Independent Systems of Ideology: Evelyn Waugh's Decline and Fall

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ABSTRACT

Evelyn Waugh's imaginary perfection involves defining Englishness as a monolithic code of morality and class structure, one that actually never exists universally and is mostly idyllic, but is nevertheless the standard to which society should be held. Invariably, Waugh's Englishness is a hegemonic, stratified and rigid phenomenon; his novels belie a deep distrust of the ascendant lower-class. Englishness is what separates Waugh's cultural compatriots—those that share his deeply conservative, moralistic and hegemonic ideology—from those Waugh derides as pretenders to the same. Waugh is doing much more than simply making fun of the wealthy and clueless; he is also blaming them for abandoning a more perfect past in favor of a shoddy future. The upper-class characters he portrays are often woefully out of touch, immoral, even reprobate, but their primary failing is an abandonment of tradition in favor of an unsatisfying modernity. Waugh is, as the title Decline and Fall suggests, watching the gradual disintegration of what he believes to be a great society, and showing it as beset on all sides by people who simply do not belong.

KEYWORDS: Metropole, Ideology, Nostalgia, English literature, Precolonial, Satire, Postcolonial

1. Introduction

The period of British history from the end of the First World War to the middle of the 1960s—when former African colonies began gaining independence by the dozens—is the long, slow, end of an era, a fin de siecle in the middle of a century. It is in this period, much discussed by cultural theorists, that the Empire becomes a Commonwealth, and questions resound about everything from the idea of nationhood to the definition of literature itself. Usually the literature produced in the British Empire during this time of change can be divided into two major sections. The first of these is the English literature as it existed in England itself, what Simon Gikandi calls the "metropole". The second is of course the colonial/postcolonial literature, represented by a myriad of writers from India to Jamaica and primarily associated with cultures and discourses that were—at least until the Empire began dissolving—largely marginalized by the English literary establishment. As Simon Gikandi puts it in his book Maps of Englishness, colonialism "was not something one associated with the culture of Great Britain or with its monumental literary works" (xii). Indeed, despite much evidence of crossover, colonial writings and English writings are often discussed separately, even though—to quote Gikandi again—"Englishness [is] a cultural and literary phenomenon produced in the ambivalent space that separated, but also conjoined, metropole and colony" (xii). In other words, to discuss the literatures of the British Empire as disparate or evolving divergently is incorrect; the culture of metropole and colony were blending and in some ways becoming indistinguishable.

Therefore, when change comes to the colonies it also comes to England, and change brings with it cultural conflict, resistance, and questions of ideology.

To Gikandi and other postcolonial theorists, "imperialism enters its terminal phase in the period after World War I" (164), and the postcolonial world is very different from that which preceded it. First, the power of England around the world is broken, but with this change came a myriad of other challenges to the once-Imperial establishment. Not only was the Empire slipping away—it seemed to many as if the homeland would go with it. One prevailing opinion "assumed that England's ability to manage and control its colonial spaces was a commentary on the character of the nation itself" (Gikandi 192). As the Empire dissolved and subjected people became conscious of their own political freedom, so too did the once-disenfranchised classes in England itself gain more political power. Mass democracy—bereft of the Empire that once made oligarchy so lucrative, but still dictated by a capitalist economic system—is the final product of this upheaval and the primary political force in the postmodern age. The system does not break down—it becomes what it is today, a more representative and multicultural democracy—but there is nevertheless "strong resistance" from many quarters.

Of course, the change from colonial to postcolonial does not happen quickly, and it is also important to note that it does not occur only in the former colonies, but also in the metropole itself. In the former colonies, literature functioned as a way to explore and solve the problems of the postcolonial world. Literature also satisfies a need for cultural verification in the former colonies by giving a voice to the previously voiceless. Although the metropole is hardly voiceless at any point, it does share the need for mediation between colonial and domestic identities, as well as the need for a new cultural relevance. Thus, questions of English identity, of relationship to the resurgent lower classes and to the formerly colonized, and most especially questions about how the ruling classes adapt to this coming upheaval are explored in the literature of the time. Gikandi is very clear about what happens in the former colonies during this period:

> Nationalist intellectuals and writers positioned themselves in this space of crisis—what I have termed the postimperial aporia—and reinvented their national identities either as a self-willed return to precolonial traditions or as a conscious rejection of an imposed European identity. (194)

During this "postimperial aporia," many intellectuals and writers in England had a similar desire to reinvent their national identity by returning to precolonial traditions. Not all English writers and intellectuals in this time of crisis shared this aim, but for some it was important to reinvent national identity in this way while rejecting the seemingly inevitable multicultural, democratic and pluralistic new world. When such great changes are afoot, it is no surprise that the culture experiencing them—England, in this case—experiences a sort of cultural backlash, a fear of the future combined with nostalgia for the way things were and, so it was thought by many, should still be.

2. Englishness, Nostalgia and the Question of Ideological Moralism

This cultural backlash and nostalgia for the good old days is most evident in popular satirical novels of the period. Satire reflects ideology, even if the readers or writers do not wish to see such ideology in themselves. Rather than being a lone voice speaking against a majority opinion, satire usually shows us what Leonard Feinberg calls "attitudes strongly held by large numbers of people" (256). These "attitudes strongly held" are the fundamental ideologies of a society. For my own discussion of the British Empire's final years, the most useful way of thinking about ideology is similar to a definition given by Louis Althusser in his essay "Marxism and Humanism":

> Ideology, then, is the expression of the relation between men and their 'world', that is, the (over determined) unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation between them and their real conditions of existence. In ideology the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that *expresses* a *will* (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or nostalgia, rather than describing a reality.

