THE INEXTRICABLE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS FORM AND SPIRIT IN EVELYN WAUGH'S *BRIDESHEAD REVISITED*

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In a letter dated April 30, 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer states, "We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore" (279). Bonhoeffer's statement indicates that in the modern age the institutional form of religion has suffered—and will continue to suffer—desecration. Though the religious form undergoes this damage, Bonhoeffer believes the "spirit" of Christianity, that is, the metaphysical truth of Christianity, can survive the degradation of religious form. Consequently, Bonhoeffer implies that the spirit of the Christian religion and its form are separate entities. Evelyn Waugh, in his novel *Brideshead Revisited*, presents an opposing view. Whereas Bonhoeffer thinks the spirit of Christianity can survive the loss of religious form, Waugh believes in the inextricable nature of religious form and spirit. Thus, Waugh holds that if Christians abandon the form of religion, they simultaneously lose the spirit. To argue effectively that this is Waugh's position requires three things: first, a fuller depiction of Bonhoeffer's opposing view concerning the separation of religious form and spirit; second, acknowledgment of Waugh's recognition that such a view exists; and third, textual examples from *Brideshead Revisited* which demonstrate Waugh's opposing belief.

In the same letter quoted above, Bonhoeffer testifies, "I often ask myself why a 'Christian instinct' often draws me more to the religionless people than to the religious, by which I don't in the least mean with any evangelizing intention, but, I might almost say, 'in brotherhood'" (281). This statement conveys the idea that the spirit of religion is capable of surviving without maintenance of the religious form, and that this spirit may be kindled in non-religious people. Bonhoeffer goes on to discuss his difficulty engaging "religious people" in conversation when religious language is involved (281). This difficulty suggests the impotence of religious language. Bonhoeffer's thought that "the time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over" supports this interpretation (279). Indeed, when he asks what "a church, community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life mean in a religionless world" (280), Bonhoeffer implies that each of these elements has lost its power, and a new way to communicate the unwavering religious spirit must be found.

Though Waugh disagrees with Bonhoeffer's perspective, he recognizes it and portrays it in his book. In the opening chapter of Book II of *Brideshead Revisited*, the main character, Charles Ryder—taking a cruise liner back to his home in England from an extended trip to South America—finds himself seated next to an Episcopalian bishop at dinner. The bishop, upon being asked what language he will speak when he arrives at his destination of Barcelona, confidently proclaims he will use "[t]he language of Reason and Brotherhood" (247). He then turns to Charles and declares that "[t]he speech of the coming century is in thoughts not in words" (247), thereby clearly demonstrating the idea that the form matters little, and possibly that it is insufficient in conveying the spirit. This thought is nearly synonymous with Bonhoeffer's statement that "the time when people could be told everything by means of words . . . is over." Just as words are "[m]ere conventional symbols" in the Bishop's opinion (247) so too is the form of religion a set of conventional symbols; the symbols may be abandoned and the spirit will remain. Through this character, Waugh demonstrates his recognition and thorough understanding of this popular contemporary view.

Turning now to the central characters of Waugh's text, evidence emerges to support the claim that Waugh stands in opposition to the view presented by Bonhoeffer and the bishop. In multiple instances, Waugh's characters enact the joint survival of religious form and spirit. The first example of form preserving religious spirit comes within Waugh's guilt-stricken character Sebastian Flyte. Charles meets and becomes enamored with Sebastian while attending Oxford. Through Charles's friendship with Sebastian, the reader becomes acquainted with an apparently carefree and felicitous bohemian who pampers a teddy bear named Aloysius. As the story goes on, the reader comes to recognize Sebastian as both deeply distressed and innocently appealing. Waugh presents a character who is troubled by moral guilt while simultaneously endowed with an attractive charm and purity.

It is precisely because of Sebastian's commitment to the form of Catholicism that he remains plagued by moral guilt and enlivened by spiritual vibrancy. The first thing to note about Sebastian and Catholics in general, according to Waugh, is that they have a unique perspective on life. Sebastian understands this and states as much in a conversation with Charles. After Charles makes the statement that Catholics "seem just like other people," Sebastian responds by saying, "My dear Charles, that's exactly what they're not . . . [T]hey've got an entirely different outlook on life" (89). He then claims that living according to this perspective is difficult for him and his sister Julia because they are "half-heathens" (90) and must contend with the moral guilt such an outlook imparts. Sebastian's struggle with guilt should be recognized as the product of his indestructible adherence to the Catholic perspective, which implies adherence to the form, and

hence connects the individual with spiritual truth. This spiritual truth perpetuates Sebastian's guilt. That he ends his life as an under-porter at a small monastery in Morocco asserts that he continually maintains the religious form. In fact, his work is to help maintain that form.

