarily reviews various clichéd subjects: “What, I wondered was coming? The Flying Scotsman? The Charge of the Light Brigade? Henley Regatta? Then surprisingly he said: [...] like Macbeth”. The contrast between what Charles expects and what Bridey has in mind is surprising, for it seems that for Bridey action refers more to what happens in the human soul than to what happens on a battlefield. And Charles is no longer condescending, as he reflects about Bridey: “Though we often laughed at him, he was never wholly ridiculous; at times he was even formidable” (269).

Charles is impressed with Bridey’s subject matter because he himself does not use art to penetrate the human soul—the wealth and delicacy that he finds painting Julia is rather that of her physical appearance. Although there is no description of any of his paintings of Julia, his approach to her as his subject matter may be guessed from the way he looks at her on the terrace, an hour or so before talking to Bridey:

I had carried two garden cushions from the shelter of the colonnade and put them on the rim of the fountain. There Julia sat, in a tight little gold tunic and a white gown, one hand in the water idly turning an emerald ring to catch the fire of the sunset; the carved animals mounted over her dark head in a cumulus of green moss and glowing stone and dense shadow, and the waters round them flashed and bubbled and broke into scattered flames. (264)

83

The passage reads almost as a description of a painting which Charles might paint. And here Julia, or rather her physical beauty, clearly fuses with the beauty of the fountain. She seems to be a detail in an architectural composition. Significantly, this is again the fountain, but there is no sign of a life-giving spring this time, only glittering impressions. While once his artistic sensitivity allowed him to glimpse life beyond art, now, after ten dead years of routine, it seems to reduce life to an aesthetic object.

Even when Julia breaks down after Bridey has accused her of living in sin, Charles, confused, tries to reduce what she is going through to an aesthetic experience—he tells her that she reminds him of a Pre-Raphaelite picture “The Awakened Conscience”.¹⁴ And when she accuses him of equating her conscience with a picture, he simply answers “It’s a way I have” (277). This declaration indicates clearly that reducing life to aesthetic dimensions has become his routine.

When mortally ill Lord Marchmain returns to Brideshead after many years of self-imposed exile in Italy, Charles’s three-dimensional, aesthetic vision of the world finds an unexpected and powerful ally. Immediately after his arrival, the marquess arranges his bedroom in a truly grandiose way. When the room is ready he calls Charles and tells him “You might paint it, eh—and call it the *Death Bed?*” (303).

Like Charles, the Marquess tries to reduce things which escape his understanding to an aesthetic experience. But he also seems to deal in this way with more down-to-earth problems. His idea of leaving Brideshead to Julia—who, according to him is “so beautiful always; much, much more suitable” (306)—and not to the self-righteous Bridey and his unattractive wife, also appears to be based on an aesthetic principle.

But if Lord Marchmain is his ally in the three-dimensional world, his death finally makes Charles acknowledge the spiritual dimension of the world. When Marchmain’s condition deteriorates, Charles consistently opposes the idea of calling in a priest for someone who rejected religion a long time ago. It is once again the agnostic who speaks through him, but he also senses a danger for his relationship with Julia. However, when, after one unsuccessful attempt, the priest is sent for once more, Charles follows him and Julia to Lord Marchmain’s room. There, “moving from the double conditionals of his first, agnostic prayer to the desire for an answer to another’s prayer to a direct and unconditional petition from his own need” (Davis 1990: 129), Charles undergoes a miraculous change. When Lord Marchmain makes the sign of the cross, acknowledging God’s grace, a phrase comes back to Charles from his childhood “of the veil of the temple being rent from top to bottom” (322). He is finally able to see clearly the spiritual dimension of the world.

84

Waugh does not reveal the influence of Charles’s conversion on his artistic career. He just makes it clear that Charles’s final understanding of the existence of the spiritual dimension of the world has not been reached through art. In this way, the whole novel seems to suggest that art may point to the existence of this dimension, but in the modern world it is extremely difficult to interpret the hints correctly. Art—even if it is helpful—is not essential for this understanding, which is ultimately attained through the workings of providence. And it should not be essential, for in the modern world, as the novel indicates in the epilogue, the kinds of art which are conducive to the awareness of the existence of the spiritual in the world are doomed to obliteration.

Notes

¹. Using Waugh's diaries, Stannard describes the moment of decision in the following way: "he came 'to the conclusion that it is not possible to lead a gay life and draw well'. Accepting painfully that he would never draw well, he chose the gay life" (1986: 102).

². All references in the text are to this edition, unless specified otherwise.

