

Lost

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Lately, I have been tossing and turning over in my mind a moment from Evelyn Waugh's novel, *Brideshead Revisited*. It enters the book softly, in the bed of a man recounting the pictures of his past and finding in the middle of his memories the vision of a small, warmly lit house standing alone and far away in a land of snow and mountains. Here, a precious scene reveals a little cabin dweller resting by a crackling log fire, next to stacks of twice-read books, skis leaning in a corner, furs and traps hanging from wall and ceiling, and the remains of a nibbled meal left on his wooden table. Outside, a blizzard rages and slowly builds a weighty mound of snow against the door, weakening its bolts and sockets until finally the "little lighted place" gives in, crumbles open and slides with the avalanche into a deep ravine (310). The man imagining this scene has never known such a place, nor has he ever been acquainted with this cabin dweller, but how gently he slips into this reverie! How he falls into this image, without understanding why or how he has done so. Though this scene is not a memory, it flows like one, dressed like Charles Ryder's other pictures of the past. That graceful, deft act, that fall into memory, cannot be separated from our own lives, for it seems a part of us, a part of the way we experience life. Characterizing the world we live in has never been an exact or easy process, but I sense that memories may offer a good start if we trust that "we possess nothing certainly except the past" (225).

When Waugh leads us into Ryder's memories, the minute details hypnotize us for a moment just before pushing us into Ryder's wandering thoughts and visions of the past. In one scene, he sits across a dining table from his lover, Julia, while watching her and recognizing something in the clothes she wears that night—a Chinese embroidered robe drawing a golden contour around her delicate neck, layered dragons in her lap. These little details that seem so insignificant hit Ryder with a tremendous effect, causing him to think back, still remembering how the "weight and stiff folds [of the robe] stressed her repose"; he recalls another night, another "moment of vision" when he remembered how Julia "had sat in the liner before the storm; this was how

she had looked; and [he realizes] that she had regained what [he] thought she had lost forever, that magical sadness that seemed to say, ‘Surely I was meant for some purpose other than this’” (310). Here, we end that unavoidable, instinctual lapse into memory with the sense of a tragedy, a starlessness that has come from such a little thing, this minor vision. By the close of the novel Ryder describes the thread of his memories as “the fierce little human tragedy in which [he] played,” characterizing most of his life as a gradual downward slope (351). Would it be apt to wonder now why most of these memories gravitate towards grief? Perhaps it is too imprecise to say that everyone recalls tears more vividly than laughter, but in terms of the history of literature, there is certainly something to be said about the tendency towards using avalanches and fallen cities to paint the essence of the modern world.

Carl Jung suggests that the term “modern” has its roots in World War I. In his essay, “The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man,” Jung elaborates on the way Modern Man perceives himself:

We are . . . the disappointment of the hopes and expectations of the ages. Think of nearly two thousand years of Christian Idealism followed, not by the return of the Messiah and the heavenly millennium, but by the World War among Christian nations with its barbed wire and poison gas. . . . modern man has suffered an almost fatal shock, psychologically speaking, and as a result has fallen into profound uncertainty. (459-60)

Paul Fussell later extends the idea of this “profound uncertainty” in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, telling us that “the dynamics and iconography of the Great War have proved to be crucial political, rhetorical, and artistic determinants on subsequent life” (ix). Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* is a post WWI novel and lies in the stream of literature that is undoubtedly shaped by the memory of the Great War. Thus, the sense of tragedy lurking behind the *Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* may very well have a connection with Waugh’s sensitivity towards a new literary imagination arriving with the memory of that war.

The character of this new memory seems to infiltrate Waugh’s rendering of the gentle slip into memory. Ryder reflects during one soaring thought that “like the pigeons of St. Mark’s, they were everywhere, under my feet, singly, in pairs, in little honey-voiced congregations, nodding, strutting, winking, rolling the tender feathers of their necks, perching sometimes . . . until suddenly, the noon gun boomed and in a moment, with a flutter and sweep of wings, the pavement was bare and the whole sky above dark with a tumult of fowl. Thus it was that morning” (225). These images unravel smoothly and

continuously from the serial sentences constructed by Waugh, causing us to hold on to his every lingering phrase and clause until the end of his sentences. This technique allows us to experience the memory as Charles does. In an earlier thought, the same opening of images, one trailing behind another in repetitive flashes, emerges from Charles's memory of a gift given to Julia for Christmas. It is a tortoise with her initials encrusted in diamonds upon its shell. He remembers the gift as "this slightly obscene object, now slipping impotently on the polished boards, now striding across the card table, now lumbering over a rug, now withdrawn at a touch, now stretching its neck and swaying its withered antediluvian head" (164). What is most important about this memory is the idea that it "became a memorable part of the evening, one of those needle-hooks of experience which catch the attention when larger matters are at stake, and remain in the mind when they are forgotten, so that years later, it is a bit of gilding, or a certain smell, or the tone of a clock's striking which recalls one to a tragedy" (164). It seems that Waugh would have us believe that before the tragic moment of realization, before the final avalanche, the "mud of Flanders and flies of Mesopotamia," one must pass along this curious stream of memories, for something lies hidden in them, buried while we experience them and only made clear to us years later in reflection (201).