Further evidence that Sebastian persistently affirms the formal aspect of Catholicism indubitably comes after Charles asks whether being a Catholic made much difference to him. Sebastian retorts: "Of course. All the time" (86). This same conversation exhibits Sebastian's belief that the tenets of the Catholic faith seem both sensible and believable on account of their beauty. In proclaiming his belief in "Christmas and the star and the three kings and the ox and the ass," Sebastian fundamentally accepts the form of the Catholic religion (87). By adopting such ideas, that is, the traditions, stories, and language of Catholicism, Sebastian affirms the form. Again, Sebastian's continual maintenance of form, even after attempted escapes from the religious perspective through drinking, sustains his religious spirit.

One might argue that Sebastian actually does *not* demonstrate the inextricable nature of form and spirit because he appears incapable of losing the spirit of Catholicism, even when he apparently loses affirmation of the religious form. Such an interpretation, however, fundamentally misunderstands Sebastian's character. First, it too easily ignores Sebastian's perpetual alcoholism, an alcoholism which arises from lapses in his belief but never allows him to escape from moral guilt. These lapses, then, do not overturn Sebastian's adherence to Catholicism. In support of Sebastian's undying respect and affirmation of Catholicism, I would again point to his seeking out a position as an under-porter in a monastery. With his inheritance he could go anywhere; he chooses to live in and serve the Church. Sebastian, then, represents the "half-heathen" who continually affirms the form of his religion and maintains some aspect of the spiritual perspective.

Julia, on the other hand, represents the "half-heathen" who denies the religious form. Her rejection of religion is explicitly stated following her discussion with a priest concerning her fornication with her fiancé Rex Mottram. According to Julia's wishes, she met the priest "not in the confessional, but in a dark little parlour" (189). Here, then, is a symbolic act of breaking away from the true religious form; Julia did not deem the formal meeting in a confessional booth to be acceptable. After the priest denies Julia the consolation and acceptance she desires, the narrator tersely states: "From that moment she shut her mind against her religion" (189).

Julia's closing her mind to her religion leads to a life in which she completely loses the spirit of religion and, subsequently, her belief in it. When Julia and her family become aware that Rex has already been through one marriage and divorce, Julia's

intention to marry Rex remains steadfast. This is an affront to her family and her religion because such an action is forbidden by the Catholic Church. At the climax of the discussion concerning the marriage, after Rex has said he will marry Julia even if he risks going to hell by doing so, Julia boldly proclaims, "I don't believe these priests know everything. I don't believe in hell for things like that. I don't know that I believe in it for anything" (197). Undeniably, then, Julia forsakes the form of religion: she neither adheres to, nor believes in, the tenets and structures of the Church; in fact, she willfully disobeys them by marrying Rex. On account of this denial she loses her spiritual endowment and streams into a life of worldly pursuits and emptiness.

Charles meets her in this drifting state upon the same cruise liner returning to England from America. Their chance meeting takes place after years of estrangement from each other, and though unexpected, is enjoyed because both Charles and Julia are dealing with floundering marriages. Because of their marital problems and Julia's lack of spiritual association, the two consummate an adulterous relationship. At Oxford, Charles loved Sebastian, but it may be argued that one reason this love did not abide was because of Sebastian's faithful adherence to and belief in the religious form. Julia, on the other hand, has forfeited her belief in the religious form and subsequently lost her moral gravity. This allows Charles, an agnostic, to find a needed advocate of the religionless nature. Consequently, he falls in love with Julia, but with a love the perceptive reader recognizes as a false imitation of the true love found only through religious faith.

The inadequacy of this love becomes known during the closing scenes of Book II. In a torturous struggle which ends in her reconciliation to her faith, Julia judges her love of Charles to be insufficient and improper. She recognizes that faithfulness to the form of religion is her only possible means of fulfillment. Once she understands this, she ends her relationship with Charles. This course of events illustrates that affirming the religious form brings the religious spirit back to Julia.