In Althusser's view, ideology is a way for people to make sense of their world or "relate" to it, but it is also the product of two separate phenomena, the "real relation" and the "imaginary relation." It is also clear, in Althusser's definition, that the "real" way in which people react to their conditions is in some ways subordinate to—"invested" in—the imaginary, so that the imaginary relationship takes precedence in determining their reactions. To further unpack Althusser's statement, his "imaginary relation" does not describe an actual reality, but instead "a hope or nostalgia." Althusser uses the word *nostalgia* to describe the imaginary component of ideology, and nostalgia is especially important in a discussion of British ideology because it is the primary force driving the resistance to ideological change. Those writers and intellectuals during this period who resisted the coming postcolonial pluralism often took refuge in descriptions of a previous era—specifically the height of Empire and colonial control—that was remembered nostalgically as superior to the present and far superior to the imagined future.

The remembered English ideology—which dominated during most of the Victorian and Edwardian eras—is one of upper-class English superiority, rigid hegemony, and imperial control. It is hard to think about the possibility of a satirist looking back nostalgically to the Victorians—indeed; the modern period is replete with works that are especially scathing in their treatment of the earlier generations. But while the Victorians represent a stuffy moralism to some, to others the Victorians represented stability, and the stable ideology of Empire looked all the more

attractive when nostalgically regarded from a modern period in which nothing seemed to be stable or predictable at all. In England, in the 1930s, ideology was changing, and there was no way to effectively tell how good or how terrible this change would turn out to be. For the most part, "terrible" was the default belief; it is easy to see why many modern authors were not optimistic about the future after witnessing two catastrophic world wars and countless other atrocities in their lifetimes. The demise of colonialism along with global conflict shakes the foundation of British ideology—political power changes hands, capitalism is more vigorously disputed—but it does not topple the whole class system. At the time, however, this eventual result was not yet known, and for many inhabitants of the metropole, the coming change was a dire prospect.

Evelyn Waugh's imaginary perfection involves defining *Englishness* as a monolithic code of morality and class structure, one that actually never exists universally and is mostly idyllic, but is nevertheless the standard to which society should be held. Invariably, Waugh's Englishness is a hegemonic, stratified and rigid phenomenon; his novels belie a deep distrust of the ascendant lower-class. Englishness is what separates Waugh's cultural compatriots— those that share his deeply conservative, moralistic and hegemonic ideology—from those Waugh derides as pretenders to the same. Waugh is doing much more than simply making fun of the wealthy and clueless; he is also blaming them for abandoning a more perfect past in favor of a shoddy future. The upper-class characters he portrays are often woefully out of touch, immoral, even reprobate, but their primary failing is an abandonment of tradition in favor of an unsatisfying modernity. Waugh is, as the title *Decline and Fall* suggests, watching the gradual disintegration of what he believes to be a great society, and showing it as beset on all sides by people who simply do not belong.

Waugh's love of the past and his nostalgic view of it are ubiquitous; he began his autobiography *A Little Learning* with a reflection on H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine:*

> I longed for the loan of the Time Machine…What a waste of this magical vehicle to take it prying into the future, as had the hero of the book! ….Were I
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> in the saddle I should set the engine Slow Astern. To hover gently back through centuries (not more than thirty of them) would be the most exquisite pleasure of which I can conceive. (1)

Waugh published *A Little Learning* in 1964, less than two years before his death. It begins a reminiscence that stops abruptly at 1925; unfortunately, Waugh died before he could finish what he conceived as a multivolume work. His reference to *The Time Machine* is apt for the beginning of an autobiography, but his dream to go "Slow Astern" and watch thirty centuries of the past is especially interesting. Waugh is apparently sure that the last thirty centuries are more interesting than the next thirty will be, and certainly more worthy of observation. From the beginning, we see Waugh preferring the past to the future, something that H.G. Wells and his protagonist never consider, as the plot of *The Time Machine* takes place entirely in the future.

Strangely, *A Little Learning* ends with a suicide attempt, as the young Waugh swims out into the ocean intending to drown himself, only to be driven back by a swarm of jellyfish. In this case, it seems that the young Waugh saw the future as something to be avoided at all costs. Waugh is not able to avoid the future, however, much he might wish to do so, and it is no understatement to say that someone who attempts suicide must often struggle with an acute fear of "all the years ahead". Of course, not long after this episode, Waugh publishes *Decline and Fall* (1928), his first novel, which sets him on the road to fame and fortune. Despite a rocky beginning in some respects, Waugh's future does not turn out to be the "dreariest of prospects," but throughout most of it Waugh continues to dream about the past.

A Little Learning was the last of Waugh's books, and it is not uncommon for a man of sixty to be nostalgic about the past or fearful of the future. However, unlike many who write autobiographies in their later lives, Waugh was not especially nostalgic about his own time period. In fact, Waugh tended to regard the twentieth century as a time of rapid and irrevocable decline. For instance, Waugh especially laments what he called the modern "obliteration of English villages", writing that:

> The process is notorious and inevitable. Expostulation is futile, lament tedious. This is part of the grim cyclorama of spoliation which surrounded all English experience in this century….To have been born into a world of beauty, to die amid ugliness, is the common fate of all us exiles. (33)

Waugh's "world of beauty" exists before he is born in 1903, but, he implies, not very long after. Waugh says "I was instinctively drawn to the ethos I now recognise as mid-Victorian." He says he loved visiting his aunts when he was a child because their house "belonged to another age which I instinctively, even then, recognised as superior to my own" (*A Little Learning* 48). Repeating the words *instinctively* and *recognised* within two paragraphs of each other emphasizes Waugh's dependence on the past for the formation of his own ideology. Even as a small child, Waugh was already comparing the present unfavorably to what he considered the Victorian past, and this comparison follows him throughout his literary career.

