

“Et in pansy ball ego”: A queer look at the representations of masculinity in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*

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The rich gallery of minor characters in Evelyn Waugh’s novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945, BR)¹ inspired the present essay concerning different representations of masculine gender in this acclaimed and widely studied work of fiction. The cultural manifestations of masculinity, sexuality, class, and power vary according to historical eras and geographical locations. This paper aims to cover the various interrelations of gender and sexualities in a fictional world, located in a world very distant from the era enlightened by discourses based on stable identity categories and identity politics. The essay will embrace six minor characters, including those who conform to, and those who “dissent”, from normative gender ideals. These characters will be viewed in relation to the codes and markers that determine gender, class, and social status, the possibility of *straight camp*, and responses to modernity.

The narrator-protagonist Charles Ryder’s gender performance and straightness especially are linked with loss, melancholy and self-deception. While exploring the melancholy character of straight masculinity in the novel, I take as my point of departure Judith Butler’s rereading of psychoanalytic theory in the discussion on heterosexual melancholy (see, Butler 1993; 1997; 1999). The essay will

¹ *Brideshead Revisited* was published in 1945 and the uniform edition in 1960.

elaborate three nonce-taxonomies which are straight normativity, gender nonconformity, and sexual dissidence. While *queer* refers to non-heterosexual positions and various sexual politically radical positions, straightness covers a larger referential field than just heterosexuality (see, Spargo 1999; Thomas 2000). In this reading, straightness entails various crossings of heteronormative sexual choice and cultural docility, and attempts to fulfil the norms of hegemonic masculinity, a heterosexual public role being one of its constituent parts.

Pre-WWII Masculinities Revisited

Brideshead Revisited is especially rich with representations of pre-WWII masculinities. The novel describes the lost decade that vanished after the Second World War. The central axis of the novel is its narrator, Charles Ryder’s relationship with Lord Sebastian Flyte, the younger son of an aristocratic Roman Catholic family. The majority of other characters are connected to this relationship. They are brothers, fathers, friends, lovers, and rival suitors. The novel begins and ends in the days of the Second World War with disillusioned Charles again visiting Brideshead Castle, the then evacuated palatial home of the Flyte family.

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1

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He was enamoured with Sebastian at Oxford in the 1920s. Likewise, Brideshead Castle and Julia, Sebastian's sister, have charmed him.

Brideshead Revisited strives strenuously to depict of the protagonist-narrator's relationship to God, Julia, or an unattainable object of desire (Brideshead Castle) – all of them pregnant with connotations from God or salvation to solutions to the existential problems. A queer reader, however, is definitely drawn to the questions of gender, sexual desire, and their expressions. It is hardly fruitful to discuss the male characters in the novel only as related to a contemporary discourse of homo- and heterosexuality. Rather, the question of sexual object choice forms a part of this queer reading. Gender, desire, and object choice constitute a central position in the characters' efforts of fulfilling normative cultural expectations. One way to counter them is through the rebellious positions called here gender nonconformity. The nonce-taxonomies of gender nonconformity or social and cultural straightness can be linked with homosexuality as well as heterosexuality.

Whereas the character of Sebastian has ignited discussion concerning sexuality and religion, it is timely to investigate some of the novel's minor characters instead of studying only the two main characters.² The exact nature of the relationship between the male protagonists has been widely debated, some arguing that Charles and Sebastian's relationship should be understood as an example of a case of

2 About the controversy around the (erotic or sexual) relationship between Charles and Sebastian, see Osborne 1989, 1991; Bittner 1990; Higdon 1994; Pugh 2001; Pitcher 2003.

romantic friendship of a male variant (Pugh 2001). Some understand it as an almost innocent youngish romance or infatuation, while others insist that there is a clearly identified erotic relationship between "gay Sebastian and cheerful Charles"; as David Leon Higdon puts it in his path-breaking essay (Higdon 1994).³ According to Higdon and Pugh, it is crucial to contextualise the relationship historically rather than simply apply the modern sexual categories to the depiction of a past era in order to understand the romantic and erotic aspects of the relationship (see also Green 1992).