But why is that the nature of these memories? Why can't we understand these mysterious signs and shadows right away, right as the moment hits us? Perhaps the answer lies in what Waugh calls "a world for Hooper," a phrase he uses to describe a modern world streaming with soldiers and war, motor-cars, and the "traveling salesman, with his polygonal pince-nez, his fat wet hand-shake, his grinning dentures" (139). In this world, old heroes and valiant men of the past are missing, having given their lives honorably for the next generation, the next line of hope for humans. Again, the detritus of the Great War seems to have shaped Waugh's rendering of Hooper's World. And there is something unsettling about this new world, this modern place that is supposedly built of better stone and safer highways. When we first meet Ryder, "something within [him], long sickening, had quietly died," rather unnoticeably in some "dark hour" of his wandering thoughts (5). This quiet death of feeling and loss of livelihood parallels what seems lost in Hooper's world—our natural instinct. This loss comes from the act of suppressing one's own instincts upon discovering what Jung calls "so much evil in the depths of our own psyche. . . . we like to assume that, if we succeeded in this, we should at least have rooted out some fraction of the evil in the world" (465-6). It takes

time to understand these wandering images lurking in the shadows of our every move precisely because of this unconscious act of suppression.

In Hooper's world, one might imagine "toilets . . . [rising] up from the floor like white water lilies." Smooth white porcelain bowls are made in the likeness of flower petals by an architect to "make the body forget how paltry it is, and to make man ignore what happens to his intestinal wastes" (Kundera 156). In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera opens us to the idea that in our Age of Hooper, otherwise known by Kundera as a world bearing kitsch, many of us "are happily ignorant of the invisible Venice of shit underlying our bathrooms, bedrooms, dance halls, and parliaments" (157).

For Waugh, this invisible Venice reverberates through an "indiscriminate chatter" that appears numbing to Ryder, flooding most of his adult years (270). This echo enters Waugh's novel several times, coming once on the night of Charles's private viewing in a room that is "painted cobalt . . . [and] fishes of silver and gold paper [are] pasted haphazard on ceiling and walls. Half a dozen youths [are] drinking and playing with the slot machines" (270). And again, it attaches itself to his wife, Celia, a woman defined by "softness and English reticence, . . . very white, small regular teeth, . . . rosy fingernails, . . . modern jewellery, . . . [and] her ready, rewarding smile" (234). The aura of the room holding Charles's private viewing and the peculiarities of his wife seem connected, held together by "false whiskers," and "simple, creamy English charm," which are two costuming features of English society that Waugh criticizes in his novel (273). Those who are a part of this world don their costumes cheerfully, glad to avoid entering the Venice of shit and instincts beneath the social surfaces. Best-dressed in the cloak of English Charm would be Rex Mottran, the man Julia desires so much that she renounces her Catholic ties to marry him. Sadly though, something about Rex had been both hidden and present all along. At first glance, Rex enters Waugh's novel as a hero, "looking the embodiment indeed, the burlesque—of power and prosperity" (119). However, as Ryder's memories unfold, revealing half a decade of events, it becomes evident that "power and prosperity" have nothing to do with being human; they make one less human. In one reflective conversation about Rex, Julia recalls,

He simply wasn't all there. He wasn't a complete human being at all. He was a tiny bit of one, unnaturally developed; something in a bottle, an organ kept alive in a laboratory. I thought he was a sort of primitive savage, but he was something absolutely modern and up-to-date that only this ghastly age could produce. A tiny bit of a man pretending he was the whole. (200)

Note how much this woman must describe, how many building sentences she must use to pinpoint her idea about that something, that modern unnamed thing at the heart of her troubles with this husband whom she had expected to offer her years of happiness rather than a marriage shadowed by open adultery. The slow discovery takes Julia a year to figure out, and, even by then, she has not found an exact name for this misery, this unavoidable tragedy. She may only find hints of it by looking back through memory and experience. It seems then that memory creates a doorway, a way to enter the shadows attending the grey-dusted surface of Hooper's World.

E.M. Forster kindles another perception about this modern world in *Howards End*, which is like *Brideshead Revisited* in the sense that several characters, particularly those of the Wilcox family, are constantly involved in a similar "cosmopolitan chatter," which the novel's narrator perceives not as a form of communication, but as a hollow noise (183). Henry Wilcox, the head of the Wilcox family, "had always the sneaking belief that bodily passion is bad," a belief frequently reaffirmed through "words that were read out loud on Sunday to him and to other respectable men, . . . words that had once kindled the souls of St. Catharine and St. Francis into a white-hot hatred of the carnal" (159). What interesting, paradoxical words those are, to be "kindled" into hating the body, to use one's instincts to show contempt for them. These thoughts suggest that modern men not only seem eager to avoid instincts and ignore their bodies, but they are in some ways born conditioned to do so. We are told, trained, and educated to become impassioned by the idea of not exalting passion. Even our houses tell us so; the very architecture of our bathrooms informs us that the carnal is both dirty and disgusting, something to be painted over and forgotten. As a result, the age of Modern Men produces people like Henry Wilcox who "could not be like the saints and love the Infinite with a seraphic ardor, but he could be a little ashamed of loving a wife" (159).