Many critics, both when Waugh was alive and today, tend to over-generalize his respect for the old, for the Victorian, and for a world that has passed, as class snobbery. Waugh is often blamed for a predilection towards the

aristocracy and contempt for those outside his social circle. In a 1946 article in *Time,* Waugh is described in a way that would define him for decades:

> Evelyn Waugh is a devout Catholic. He is also a devout esthete and a devout snob. This week, in LIFE, he wrote an open letter to U.S. readers of his best-selling *Brideshead Revisited,* which showed that these three traits are inseparable parts of his fastidious revulsion from the godless, uncivilized age in which he finds himself. (69)

In 2008, a writer in *The Economist* agreed wholeheartedly, saying that "Evelyn Waugh was a world-class snob and social climber, an aesthete whose rigid religious convictions were rarely matched by their practical application" (74). Waugh himself agreed with this characterization, at least partly. He wrote a letter to an Irish newspaper in 1947 declaring "I think perhaps your reviewer is right in calling me a snob; that is to say I am happiest in the company of the European upper-classes" (*The Letters of Evelyn Waugh* 255). While Waugh did indeed prefer what he considered the finer things and the finer people, this did not have as much bearing on his writings as some people like to believe it did.

To call Waugh's *writing* snobbish, or to claim that he is advocating the aristocratic over the proletarian and simply being unfair, misses the mark somewhat. Donald Greene implies that Waugh was far more of an equal-opportunity satirist whose aristocratic characters are hardly portrayed as superior. "Of the great majority of Waugh's upper-class characters, there are few who cannot be described as either nonentities, fools, dupes, figures of fun, insufferable, crooked or cads" (454). Ann Slater says simply "When people repeat the familiar, the comforting canard that Waugh was a snob, it is the stale half-truth of prejudice" (38). This is indeed a half-truth, because Waugh's novels are not consistently snobbish about people—very few of his characters are portrayed as superior—but they *are* consistently snobbish about *ages.*

It is no great revelation to say that Waugh considered the age in which he lived to be, as the title of his first novel suggests, declined and fallen. His ideology was formed at a young age in his aunts' stuffy parlor; it is dominated by nostalgia for a better time, a "world of beauty," in which Englishness is virtually homogenous and unaffected by the influences of modernity, class conflict and surging colonial identities. This Golden Age to which Waugh compares modernity is somewhat Victorian in character but not completely; much of it is imaginary. Waugh's best description of the "world of beauty" occurs in a 1952 letter to his close friend Nancy Mitford,

> I am afraid you are right when you say that there are no ladies & gentlemen now. It was a most important distinction basic to English health & happiness. You see we are the most elaborately stratified people in the world but no one, unless he makes it his special hobby, knows [anything] about the strata except those immediately above & below his own. Everyone was convinced that there was a great impassible line between 'gentlemen' and 'the lower classes' and everyone drew that line immediately below his own feet…. The great thing
> was that *everyone* thought himself a gentleman and closely allied with Dukes, and everyone below him contemptible. So there was a stable, contented society. (*The Letters of Evelyn Waugh* 364)

The England of the past, according to Waugh, consisted of three important things, each responsible for "health & happiness" as well as "a stable, contented society." First, there was a clear distinction between "ladies & gentlemen" and everyone else, and it was easy for an outside observer to determine who was a gentleman and who was not. Secondly, there was a moral code that, even though it was not always followed, was nevertheless the standard of comparison. Finally, there was a shared delusion among everyone that the line separating "gentleman" from common existed "immediately below his own feet." To illustrate this final point, Waugh says "'You're no lady' was the traditional battle cry between two drunken charwomen scratching out each other's eyes in a pub" (*The Letters of Evelyn Waugh* 364). In other words, when Englishness was what Waugh believed it should be, even the lowest of the low thought themselves gentlemanly even when they clearly were not. This lower-class delusion, Waugh contends, was useful in order to keep the society stable and content.

When Waugh says there are no ladies and gentleman "today," he is referring to the twentieth century and most especially to the England he observes around himself. Not only have the lower classes ceased to regard themselves, albeit incorrectly, as ladies and gentlemen, but the upper classes have ceased as well, and the once homogenous moral code of the nineteenth century is universally ignored. In *Decline and Fall,* Waugh passes specific sorts of blame onto all aspects of society. The upper class, in Waugh's view, casts away their better nature in favor of hedonism and ludicrous modernity, thereby erasing the class distinctions he believed to be necessary. In addition, upstart colonial and lower-class identities are also threatening this view of Englishness. For Evelyn Waugh, maintaining the division between gentleman and common man, between English and colonial, also means retaining ideology, culture, and all that makes Englishness what it is.

Thus, while his satirical novels are tremendously funny, they also echo a fear of coming darkness and issue a warning against the dissolution, or perhaps the *dilution,* of traditional Englishness as he sees it. Joan Acocella says that Waugh "sees the world as fallen . he took sin seriously and wondered how goodness could survive against it….This problem…underlies all his novels" (66). James Carens, writing forty years earlier, agrees; Waugh's satire is concerned with "the decay of a civilization, futile sensuality leading to boredom, [and] the poverty of spiritual life".