Critical masculinity studies addresses masculinity as a privileged, socially and historically constructed category (Connell 2005).⁴ Denaturalising the connection between masculinity and men has been a crucial theoretical challenge explored by many critical gender scholars (see, Berger & Wallace & Watson 1995; Thomas 1996; Halberstam 1998; Gardiner 2002).⁵ In the Anglo-American context,

3 One main orientation among the scholarly readers has been the religious or theological frame of reference, where Sebastian's role is to embody the sensual love Charles encounters on his way to God and the Catholic faith (see McDonnell 1988; Davis 1990; Kennedy 1990). Contemporary theories on gender and sexualities have made possible new, gender-conscious readings of the novel.

4 It is most meaningful to understand masculinity, as well as femininity, in the Lacanian sense. They are conceived as positions in the symbolic order, both of them signalling a different relation to the Phallus. They do not only refer to any cultural or personal trait, but to a deeper structure than the qualities associated with masculinity and femininity. Masculine and feminine are the positions in "the comedy of sexual difference" as Jacques Lacan puts it (Lacan 2006, 582–584.)

5 The concept of female masculinity, coined by Judith Halberstam, offers an example of the project of denaturalising the connection between masculinity and maleness (see Halberstam 1998; 2005).

the concept of hegemonic masculinity refers usually to a privileged, white, heterosexual masculinity, or “markedly manly” masculinity marginalizing after Second World War other types of masculinity (see, Silverman 1992; Connell 1995; 2001; 2005; Nardi 2000).

Clear-cut identity categories are blurred in the context of *Brideshead Revisited*, but one thing is certain: we are addressing same-sex desire, intimacy and erotic feelings between men, and we are exploring masculinities that differ from our postmodern equivalents. Concepts such as masculinity, femininity, sexuality or deviancy refer to the cultural and discursive constructions whose formation has greatly been influenced by the early modern discourses of sexology and psychoanalysis. In *The Wilde Century*, Alan Sinfield states: “I regard ‘masculinity’, ‘femininity’ and ‘effeminacy’ as ideological constructs, bearing no essential relation to the attributes of men and women. Effeminacy is founded in misogyny. – The function of effeminacy, as a concept, is to police sexual categories, keeping them pure.” (Sinfield 1994, 25–26.) In *Brideshead Revisited*, masculinity seems to be one of the main areas where the battles concerning class, status, appropriation and hegemony are waged.

From a gender-conscious point of view, the male characters in the novel seem to be defined according to their relation to masculine gender norms, internalized and external social and cultural demands. Furthermore, class distinctions form a significant part of all representations of gender. Here, masculinity refers to historically changing gender

manifestations, which are produced socially and discursively, by reproducing and reiterating cultural signs. In the novel, masculinities – or rather, different modes of being male – are constructed by the ways in which the characters reproduce different notions of culturally constructed masculinity. In other words, the gender of each character is produced by his or her reiterating the cultural models of masculinity and femininity. While the ideal of gender remains inevitably unattainable or uninhabitable, every gender representation is related to these ideals (Butler & Kotz 1992, 82–89).

While using the categories of gender nonconformity and sexual dissidence, I acknowledge my debt to the brilliant study by Jonathan Dollimore⁶. In *Sexual Dissidence* (1991), he traces the modern Western history of male homosexuality, focusing on the complex interplay between deviant forms of sexuality and ways of producing various masculinities. Here, sexual dissidence is connected to the sexual object choice of the characters. Instead of the medically biased term homosexual, actively and recognizably homosexual characters in the novel are referred to as “gay.”⁷ In the flamboyantly “gay” character of Anthony Blanche, for example, sexual dissidence and gender nonconformity in-

6 In his study, Dollimore gives a rereading of male homosexuality by Oscar Wilde and André Gide, and the modern discourses of gay male sexuality.

7 “Gay” still covers aspects of openness, gay pride and liberation that have been crucial the pre-queer identity politics since 1970s. My point of departure is certainly irreconcilable with the tradition represented by Jonathan Pitcher (2003) where all modern or postmodern theoretical positions in reading Waugh are dismissed as “imposing modern approach” or as “applying as exclusive methodology”. To a queer scholar, the centrality of queer reading in his remonstrance does not come as a surprise.

tersect. On the other hand, Kurt, Sebastian's German lover, represents a sexually dissident character whose gender performance shows no signs of gender nonconformity. In my reading of the novel, Kurt is a character whose difference is located mainly in the area of erotic object choice, which does not imply any necessary gender nonconformity.