However, even in the post-war, modern world, the body cannot be hidden all the time, for the literature we have produced tells us otherwise. Post-war literature gives us "archetypal situations" in which we "suddenly feel an extraordinary sense of release, as though transported, or caught up by an overwhelming power" ("On the Relation" 320). In *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, there are moments, particularly experienced by Julia and Tereza, where the characters separate themselves from Hooper's World, that suppressed society, and "become only and utterly" bodies (Kundera 157). When this happens to Tereza, she crouches above a toilet, desiring to empty her bowels while feeling humiliation for just having been

unfaithful to her husband for the first time. This similar moment for Julia does not happen immediately as she continues an affair with Charles; it occurs in retrospect. After a word from her brother, Bridey, Julia escapes to a dark corner where she crouches, just as Tereza does above the toilet, and her body cannot stop shitting the word “sin” in “single words and broken sentences” (287). In this fitful scene, she cries miserably about “Mummy carrying [Julia’s] sin with her to church . . . taking it with her through the empty streets . . . Mummy dying with my sin eating at her, more cruelly than her own deadly illness” (288). These raw moments of hysterical emotion are what some might technically consider an exposure of neurosis, a mental imbalance that causes distress, while also exposing buried problems. Although neurosis appears as an extremely grave mental state, I cannot avoid sensing that it too resembles a gateway like memory, only more wild and frightening. Jung informs us that “our psychology, the acquaintance with our own souls, begins in every respect from the most repulsive end, that is to say with all those things which we do not wish to see” (“Spiritual Problem” 474). Thus, neurosis, embodying a “most repulsive end,” creates a powerful freedom and offers us a type of therapy that cannot be found otherwise. At the same time, this intense emotional state of anxiety may produce in literature an archetypal image, one that “releases all the hidden forces of instinct that are inaccessible to [our] conscious will” (“On the Relation” 320-1).

I predict that if asked, the director Krzysztof Kieslowski would go on abounding tangents about his understanding of Jung’s discussion of “the secret of great art.” The creative process, according to Jung, “consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work.” The artist translates the image “into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life” (321). In his film, *The Double Life of Veronique*, Kieslowski brings us through a myriad of archetypal images that dance in and out of the oddly paralleled lives of Weronika from Poland and Veronique from Paris. He devotes one scene to a puppet show that begins with a spinning wooden box, turning from a pair of hands that emerge from behind dark curtains. No body and no puppeteer are seen. Only a pair of twisting hands manipulating a pale marionette emerges from the shadowy stage. In one frame, a ballerina puppet bounces gently on one foot, perfectly extending it in the air and pressing it flat as she lands on the stage. It appears beautiful and graceful, but at the same time frightening, for we all understand that the puppet is not alive; yet its movements impose the idea of a life inside of it.

Kieslowski's scene suggests a variety of things for the advancement of plot, but I am more interested in his visual language. During this scene, the ballerina puppet acts as an archetype, which creates a peculiar sensation that calls to mind Freud's description of the uncanny. This specific "species of the frightening" produces a striking fear that stems from an "intellectual uncertainty," such as the one I sense while looking upon Kieslowski's dancing puppet, unsure as to whether or not it carries life in it (Freud 125). Such intellectual uncertainty can arise from meeting a once-familiar vision or sensation of the past that has become estranged from our conscious memory. Repetition of images, sights, or the notion of the double produces sensations of the uncanny. In another scene, Kieslowski creates this mood when Weronika actually sees her double, Veronique, hastily boarding a traveling tour bus while snapping photos of the protesters in Krakow. Bewildered, Weronika cannot take her eyes off her twin and tries desperately to move closer to the exiting bus to confirm what her eyes have told her: there does exist another version of me in this world. While this happens, the camera moves around Weronika in a "vertiginous circular shot," capturing her horror stricken expression while making the audience feel as if the world is spiraling on the verge of immediate collapse (Zizek 22). Here, Kieslowski makes sure that his audience notices Weronika's anxious fear. By the end of this scene, I began to wonder whether or not I was exposing myself to a beautifully rendered horror movie. Kieslowski's visual devices evoke odd, chilling sensations that remind us of suppressed instincts forming what seems to be the nature of the new experience of life in the modern world.

Kieslowski might have us all believe that our journeys through life travel under the shade of countless shadows. Undoubtedly, Waugh, Kundera, Jung, and Forster would also agree that the rendering of a complete portrait of the world today would require depicting a "hoard of abstractions and reflections and counterfeits of ourselves—the sensual man, the economic man, the man of reason, the beast, the machine and the sleepwalker" (Waugh 226). At the same time, one must realize that underneath these costumes a truer version of ourselves lies waiting to be discovered. But that very discovery, that leap into an authentic vision of our lives rarely arises from a forced search. Instead, discovery accompanies chance coincidences and deep reflections; it depends on a recognition of the suppressed.

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