Carens goes on to call Waugh a modernist and compare him to T. S. Eliot, because he "shared the disillusionment and disgust to which *The Waste Land* gave quintessential expression" (13). The reasons for modernist "disillusionment and disgust" are varied; for some the problem is war, for others the decay of liberalism, and still others are more concerned with spiritual decay. Waugh is disillusioned and disgusted, certainly, but he is most bothered by changing ideology and a rapidly eroding class structure, because these are outward symptoms of the change from a stable and moral society into what he sees as an unstable and immoral one. Stephen Greenblatt claims that "in Waugh's satiric vision, seemingly trivial events. . . are symbols of a massive, irreversible, and terrifying victory of barbarism and the powers of darkness over civilization and light" (4). The key word here is *civilized*; there is an implicit call in Waugh's novels for a return to what he sees as English morality and hierarchy. Since such a return is impossible, the hopeless comparison of new to old is the basis of Waugh's satire.

Though Evelyn Waugh famously admits his prophecy of destruction, at the same time he denies that he is a satirist. In his essay "Fan-Fare," Waugh contends that:

> Satire is a matter of period. It flourishes in a stable society and presupposes homogeneous moral standards….It exposes polite cruelty and folly by
> exaggerating them. It seeks to produce shame. All this has no place in the Century of the Common Man where vice no longer pays lip service to virtue. The artist's only service to the disintegrated society of today is to create little independent systems of order of his own. I foresee in the dark age opening that the scribes may play the part of the monks after the first barbarian victories. They were not satirists. (*The Essays, Articles, and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh* 304)

Satire, according to Waugh, only works when the society in which it is produced is moral enough to take a stand against immorality. This does not mean that the society *itself* was moral but, as Waugh credits the nineteenth century, they *did* have an agreed-upon moral code to use as a comparison. Waugh's template for comparison with the fallen modern era is a "stable society" with "homogenous moral standards." The early Roman Empire and eighteenth-century Europe were hardly stable and moral, but they did produce Petronius, Catullus, Pope and Swift because they could at least *conceive* perfection in a moral and hierarchical sense. Waugh contends that the age in which he lives, and to which he gives the tongue-in-cheek name "the Century of the Common Man," has no such definite moral compass and, therefore, cannot produce satire.

But Waugh *does* produce satire, great, hilarious piles of it, and in doing so he compares the modern world to a pseudo-Victorian ideal that never worked perfectly, even in the Victorian Age. Waugh uses the term "Century of the Common Man" ironically, to show that all men have become "common" in the modern age, whereas all things gentlemanly were abandoned not long after Victoria died. This is, of course, an overgeneralization of both ages, but stereotype is often very useful for satire. Waugh is judging society against his own ideology, nostalgia constructed with bits of Victorian morality, traditional views of both the domestic and colonial Others, and even a bit of the snobbery for which he is often blamed. Waugh's ideology, as seen in *Decline and Fall*, glorifies an ideal moral code and a rigid power structure. Though the actual past was hardly as moral or peaceful as Waugh's version of it, and the present is not nearly as awful as he makes it out to be, the Swiftian mirror he holds up distorts both until they fit his independent system of order.

Waugh claims he is neither a satirist nor a modernist, but his early novels fit into established definitions of satire and modernism whether he likes it or not. As Jonathan Greenberg writes,

> Located between the high and the low, he fits awkwardly into a narrative of the modernist 'great divide'; conservative but not extremist, his politics, unlike those of Lewis or Marinetti, have rarely proved interesting to dialecticians. But it is precisely as a satirist, I maintain, that Waugh is important to accounts of modernism. (115)

It is interesting that Greenberg should point out that Waugh's politics are not interesting to dialecticians. Perhaps, this is because his earlier novels are often seen as "frivolous [because] they betray little in the way of overt philosophical content" (Lynch 373). Parts of these novels are frivolous, but Waugh's work can also be read convincingly as disillusioned and reactionary, and both of these terms are associated with modernism, at least Eliot-esque modernism. The title of his first novel, *Decline and Fall*, directly alludes to Gibbon's expansive history *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Like the Romans, the English have produced an Empire that reached its height, is declining, and will eventually fall. Gibbon's fundamental reasons for the fall of the Roman Empire were the decadence and immorality of the patrician and plebeian classes, coupled with the rising power of non-Roman barbarians. In a way, Waugh's *Decline and Fall* is focused on the same things. *Decline and Fall* makes fun of the English upper classes (patricians) for being decadent and immoral, but it is not too soft on the plebeians either; the middle and lower classes are portrayed as just as bad. Waugh also stages a barbarian invasion of sorts, as moral weakness and apathy on the part of the establishment allow the non-English hordes such as the Welsh or the Africans to presume too much and exacerbate the situation. In both cases, Waugh blames the decline and fall on a lack of focus, an abandoning of a moral center in favor of the periphery.

People were always immoral in one way or another despite their class; Waugh has no delusions that the populace was more consistently moral in Victorian times. But the Victorians had something Waugh believed the moderns do not: a common ideology based on shared morality and shared Englishness. Though not everyone measured up to the ideal in the time before the Century of the Common Man, the ideal existed and people strove for it. In essence, even gentlemen who did not act gentlemanly nevertheless knew what "gentleman" or "Englishman" was supposed to mean. In his book *Pax Britannica*, James Morris defines what Englishness meant at the time of the Jubilee:

> Plain Englishness, in those days [1897], was a principle. The British Empire was most decidedly British….there were specifically British ways of doing
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> things. There were emotions no proper Englishman would display. There were tastes and taboos so pungently British that the whole world knew them, and expected them to be honoured. (509)

Of course, this does not accurately describe *all* British people in either the colonies or the metropole, but Englishness was an accepted rule of conduct, and,

> The British liked this tart image of themselves, recognized its force and astutely lived up to it. It was an upper-class image, fostered by the public schools and encouraged by artists as different as Kinglake and Henty: it was an image so totally different from any other, so pronounced of character, so difficult to match or imitate, so rooted in many centuries of national integrity, that in itself it was an instrument of government. It bolstered the unassailable aloofness of the British. It made them seem a people apart, destined to command. (Morris 510)

The Englishness to which Morris says people aspired in the Victorian Era is similar to Waugh's idea of Englishness. To Waugh, this Englishness did indeed make its adherents seem "a people apart, destined to command." The idea of the English as a superior people, as a people separated from the rest of the world, is what keeps the Empire powerful, or ensured—in Waugh's words— "a stable, contented society." Stereotypical Englishness functions as Louis Althusser's "hope or nostalgia" version of ideology, and it is this stabilizing ideology that Waugh believes has changed beyond repair.