While the relationships between men are studied elaborately in the novel, the focus remains mainly on a man's relation to the variations of the socially, culturally and discursively constructed gender roles that he is demanded to fill. Every character is located in his/her place in the matrix formed by a social and cultural scheme of gendering processes and means of generating and directing desire. In the 1920s context of *Brideshead Revisited*, a person's same-sex desire or even same-sex acts did not unequivocally lead to his identification as homosexual. Consequently, our modern understanding of the categories homo/heterosexuality cannot explain the dynamics of same-sex love and eroticism depicted in the novel (see also Pugh 1995, 65). Straight masculinity especially entails problems in the fictional universe of *Brideshead Revisited*. A rather surprising conclusion drawn from the queer reading is that the most intriguing gender nonconformists in the novel, as a matter of fact, are straight men. These straight nonconformists are Edward Ryder, the eldest son of the Flytes, Lord Brideshead (Bridey), and Boy Mulcaster, Charles Ryder's brother-in-law.

Women's role in *Brideshead Revisited* is to provide a background for the drama played by the male characters. The

women make the male-to-male relationships possible, they catalyze or interpret these relations, as, for example, is the case with Lady Marchmain, Lord Marchmain's mistress Cara or Cordelia Flyte. Otherwise, women typically are seen as the means to the social status that men strive for, as for example the characters of Julia Flyte Mottram, Celia Ryder (*née* Mulcaster), and Brenda Champion (see, McDonnell 1986). The evident male-centeredness, where women play only an accessory role comes very close to the triangle pattern of the homosocial desire between men that Sedgwick has famously analysed (Sedgwick 1985, 21–25). Fundamentally, Julia attracts Charles because of her remarkable likeness to her brother, as Higdon (1994, 85) suggests. The romance with her also enables him to return to Brideshead. Lady Marchmain's character reflects the dated psychoanalytic theories, so popular in Waugh's time, that traced male homosexuality to a family background with an ineffectual father and a domineering mother (Higdon 1994, 83).

Clothes and closets: the well-clad gallery of minor masculinities

In the male-centred society of *Brideshead Revisited*, where every dominating position is shared between men, class and descent, and cultural competence indicate even more crucial distinctions than gender as such. For this reason the codes and markers indicating these meaningful distinctions can be the same as those known by us as the markers of gender, or masculinity or femininity. The

function of these gendered codes, however, differs from the contemporary one. Membership in the class of men is provided as a given fact when the narrator classifies the characters as “men.” If, as Joan Rivière stated in 1929, femininity is a masquerade, we can also claim that masculinity is another masquerade, or a spectacle: one becomes a man by gesturing, walking, talking, dressing, and behaving as one. Good taste and dressing up are important steps in the formation of a civilized male subject.⁸ For example, in his first year at Oxford, Charles Ryder is instructed by his cousin Jasper. The first item of the lesson is how to choose the right college and subject; the next item is clothing:

Clothes. Dress as you do in a country house. Never wear a tweed coat and flannel trousers – always a suit. And go to London tailor; you get better cut and longer credit... (BR, 28.)

Second to clothing come the clubs as well as the academic code of behaviour, and the notions of good and bad company. A remarkably aesthetic reason for avoiding Anglo-Catholics, taught by Jasper, is that “they’re all sodomites with unpleasant accents” (BR, 28). In a similar vein, but in his highly eccentric manner, Charles’ father, Edward “Ned” Ryder, gives advice to his son who is starting his studies at Oxford. Again, the crucial piece of information concerns the art of clothing:

⁸ The aesthetic competence displayed by the characters, which the modern reader interprets as effeminacy, belongs to a long tradition of gentlemanly behaviour, whose signs of refinement are rather difficult for us to interpret. They carry on the long tradition of early and highly modern male categories, such as beau, fop, dandy, and sentimental men. (See Sinfield 1994; Bristow 1995.)