³. Bell's idea of an essential difference between the appreciation of nature and the appreciation of art is not revolutionary, as it closely resembles reflections of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, who in 1735 repudiated in his dissertation "the claim that the pleasure we take in a poem or a painting is not so very different from our enjoyment of the smell of a rose or the taste of a good glass of wine" (Harries 1997: 21).

⁴. In the novel, because of the disrupted time sequence, it is the eye-opening remark that appears first, without any comment, and only some time later does Charles return to his first lesson in the Botanical Gardens, which now seems to be an illustration for Sebastian's eye-opening claim.

⁵. The eye-opening remark could be interpreted in a different way. In this interpretation Sebastian would be one of those rare people who, according to Bell, are able to see in natural things their pure formal significance—in spite of all this clogging with unaesthetic matter. However, further analysis of the novel makes it clear that such an interpretation would be incorrect.

⁶. The revised edition was published in 1960 in Great Britain. In the United States the original version is still the basis for new editions of the novel.

⁷. In the Epilogue to "The Origin of the Work of Art" Heidegger writes about such an attitude to art: "Aesthetics takes the work of art as an object, the object of *aisthesis*, of sensuous apprehension in the wild sense. Today we call this apprehension experience. The way in which man experiences art is

supposed to give information about its nature. Experience is the source that is standard not only for art appreciation and enjoyment, but also for artistic creation. Everything is an experience. Yet perhaps experience is the element in which art dies. The dying occurs so slowly that it takes a few centuries" (Heidegger 2001: 77).

⁸. There is a difference between Ruskin and Fry concerning the idea of beauty: for the latter beauty does not have its source in decoration, but in a clear expression of function and the right proportions of buildings (Fry 1996b: 218-221). Therefore, for Fry, even a building deprived of decoration can be beautiful.

⁹. In the context of Fry's review of Bell's *Art* one could say that this relationship between proportions and needs, between form and function, would be responsible for the impact of the building as a work of art. Waugh, however, did not like such an approach to architecture, which he associated primarily with Le Corbusier, the most extreme advocate of the idea of functionalism, who notoriously claimed that "the house is a machine for living in" (Le Corbusier 2008: 160). Otto Silenus, modelled on Le Corbusier, says in Waugh's *Decline and Fall*: "The only perfect building must be the factory, because that is built to house machines, not men. I do not think it is possible for domestic architecture to be beautiful, but I am doing my best" (Waugh 1937: 120).

¹⁰. In fact, it could be said that in his work Waugh himself was following in the footsteps of the Baroque masters. As Michael Brennan notices, Waugh "genuinely regarded his career as an author as a Christian vocation and with missionary zeal viewed his pen as a means of asserting Divine authority over a world which had descended into the hands of barbarian hordes" (Brennan 2013: 96). In one of his magazine articles written in late 1940s he also "explained how the blended integrity of his art and religious belief in his post-*Brideshead* writing would provide the foundations of his literary creativity" (96).

¹¹. Almost the same situation appears when Marchmain House is to be sold. When Bridey tells Charles that the house is going to be pulled down to make place for a block of flats, Charles remarks:

‘What a sad thing.’

‘Well, I’m sorry of course. But you think it good architecturally?’

‘One of the most beautiful houses I know.’

‘Can’t see it. I’ve always thought it rather ugly. Perhaps your pictures will make me see it differently.’ (209)

For two of them the destruction of the house is a sad thing, but for different reasons. For Charles it would be the destruction of one of the most beautiful houses he knows. For Bridey, the destruction of one of his two homes. Bridey liked the house, but again because it served a good end—it was his home. The means—the architectural side—were not important to him. And again, when the end ceases to exist, Bridey begins to wonder about the quality of the means. The fact that he has always considered the house rather ugly indicates Bridey’s complete lack of sensitivity to worldly beauty. This is why during their conversation

about the chapel Charles reflected that neither of them had any understanding of the other nor ever could reach such an understanding.

¹². That the experience of Brideshead by the young Charles should be seen on spiritual level is suggested also by the converted Charles, who narrates the story, when he describes this experience in the following way: “Perhaps in the mansions of Limbo the heroes enjoy some such compensation for their loss of the Beatific Vision; perhaps the Beatific Vision itself has some remote kinship with this lowly experience”. And the young Charles, although far from literalness, sees the experience in similar terms: “I, at any rate, believed myself very near heaven, during those languid days at Brideshead” (77).

¹³. There is also, of course, the third sense of absolute space—the physical place.

¹⁴. The picture is, according to R. M. Davis, “an example of Victorian camp without spiritual dimension” (Davis 1990: 117).

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