According to Althusser, ideologies as important or as far reaching as "Englishness" have their defenders, institutions whose job is to protect and perpetuate a specific way of looking at the world, thereby maintaining tradition and order. Morris says the image of Englishness was "fostered by the public schools," and in this case the public schools are examples of what Althusser called an "ideological state apparatus," or ISA. ISAs are "social institutions [that] produce in people the tendency to behave and think in socially acceptable ways" (Fiske 1269). The power of the public schools, as well as the power of other ISAs such as family, language, the media, or the political system, lies in their ability to instruct people in the proper ways of behavior within an ideology. This instruction is not limited to visible methods such as lectures or classroom activities; it is both active and passive instruction. As an example, Althusser refers to one Ideological State Apparatus [that] certainly has the dominant role…This is the School. It takes children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most 'vulnerable', squeezed between the Family State Apparatus and the Educational State Apparatus, it drums into them, whether it uses new or old methods, a certain amount of 'know-how' wrapped in the ruling ideology (French, arithmetic, natural history, the sciences, literature) or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state (ethics, civic instruction, philosophy) ("Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses").

Althusser tends to blame the ISA's for propagating what he sees as an oppressive, capitalist ideology, but Waugh is more interested in traditional English ISAs as preservers of Englishness. For Waugh, schools perform an important function by retaining tradition, or by maintaining "the ruling ideology in its pure state." In *Decline and Fall*, especially, ISAs are portrayed as not as effective as they once were, and in fact Waugh sees them as contributing to the decline.

When Waugh went up to Hertford College, Oxford, in January 1922, he brought with him many ideas about what college life should be. Waugh writes "it seemed to me that there was a quintessential Oxford which I knew and loved from afar and intended to find" (*A Little Learning* 167). In some ways Waugh *did* find it; he is very positive in his descriptions of Hertford:

> 'Hertford was also agreeably free both from the schoolboyish 'college spirit' which was the bane of many small colleges and of the hooliganism which on occasion broke out against the eccentrics in the larger….It was a tolerant,
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> civilised place in which to lead whatever kind of life appealed to one. (*A Little Learning* 164)

However, Waugh is not so complimentary of other Oxford Colleges, and despite his high opinion of Hertford his descriptions of Oxford tend to revolve around heavy drinking and silliness. This would not be so bad—indeed Waugh heartily participates in such revelry— provided that the institution itself retained its dignity, its Englishness, and its status as an ISA. Waugh describes Oxford in 1922 as "very much closer to my father's (and, indeed, my great-grandfather's) university than to my children's," and he hopes it will stay that way (*A Little Learning* 164).

3. Bollinger Club, the Other and the Power of Satire

By 1928, however, when Waugh publishes *Decline and Fall*, his opinion of Oxford had deteriorated from his 1922 opinion, and it had not yet been tempered by the thirty-six years it would take to produce the remembrances in *A Little Learning*. *Decline and Fall* begins with a farcical scene of hedonism and vandalism by members of an aristocratic group called the Bollinger Club. The Bollinger Club is made up of people with beautiful, important sounding names who behave abysmally. They are certainly not behaving like gentlemen; a better description of the party is to say they are acting "common," as in Waugh's Century of the Common Man. Whatever dignity Oxford held—whatever influence it had on "proper" decorum—is lost in the moment.

The opening Bollinger episode is Waugh's unabashed ridicule of the upper-class— after all, he terms these partiers "epileptic royalty" and "illiterate lairds"—and it also speaks out against the shocking tolerance of this by an important institution. Oxford as an ISA is not working as it should. The faculty is not shocked by the smashing of grand pianos and the throwing of a Matisse into the lavatory. Instead, they hide and dream about Founder's port, "only brought up when the college fines have reached £50" (2). Fines such as these are meaningless to the wealthy, so the only one punished in the whole affair is Paul Pennyfeather, who is expelled not for vandalism but for having his trousers stolen. The faculty members call him "someone of no importance [who] is not well off" and a person who could not be counted on to pay a fine (7). The satirical bite of the passage happens when the hiding faculty members discuss whether or not to rescue Pennyfeather from his detrousering. Thankfully for the faculty, the accosted man turns out to be "only Pennyfeather," and so they are able to let the scene play out without compunction. Thus, even though the "illiterate lairds" are witnessed to be the ones at fault, it is Pennyfeather that "does the College no good" (7). Pennyfeather's crime is that of being less important than those who attack him.

To see what is generally regarded as a venerable faculty act with such selfishness and complicity is shocking. The Oxford of *Decline and Fall* bears no resemblance to Waugh's "quintessential Oxford." *Decline and Fall* assumes an ideal that is not present; the great Oxford is thus portrayed as utterly fatuous. The judgment against Pennyfeather is unfair, and readers recognize this, but the authority of the judges to make such a judgment is never called into question. Much ideological faith is placed in Oxford, and Waugh suggests that, in 1928 at least, this faith is very much misplaced, and shows how far from ideal the ISA has fallen.