“Always wear a tall hat on Sundays during term. It is by that, more than anything, that a man is judged.” ‘And do you know’, continued my father, snuffing deeply, ‘I always did? Some men did, some didn’t. I never saw any difference between them or heard it commented on, but I always wore mine. It only shows what effect judicious advice can have, properly delivered at the right moment. I wish I had some for you, but I haven’t.’ (BR, 27.)

It is disputable whether Ryder Senior passes the tradition to his son, but it is evident that the topic shared in the intimate *tête à tête* between the two upper middle-class men is the art of gentlemanly clothing. In the novel, such attributes as vanity, fashion, cuts and fabrics that we are used to considering a feminine or effeminate topic of interest, are part of the cultural knowledge of becoming a gentleman. For example, the narrator describes Anthony Blanche as having “on a smooth chocolate-brown suit with loud white stripes, suède shoes, a large bow-tie, and he draw off yellow, wash-leather gloves as he came into the room” – (BR, 34). While one need not be surprised by the fact that the cosmopolitan dandy knows how to make a fashion statement, what is striking about the scene is rather the unabashedly accurate and detailed description given by the narrator Charles Ryder, an officer and a father of two. That he takes such pleasure in depicting design and material shows clearly that since the Second World War normative, hegemonic masculinity has, indeed, changed.⁹

⁹ Throughout the novel, the sarcastically depicted plebeian characters such as Rex Mottram or lieutenant Hooper offer a sharp contrast to the privileged male cast, which represents the lost pre-modern Arcadia that, in fact, was lost in the battle against these epitomes of modern masculinity.

As the official “gay” character in the novel, Anthony Blanche often presents a knowing non-straight view of identities and relationships. His interpretation adds nuances to Charles’ intimacy with Sebastian, too. His openly homosexual relationships differ from Charles and Sebastian’s, which is rather eroticized or homoerotic, or at least a more closeted one. Blanche’s effeminate masculinity consists of a spectacle where the crucial element is his signalling of aesthetic modernity and modern homosexuality.¹⁰ He enjoys of the company of “meaty and saucy boys” but his role as a modern homosexual or *invert*, as homosexuality has been defined in the sexological context, also remains a part of his conscious spectacle. Furthermore, everything we know of his desire, we know through his narrative. In the end of the novel, he knows well the underground pansy bars frequented by young gold-diggers and aging gay men. As an ultimately modern personality, he seems to cope with the changing times much better than the other characters. Blanche’s analyses of persons and relationships bring up the theme of desire between men, and throughout the novel, he presents an example of an openly “gay” life. Continually, his description connects the described person with a vague area of non-straightness (see, Higdon 1994, 84).

Another textual strategy to question a character’s straightness consists of the repeated comments on a character

¹⁰ Even his surname is feminine, and his chameleonic character is emphasised by the variations of his first name used in different contexts: he is Anthony or Antoine, and at the Blue Grotto Club he is known as Toni which in its effeminacy signals membership in the camp culture.

being disliked by others. This is the case with Blanche, Sebastian, and above all, Sebastian’s German lover, Kurt. Crucially, Blanche makes his most important appearance as a messenger when introducing him for the first time (BR, 196). Kurt lives with Sebastian for six years, and after his forced repatriating, Sebastian looks for him for a year throughout Europe. Kurt meets a tragic death, as fictional gay men are prone to do: he ends up in a German concentration camp where he hangs himself. Even after this, Sebastian remains in Europe trying to get some information about his lost lover. From the point of view of the queer reader, the sketchily depicted love story of a dipsomaniac Lord and an ex-mercenary, ill with secondary syphilis, seems the queer romance of the novel. According to some reports, Kurt “became quite human in Athens” (BR, 291). Unlike Sebastian’s pious sister Cordelia, I would not focus too much on the refining effects of the classical civilization – even on a German “gay” man, but on the centrality of Athens and the tradition of paederastic love in the mythology of the Western male homosexuality (see Halperin 1990; Aldrich 1993).

Kurt is said to be “a great clod of German” (BR, 196), “macabre” (BR, 197), “an awful fellow sponging on Sebastian, a thoroughly bad hat by all accounts” (BR, 202), “a criminal type” (BR, 209), and with “a foot full of pus” (BR, 208). Strategically, expressions of dislike or suspicion are connected to every character whose straightness is even slightly uncertain, but the strongly negative descriptions attached to him might be a subtle way of identifying him as the other active, recognizable “gay” man in the novel.