These two "half-heathens" are not the only examples in *Brideshead Revisited* which point to Waugh's belief in the inseparability of religious spirit and religious form. At the close of the Book I, the youngest and most pious of the Flyte children, Cordelia, describes the closing of the chapel at Brideshead to Charles. The chapel, along with the rest of the estate, is shut because of the death of Cordelia's mother, Lady Marchmain. The severity of the action captured by Cordelia's description is deeply moving and worth quoting at length:

> After she was buried the priest came in . . . 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 stoup 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 stayed there till he was gone, and then, suddenly, there wasn't any chapel there any more, just an oddly decorated room. (220)

These activities executed by the priest illustrate the desecration of the chapel. Through the elimination of the form of Catholicism from the chapel—the removal of the altar stone, the burning of the anointed wool, the emptying of the holy water, the extinguishing of the lamp, and the opening of the tabernacle—the chapel as a sacred, spiritual refuge ceases to exist; instead it becomes nothing more than "an oddly decorated room." Clearly, Waugh asserts that the spirit of that building was synonymous with its form, tradition, and physical elements. Just as the chapel loses its spiritual endowment when the form is removed so too do humans lose their connection to the spirit of religion when the form of religion is removed from their lives.

In juxtaposition to this scene of desecration stands the scene of Lord Marchmain's Last Rites following his return to Brideshead after living abroad for many years. His extended absence, the reason for which is never fully explained, caused him to separate from, but not divorce, his wife. While abroad, he abandoned the Catholic Church, and, like Julia, unashamedly became an adulterer. His return, which takes place years after his wife's death, symbolically represents his revisiting of faith. Because of his failing health, the family members who are with him deliberate about whether to have a priest offer him the Last Rites. This deliberation, which emphasizes the importance of the religious form, is the event which reconciles Julia to her faith. Moreover, the feeble Lord Marchmain, accepting the formal and spiritual power of the Last Rites, demonstrates Waugh's belief that Christianity will be sustained by maintaining the formal practices of the religion.

Because the form contains the spirit, the individual's perspective of the religious deed allows him or her into the true nature of the act by varying degrees. Thus, when Charles, with eyes desiring to find the true religious substance, sees Lord Marchmain accept the form and faith of Catholicism before dying, he is allowed into the mystery and power of the religion. Lord Marchmain affirms his faith by making a penitent sign when the priest administers the Last Rites: the sign of the cross.

This climactic moment is narrated through the eyes of Charles. After the priest has anointed Lord Marchmain with oil, while Charles is "longing for a sign," tension builds as to whether Lord Marchmain will affirm his faith (338). While the family waits desperately for hope that their religious spirit will survive, Charles

describes the scene he witnesses with power and emotion I could not hope to summarize:

> Suddenly Lord Marchmain moved his hand to his forehead; I thought he had felt the touch of the chrism and was wiping it away. 'O God,' I prayed, 'don't let him do that.' But there was no need for fear; the hand moved slowly down his breast, then to his shoulder, and Lord Marchmain made the sign of the cross. Then I knew that the sign I had asked for was not a little thing, not a passing nod of recognition…. (338)

The overwhelming significance of the act engulfs Charles, the same act he performed out of "good manners" so many years before upon his entrance to the chapel at Brideshead (38). Even at that point, the act of mere "good manners" bore the same significance as Lord Marchmain's. Sebastian's sharp rebuke of Charles for irreverently and ignorantly performing such a sacred act bears witness to the importance of the form regardless of the motive or perspective. At Lord Marchmain's act Charles becomes aware of the awesome nature of the Catholic form of religion.

Charles had been praying for a sign, and the sign he received was "not a little thing, not a passing nod of recognition;" it was not a token of the Christian religion, but rather the *essence* of it. When seen in the correct way, the formal religious act miraculously carries and conveys all the power and glory of the spiritual realm. In the moment of Lord Marchmain's action, the religion was passed on and fortified for the future, because Charles encountered the spirit of Christianity through the action and accepted its authority. Waugh, then, not only sees the power of Catholicism inherent in its formal practices but also sees this connection itself as a reason for hope. Whereas those, like Bonhoeffer, who think religious form and spirit are separable must worry how the religious truths will survive a "religionless" society, Waugh remains confident that such truths will abide so long as the religious form is maintained.

In the Epilogue, Charles, now serving in the army, is stationed at Brideshead with his regiment. The use of the estate for means of war has severely damaged it. In fact, Charles's first assignment upon arrival is to clean up the mess previous regiments have left. The devastation of the house serves to demonstrate the ruin which the world has fallen into in the twentieth century. But, despite this destruction and eminent desperation, there is a light of hope in that the chapel has been reopened. When Charles visits the chapel, he sees "the art-nouveau lamp burn[ing] once more before the altar" and says "a prayer, an ancient, newly learned form of words" (350). The Church for Waugh remains the only undefeated aspect of life. In a world attempting a move toward the

"religionless time" of Bonhoeffer's lament , the Church remains the formal structure which preserves the religious spirit within itself. In the same way, Charles's prayer is a husk, an ancient form, which contains spiritual reality within it as well. However, such a reality can only be attained by affirming and entering the form, the maintenance of which assures transmission of the spirit.

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