What cements Oxford as a failed ISA, as an authority over what is and is not acceptable that does not properly act on the authority, is the fact that everyone else accepts the judgment without question. The declining and falling spread like a cancer. Pennyfeather's guardian uses "indecent behavior" as the perfect excuse to cheat Paul out of five thousand pounds (11). Mr. Levy the scholastic agent advertises only the worst sort of jobs for a person who has euphemistically "discontinued [his] education for personal reasons" (12). Dr. Fagan lowers Paul's already laughable salary for the same reason (16). Paul Pennyfeather himself, the person with the most reason to contest such a judgment, never makes a peep about it, merely accepting his expulsion as the order of things. The point here is that Oxford, the lairds, the faculty, indeed the rest of society, are in agreement about this flippant verdict against Pennyfeather and the lenience against the true malefactors. The objects of derision in Waugh's novel are those who are not acting as they should, not the system itself. The problem is not with fundamental arrangements, but how these fundamental arrangements have been lately ignored. Waugh indicates that the Oxford ISA should enforce morality but has not done so, even though adherents to the ideology believe it has.

Oxford is not the only formerly stalwart ISA that Waugh satirizes; the long-suffering Pennyfeather is victimized by a number of them, whereas those that should be punished never are. From Oxford Pennyfeather proceeds to Llanabba, a public school in North Wales, variously described as "pretty bad" and "smelling obscurely of all ghastly smells" (14,19). Llanabba is a second-rate example of the public-school ISA, a poor representation of an institution that should, as Morris put it, "foster" Englishness. Lansing, the fairly reputable school Waugh attended as a boy, is light-years ahead of Llanabba. Waugh describes the headmaster of Lansing in friendly terms: "His outstanding gift was in the choice of subordinates. We were very fortunate in almost all the masters he appointed" (*A Little Learning* 99). In the actual North Wales school in which Waugh was a master for two terms, the worst he says of headmaster Mr. Vanhomrigh is that "he procrastinated and he improvised" (*A Little Learning* 223).

In contrast, Augustus Fagan, headmaster of Llanabba, is presented as a self-righteous fool. He is obsessed with protocol and social graces and exhibits a sort of celebrity-worship of the aristocracy. As Dr. Fagan laments before his Annual School Sports extravaganza,

> Frankly I am at a loss to understand my own emotions. I can think of no entertainment that fills me with greater detestation than a display of competitive athletics, none—except possibly folk dancing. If there are two women in the world whose company I abominate—and there are very many more than two—they are Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde and Lady Circumference. (75)

Nevertheless, Fagan is "filled with a wholly delightful exhilaration" at the thought of the festivities (76). He throws himself into the preparations, ordering what he considers to be the best of everything, including flowers and fireworks, in an attempt to impress those he believes to be his social betters. He hates sports, he hates the most aristocratic of his aristocratic guests, but he still believes his party thrown under the guise of children's sport is "too good an opportunity to be missed" (75). Waugh characterizes him as a sycophant and a hapless social climber, and

neither he nor the masters he employs affect the students in any positive way. Nevertheless, in the world of *Decline and Fall*, Fagan prospers no matter what happens. When Llanabba's school is shut down, he turns up again as the proprietor of a "Home Secretary Approved Private Sanatorium" (274). He is well-off enough, in fact, to give an impassioned dinner speech in praise of "Fortune, a much-maligned Lady" (277). It is interesting that Fortune should favor Fagan thusly; his pretension and cluelessness should cause him to fall fast and hard. But the world has fallen instead, and nothing is like it was before. In Waugh's imagined *status quo ante*, when the upper classes adhered to correct ideological practices, and the schools functioned correctly, a man like Fagan would have conceivably been exposed as the fraud he is.

The school that has fallen the farthest in *Decline and Fall* is probably Harrow. Along with Eton, Harrow is traditionally regarded as the best of England's public schools; it has long been a producer of what many people would call "gentlemen." In *Decline and Fall*, Harrow is mentioned only as the school that produced Captain Grimes, a man whose exploits prompt Prendergast to describe him by saying simply "He isn't a gentleman" (22). Truly, Grimes is no gentleman; he is a drunk, a bigamist, and a pederast. Grimes is certainly not the best example of a quintessential "Old Harrovian," but instead perhaps a common example in both senses of the word. Harrow still maintains a reputation as a fine and upstanding ISA, which is why a thoroughly odious character like Grimes can do what he wishes and suffer no enduring consequences. He is a "public-school man" who, by virtue of his inclusion in the elite ranks of English public schools, "[has] been put on [his] feet more often than any living man" (33). Grimes' faith in the English social system has not been mislaid, because his social connections save him from a forced suicide, a court-martial, and various unmentionable indiscretions as a schoolmaster.

For some critics, the question of Grimes's success is confusing:

> The early novels of Evelyn Waugh, although uproariously funny, make puzzling reading for those who feel that it ought to be possible to identify, in a satire, the moral point of view of the author. This is perhaps especially true of his first novel: *Decline and Fall*…many readers have commented on the difficulty of discovering any 'secure system of values' in a novel where the innocent suffer and the vicious go unpunished. (McCollough 30).