Blanche and Kurt are also connected through their speech: while one stutters coquettishly, the other, having one of his front teeth missing, pronounces the sibilants rather peculiarly. In *Brideshead Revisited*, the love that dare not speak its name, in fact, dares to speak its name, ironically, with a stutter and a lisp, and even “sometimes with a disconcerting whistle” (BR, 203).

The narrative strategy of insinuations, allusions and secrecy shares many characteristics with the “epistemology of the closet,” a famous formulation of Sedgwick’s concerning the centrality of closeted homosexuality in modern Western culture. For instance, the narrator describes a scene from the shared life – or better yet family life – in a little house in Morocco where “the two sick men, Sebastian and Kurt, sat opposite one another with the gramophone between them” (BR, 208). The whole relationship, tinged by erotic domination and submission, is represented with ample circumlocution. Once again, this is a means to construct a closet, and at the same time, the gesture fixes the attention of the reader on the sexual suspicion. The same, classical gesture of raising the question, negating it, and by the negation establishing a suspicion, occurs when two working girls at Ma Mayfield’s are reported as discussing whether Charles and Sebastian are fairies or potential customers (BR, 111-112). A good example of this authorial tactic of innuendo is offered in a dialogue where Sebastian’s elder brother, Brideshead Flyte, asks Charles about Sebastian and Kurt’s relationship. Bridey evokes all the traditional discourses to which homosexual love has been connected, with terms such as ‘vicious’, ‘criminal’,

‘criminal type’, ‘prison’, ‘dishonourably discharged’, ‘killing himself with drink’ and ‘insane’. Even the act of asking and negating is sufficient to keep the closeted knowledge of male-male love in Morocco as a hidden topic of the dialogue. (BR, 208-209.)

The exotic effeminacy and the carnival of camp masculinities

Anthony Blanche, the cosmopolitan dandy and aesthete, and a personification of modernism – as Gregory Woods describes him – is the openly gay character in the novel (Woods 1998, 5–6, 260).¹¹ The term “gay” with its connotations in the area of identity politics is nevertheless an anachronism; in the context of the novel, Charles Ryder calls him a *pansy*. Blanche presents himself consciously as a representative of a specifically modern category: he is an embodiment of the Modern Homosexual. He knows well the crucial cultural coordinates of the transgressive identity category, as is indicated in his short autobiography:

At the age of fifteen, for a wager, he was disguised as a girl and taken to play at the big table in the Jockey Club at Buenos Aires; he dined with Proust and Gide and was on closer terms with Cocteau and Diaghilev; Firbank sent him his novels with fervent inscriptions – – (BR, 47).

¹¹ Both Higdon and Woods mention Ambrose Silk’s (*Put Out More Flags*, 1942) literary kinship with Blanche. According to Higdon, they seem to attract Waugh’s censure more because of their modernism than their homosexuality (Higdon 1994, 81).

In this fragment of an autobiography, he manages to mention his cross-dressing as well as a remarkable list of the most famous – or notorious – homosexual characters from the art and literary scenes of the early 20th century.¹² He also reminds the reader of the narrator’s longing for the spectre of homosexuality, embodied mainly in the character of Sebastian Flyte. Blanche’s coquettish gender performance and sexual dissidence do not put his status as a man in question in the context of gender coordinates that are present in the novel. The effeminacy is recognized as a self-evident mode of being a man – not a particularly encouraged one perhaps – but a nameable, visible and culturally possible one nevertheless.

The gender nonconformity of Anthony Blanche gains even more prominence when linked to the performance of Boy Mulcaster, Blanche’s parodic heterosexual shadow. Together, they form the two sides of a coin, Mulcaster striving for a serious performance of straightness and ending up by being a parody of heterosexual masculinity. The key term in both Blanche and Mulcaster’s characterization is camp. As a mundane “gay” man, Blanche musters the art of camp: he knows how to flirt ostentatiously with other young men and revels through exaggeration the flamboyant nature of his gender performance. The essence of camp is, indeed, in the exaggeration, artificiality, and posing (see

12 “Firbank’s exotic effeminacy”, Joseph Bristow’s description of author Ronald Firbank links the character of Blanche to the context of Oxford dandies, with whom Waugh was related, also erotically, in his Oxford years. In addition to this, his peer Oxonians, Harold Acton and Brian Howard, are usually mentioned as the models for Anthony Blanche. (See Green 1992, Bristow 1995, 100-101.)

Bredbeck 1994; Meyer 1994)¹³. As Andy Medhurst claims, camp is not just any kitsch, but a definitively queer practice and especially a part of male homosexual culture and history (Medhurst 1997, 275–277, 289–291). That is why there is always a political edge to camp; and the worldly and blunt performance of Anthony Blanche forms a part of this tradition. His performance, in fact, comes close to a depiction of camp:

It is a configuration of taste codes and a declaration of effeminate intent. It flows like gin and poison through subcultural conversations. It revels in exaggeration, theatricality, parody and bitching (Medhurst 1997, 276.)

The description of camp bears a resemblance to the scene with Blanche mockingly “seducing” Charles while they are dining together. He is making an art out of bitching while warning Charles of the dangerous charm of Sebastian and the Flytes, telling him that “charm is the great English blight”. Extremely masterfully, he weaves a net of insinuation focused on Sebastian’s sexual ambiguity while mocking philistine Englishness and straight normativity. (BR, 48–57, 260.)

I can see him [Sebastian] now, at the age of fifteen. He never had spots you know; all the other boys were spotty. Boy Mulcaster was positively scrofulous. But not Sebastian. Or did he have one, rather a stubborn one at the back of his neck? I think, now, that he did. Narcissus, with one pustule (BR, 52.)

13 Meyer cites J. Redding Ware’s slang dictionary (1909) where camp is defined as “actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis” (Meyer 1994, 105).

The eloquently constructed monologue is indeed infiltrated by the afore-mentioned “gin and poison of subcultural conversations” and the air is heavy with insinuation while Blanche knowingly conveys information about Sebastian, whom he depicts as a not-so-innocent figure. He reveals that at Eton, Sebastian was said to be a little *bitch* – by “just a few unkind boys who knew him well” (BR, 51). He also insinuates that *charming* Sebastian might have informed in the confessional about Blanche’s secret carnal delights. He hints at the possibility that unlike the other boys, Sebastian possibly knew his secrets, which lead to his leaving Eton “under a cloud” (BR, 52.) While gossiping, he manipulates Charles masterfully and seeks to plant in his mind various ideas ranging from the *very sinister* nature of the Flytes to the superiority of modern art (BR, 53). He is a living spectacle who relishes camping it up and shocking Charles, whose lame art, filled with English charm, he later describes as “a dean’s daughter in flowered muslin” (BR, 259).

I do share the political concern expressed by Medhurst, Meyer and many others claiming that camp has to be recognized as a queer cultural strategy of challenge and subversion. There is, however, another scholarly tradition of writing about camp as a category of “purely” aesthetic nature, “a sensibility of apolitical playfulness and ironic detachment” (Medhurst 1997, 279). The beginning of the apolitical understanding of camp as an ironic sensibility derives from the famous essay “Notes on ‘Camp’” (1964), where Susan Sontag characterizes camp as “understanding Being-as-Playing-a-Role” (Sontag 1999, 56). She also

divides it into naïve and deliberate camp, and claims genuine camp to be unintentional and deadly serious. She appears to fathom the relation of Mulcaster and Blanche’s camp while describing camp either as completely naïve, failing in seriousness, or as wholly conscious (when one plays at being campy). (Sontag 1999, 56, 58–59.) Philip Core, too, comments ironically on the realm of camp: “I do not posit homosexuality as requisite for camp; quite the contrary. Camp is most obvious to me in a homosexual context, but I perceive it in heterosexuals as well, and in the sexless professionalism of many careers.” (Core 1999, 81.)¹⁴

This essay draws mainly on Sontag’s reading of camp in interpreting Boy Mulcaster as a camp character. In *Sexual Dissidence*, Jonathan Dollimore perspicaciously comments on the central features of camp: “camp shows the constructedness of image construed by it, using parody and mimicry; it is a performance of something to excess” (Dollimore 1991, 310–312). While Blanche’s camp is a culturally conscious performance, Mulcaster’s is wholly unintentional and unconscious – his representation is campy even though he is completely unaware of the whole category. Being a man – homosexual or heterosexual – becomes a carnivalization of gender in Blanche’s and Mulcaster’s spectacles. They reveal the seams, or loci of artificiality and mechanical reiteration that, in fact, form a part of every gender representation, and underline the constructedness