The reason why Waugh's sense of values is difficult to discover in *Decline and Fall* is because it seems to be contradictory; the good-hearted Pennyfeather suffers, while morally reprobate Grimes gets off scot-free. But *Decline and Fall* is a satirical approximation of the way Waugh sees the world, and the correct way of things has both declined and fallen. To Waugh, success *should* be given to Old Harrovians, but Old Harrovians should also be deserving of what their status attains. The reason they are not is because the tenets of Englishness, as Waugh defines them, are no longer being followed. Grimes might be identified as a Harrovian, but his description makes it clear that he is not fit to bear the name. Again, this idea assumes that there exists a quintessential Harrovian, an idea of the public school man that is widespread enough to see Grimes as a travesty disrupting a long line of excellence.

In a perfect world, Harrow and Llanabba would produce only gentlemen, but in the Century of the Common Man, Harrow produces Captain Grimes. Though the boys at Llanabba are upper class and even peers in some cases, it is likewise difficult to see them as gentlemen. Their parents are even worse; not even Jay Gatsby has a more shameful source of income than Lady Metroland, whose wealth and status are predicated upon white slavery and a chain of South American brothels. Lord Circumference is merely inconvenienced by "[running] over a fool of a boy" (84), and Lady Circumference is likewise inconvenienced by the death of her own son, which merely serves to keep her from snubbing someone properly (198-199). Because of aristocrats like these, the line between gentleman and common is so confused as to be nonexistent.

As Englishness is being abandoned by those presumably steeped in it, it is also being overrun by the Other. People who were never considered part of the establishment are overstepping their assigned boundaries in the modern age. Waugh laughs at the upper classes, but his treatment of the outsiders who are not worthy of entrance into the circle is vitriolic at the very best. James Carens calls these characters "grotesque" and says they belong "to a social group that somehow fails to be a part of the aristocracy" (61). Most of the outsiders in *Decline and Fall* are present at Dr. Fagan's Annual School Sports. The Sports are a good example of what Althusser termed "practices. . . within the material existence of an ideological apparatus [such as] a small mass in a small church, a funeral, a minor match at a sports club, a school day [or] a political party meeting" (Fiske 1270). Normally, such a function within an ISA would fortify hierarchies and instruct the participants in social practices, but such things are fallen, so the social aspects of the School Sports turn out to be simply confused.

For example, the sometime clergyman Prendergast aspires to similar social standing as Fagan, or perhaps Pennyfeather, but fails miserably. Prendergast had his chance to be a member of the clergy, therefore, transcending class to some degree and becoming part of a very powerful ISA. But, as he himself admits, "my *Doubts* began" (37), and so that social standing is denied him. Grimes, odious as he is, can claim Harrow, but Prendy's attempt to identify himself with a prestigious school involves wearing "a blazer of faded stripes" (75) which no one recognizes. Prendergast is an example of the lower-class Other who has no business at such an event but nevertheless attends. Nothing good comes from this. At the Sports, Prendy gets drunk, embarrasses himself tremendously, and accidentally shoots little Lord Tangent in the foot (89). In scenes that would not normally be included in a comic

novel, Prendergast causes the death of a child and then is himself murdered by having his head sawn off. Interestingly, nobody else dies in the book.

The butler, Sir Solomon Philbrick, is yet another example of a lower-class individual who crashes the party. He shows up in "a mustard-coloured suit of plus-fours" (75) and, with his skills as a pathological liar, inserts himself "as one of the guests" (96). Like Grimes, Philbrick's excesses meet with no punishment, and at the end of the novel he is still masquerading as a lord and getting away with it. If such a person is likewise allowed into polite society— and indeed Philbrick seems to move about in whatever circles he wishes— then it is impossible to satisfactorily determine if anyone is truly a gentleman. Philbrick, therefore, cuts at the heart of what Waugh believes constitutes Englishness—a strict and unchangeable hierarchy.

Philbrick offers to shoot the Llanabba Silver Band members when they first arrive, and Fagan, who invited them to the Sports, is so revolted by their appearance that he remarks "I refuse to believe the evidence of my eyes…these creatures simply do not exist" (80). The band is Welsh, and Welshmen are traditionally thought of and portrayed by some English writers as childlike, uncivilized buffoons. As Waugh describes them, the Welsh are "of revolting appearance… low of brow, crafty of eye and crooked of limb" (80). In 1920, Edward Snyder exhaustively searched through the extant English canon and found prejudice abounding against the Welsh. He writes, "The Welsh were most frequently attacked for their dialectical peculiarities, their undue pride in genealogy, and their marriage customs, their habits of eating, and the ignorance and poverty of their clergy" (687). Snyder cites Shakespeare as making Welshmen the butt of the joke "in at least ten cases . . . usually through [their] overwhelming stupidity" (755). In the 1970s, native Welshman Raymond Williams speaks of Wales as always oppressed and subordinated by England and Englishness, [the Welsh] have had to put up with a version of who they are, what their interests are, what their energies and their resources should be used for, in the name of this unity called `England' . . . not just the version abroad, but the more effective version at home. ("Are We Becoming More Divided?" 187)

Williams's imposed identity went even further; in a different essay he speaks of Welshness becoming synonymous with proletarian, mainly because of Anglicization and exportation of the Welsh upper classes. As he writes in "Wales and England":

> English law and political administration were ruthlessly imposed, within an increasingly centralized `British' state. The Welsh language was made the
> object of systematic discrimination and, where necessary, repressions….Anglicizing institutions, from the boroughs to the grammar
> schools, were successfully implanted. All these processes can properly be seen as forms of political and cultural colonization. (22)

In effect, Wales was one of England's very first colonies, and the Welsh were often treated as an oppressed and colonized people, always lower on the social scale than their English counterparts.