¹⁴ Core (1999, 83) even applies the concept of *Straight Camp* to Gabriele d’Annunzio’s fascist aesthetics.

of manhood.¹⁵ In his farce of masculinity, Mulcaster combines clumsily the essentials of straight manhood with tragicomic results, as during his discussion with Charles:

In two years Mulcaster seemed to have attained his simple ambition of being known and liked in such places [night clubs]. At the last of them he and I were kindled by a great flame of patriotism. 'You and I', he said. 'were too young to fight in the war. Other chaps fought, millions of them dead. Not us. We'll show them. We'll show the dead chaps we can fight, too.' -- 'All good chaps like the dead chaps.' (BR, 198.)

Heroic masculinity is ridiculed when, ironically, the patriotic duty is fulfilled by driving out “thrice a day in a lorry at the head of a convoy of milk vans” (BR, 198). The idiosyncrasy of the novel’s camp is in its surpassing the boundaries between homo- and heterosexuality. The straight characters especially are described in a way that owes much to the continental camp of Oscar Wilde and Ronald Firbank (Bristow 1995, 109–111). The peculiar Waughian camp remains crucially linked to the question of the crisis of modern masculinity that the novel focuses on. An indication of the recurrent authorial strategy of juxtaposition is the almost invariable emergence of Mulcaster’s name in the scenes where Blanche appears. That is evident everywhere from his gossipy dinner with Charles to his last appearance in the pansy bar scene at the “Blue Grotto Club” (BR, 257–260). On another occasion, Mulcaster is

15 The dynamic camp duo of Anthony and Boy bears a striking resemblance to a classical essay on lesbian camp and feminist subject position, namely “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic” by Sue-Ellen Case (1999).

juxtaposed to his nephew, four-year-old Johnjohn, when not-too-bright Celia Ryder tells her husband:

You'd think, to hear them to talk to each other, they were the same age. -- Johnjohn admires Boy so tremendously and imitates him in everything. It's so good for them both. (BR, 222.)

For several decades, the problem of straight camp has intrigued various scholars writing on camp (see Cleto 1999). In his essay, Core claims perceptively: “Camp depends on where as well as how you pitch it. In some senses, it is in the eye of the beholder.” (Core 1999, 82.) We can name Mulcaster’s variety of camp *unconscious hetero-camp*: his aggravating striving towards manliness is ultimately campy because of its hilariously superb failure. The reader fluent in camp, sharing the ardent love and appreciation of glorious fiascos and parodic excess, is able to read Mulcaster’s gender performance as an occasion of straight camp.

The art of impotence and fighting modernity

An important topic in the novel is the post-WWII social and cultural changes that the author so obviously detested. In *Brideshead Revisited*, the rise of the modern hegemonic masculinity seems not a triumph. In the period between the two world wars, two crises are intertwined. The crises are the social and cultural modernization and the rise of the modern masculinity that claimed hegemony after the Second World War.

In the novel, lieutenant Hooper, a lower middle-class commander of Charles' platoon during the Second World War makes an appearance as the most hideous representative of "modern times" and the new masculinity. Charles describes him saying "Hooper appeared; he was a sallow youth with hair combed back, without parting, from his forehead, and a flat, Midland accent. – – Hooper was no romantic. – – The history they taught him had had few battles in but, instead, a profusion of detail about humane legislation and recent industrial change." (BR, 13–15.) To Charles, Hooper – "a man to whom one could not confidently entrust the simplest duty" – becomes a symbol of Young England with a shallow and prosaic "Religion of Hooper" (BR, 15). Snobbishly, he complains about Hooper's favourite expressions, such as "rightyoh" and "okeydoke" (BR, 16, 19, 328, 330). Charles even muses, both bitterly and sentimentally how brave men of Victorian moral values died in the First World War.