This is a strange characterization of the Welsh to say the least. History tells us plainly that the Welsh were *not* always considered proletarian; kings and queens of England trace their lineage through Wales, as do prominent politicians, prime ministers and other notable personalities. But according to Dr. Fagan, who considers himself enough of an expert to write a monograph on the subject ironically entitled *Mother Wales,* even these notables are part of a dangerous Other:

> 'I often think,' he continued, 'that we can trace almost all the disasters of English history to the influence of Wales. Think of Edward of Carnarvon, the first Prince of Wales, a perverse life…and an unseemly death, then the Tudors and the dissolution of the Church, then Lloyd George, the temperance movement, Non-conformity and lust stalking hand in hand through the country, wasting and ravaging'. (83)

Fagan's audience agrees with his pronouncements fervently; at the end of *Decline and Fall* Fagan's book has become a bestseller. Stubbs calls it "most illuminating" and even Pennyfeather says it is "eloquently written" (287). The Welsh themselves seem to prove the veracity of Fagan's claims, not only with their seemingly revolting physical appearance but also with their willingness to blaspheme for an extra pound and cheat each other out of money. The presence of the Welsh, whether in the form of the Llanabba Silver Band or as historical royalty, merely adds to the chaos of a fallen ideology. Waugh adheres to this tradition, this ideological treatment of the Welsh, and his descriptions of the Llanabba Silver Band also prefigure his treatment of other colonized people.

The African and colonial Others are represented in *Decline and Fall* by Sebastian Cholmondley, or "Chokey" the Negro. Here is a man who, in his study of literature, architecture and other facets of English culture, attempts to assimilate himself into a social realm where, as an African, he is clearly not welcome. Were Chokey an Oliver Twist, or a Becky Sharp, it might be possible for readers to have some sympathy for his attempts at social acceptance. However, this is no feel-good *Bildungsroman,* and Chokey is portrayed without any sympathy whatsoever. At first glance, with the eyes and sensibilities of a twenty-first century reader, the brunt of the parody seems to be directed towards the aristocratic characters, which seem absurdly racist. Sam Clutterbuck says "niggers…have

uncontrollable passions," which he blames on "their nature. Animal, you know," while both the Clutterbuck governess and Colonel Sidebotham tell horrible stories of an African propensity for violence (101, 102, 105). The Vicar is the worst of all: "The mistake was giving them their freedom." He says, "They were far happier and better looked after before" (104). By having the upper-class characters refer to Chokey in this way, Waugh runs the very real danger of being too mean and causing satire-killing sympathy. However, Chokey is portrayed in such a manner that *he actually seems to deserve it*. Rather than being a sympathetic character, Chokey is a minstrel-show stereotype. "Waugh occasionally permits himself a parody of attitudes which strike him as absurd, and there is an element of racial snobbery which prompts him to turn this technique against Negroes" (Carens 63). This "racial snobbery" is a logical extension of Waugh's theories of Englishness. It is absurd for Chokey—as he is described—to think he can belong to the ideology Waugh portrays as antithetical to him.

Chokey is laughably ignorant, asking people if they had ever "read Shakespeare [or] heard of a writer called Thomas Hardy" (104, 110). He gives an "impassioned speech, savoring of the rhetoric of revivalism" about the "poor coloured man," but this is peppered with self-derogatory comments of which he seems to be unaware. Chokey says his race "[has] the child's love of song and colour and the child's natural good taste" (104) echoing the same racist sentiment that makes the word *boy* a racial slur. He says he likes cathedrals because "I sure am crazy about culture" and then offers to *sing a song* to endear himself (103, 105)! Chokey is then proven to be violent, just as was predicted by the party-goers, when Margot offhandedly tells Lady Circumference that he "shot a man at a party the other night" (106). As if this were not enough, he then shows his "uncontrollable passions" by asking Flossie "to go to Reigate with him for the weekend" (110), a thinly veiled indecent proposal indeed. In effect, Chokey is set up as a straw man against racial-superiority arguments, and is thus the most extreme victim of Waugh's satire.

Chokey cannot succeed. He leaves the novel right after the Sports scene, presumably because Margot has become "rather bored with colored people" (106), but his influence remains. Though he has been unsuccessful in his attempt to be included, he nevertheless considers English literature and English cathedrals to be the best the world can offer in terms of culture. Chokey says "I'd give all the jazz in the world for just one little stone from one of your cathedrals" (103) and there is little doubt that he means it. Nevertheless, Waugh implies, the beauty and order represented by cathedral-stones is long gone, replaced by a world in which Lady Metroland can bring a Negro to a party as her romantic consort. Jazz has therefore replaced cathedrals, and modern multiculturalism has effectively destroyed what Waugh considers necessary to preserve.

4. Conclusion

The novel ends with Paul thinking about the "ascetic Ebionites," an ancient group of outsiders who committed the sin of "turn[ing] towards Jerusalem when they prayed" (293). Paul says it was "quite right to suppress them," those pretenders to the true faith. He might as well have been talking about Chokey, Prendy, or the Welsh stationmaster, each of whom were either willing or unwilling iconoclasts and were punished for it. By satirizing those people who are either too immoral or too Other to be representatives of Englishness, Evelyn Waugh effectively endorses a homogenous English ideology and perpetuates the idea that the Englishman is an attractive stereotype. The English class system, in Waugh's view, is disintegrating, and the new world coming is one of lower class pretension and upper class degeneracy. Though his novel chronicles the decline of this system and not its outright fall, it is difficult to believe that the system was ever as healthy as Waugh seems to believe it was when situated in Victorian stability. In Waugh's satire, where presumably anything can happen, not one of the fictional characters lives up to the impossibly high standards he sets for them. Nevertheless, Waugh contends that only by achieving these standards and perpetuating the ideology can the decline and fall be avoided.

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