These men must die to make a world for Hooper; they were the aborigines, vermin by right of law, to be shot off at leisure so that things might be safe for the travelling salesman, with his polygonal pince-nez, his fat wet hand-shake, his grinning dentures." (BR, 134.)

In the 1920s and 1930s Britain of *Brideshead Revisited*, the characters of Edward Ryder and Brideshead Flyte keep on delaying action against the new order represented by overtly ambitious Rex Mottram. Together with Charles Ryder, these straight male characters also embody the theme of heteropessimism of the novel. Straightness will

not make them happy, heroic or worth emulating. They are, indeed, among the most satirically depicted characters in the whole work, and their straightness is filled with shades of melancholy and loss as well as a satirical edge. The characters connected by masculine incompetence consist of the aforementioned Rex Mottram, Edward Ryder and Bridey Flyte. As well as to masculinity, the trio shares a highly remarkable relation to modernity. One of them embraces and embodies modernity, while the other two belong to the odd Waughian martyrology of figures fighting in vain the signs of the modern times. Modernity challenges, among other things, the traditional masculinity of upper-middle-class men. If, in the novel, living as a gay man seems a difficult task with high risks, leading a life as a straight man seems almost impossible: the straight characters manifest a gallery of melancholy, incompetence, bathos, and eccentricity. The central themes of anti-modernism and a highly problematized straight masculinity cross interestingly in the characters.

In the Waughian fictional universe, Canadian-accented entrepreneur Rex Mottram is a warning example of a wealthy, successful but ethically and aesthetically challenged modern man.¹⁶ The character is motivated, above of all, by the author's strong dislike of modernism and the values of modern times. In the end of the novel, he is a minister and the narrator links his success quite unflatteringly to the rise of the useful enemy, warmongering Hitler. Rex represents the New World as a member of the new

¹⁶ Charles Ryder's estranged wife Celia, whom Americans find so charming, is Mottram's feminine counter-part as the Modern Woman.

economic and political elite, and he is the most clear-cut representation of modern, post-war hegemonic masculinity: he is heterosexual, highly competitive, controlling and ambitious. As the narrator puts it: “One quickly learned all that he wished one to know about him, that he was a lucky man with money, a member of parliament, a gambler, a good fellow” (BR, 106). However, the narrator paints a different picture: Rex is a rich upstart who has no sensibility or taste; even his physical appearance reveals that he is a brute: he has dark hair growing low on his forehead and heavy black eyebrows (BR, 106).

Rex’s energetic straightness links him to the triangle of homosocial desire that Sedgwick has elaborated after the model presented originally by René Girard (Sedgwick, 1985, 17). Rex’s relations with Julia as well as with Brenda Champion cause a stir in the society around them, but above all both of them link him even closer to the “club” of influential men. Women prove his heterosexual masculinity, functioning as steps on his social ladder. He is described as a deficient person in whom there is something missing. His estranged wife, Julia, expresses this twice by saying that he is not fully human, but only a soulless mechanical man of modern times. It is quite revealing of the catholicizing nature of the novel that the cited authority is Father Mowbray, who had the ungrateful task of teaching Rex the basics of the Catholic faith. Julia’s description of Rex crystallizes the authorial vision of a modern man:

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 (BR, 193.)¹⁷

There are also two highly extravagant straight characters in the novel, Edward Ryder, Charles’s father, and Lord Brideshead, the eldest son of the dysfunctional aristocratic family. One quality connects them: they can refine incompetence into an art form, and the reader can interpret their performances as men as two cases of straight gender nonconformity. Ryder Senior has fulfilled his duty as an early widowed straight man: he has begot a son. His wife has died in the Serbian war, and his almost adult son leads his life in Oxford.¹⁸ Edward Ryder has proven his competence in straightness, and in his mature years, he enjoys his freedom whole-heartedly. His version of masculinity is a strange set of permutations in the role of wealthy, aging, middle-class man. He seems to express an anarchic enjoyment in his persistent performance of eccentricity. He makes a strange comedy out of his role as a gentleman and a father; he clearly finds his pleasure in his eccentricity, which he seems to flaunt.

Edward Ryder adamantly declines to live in the modern world and mocks the demands of emergent modern hege-

¹⁷ Another occasion of authorial anti-modernism is not subtle either, occurring when Julia describes Rex as being “not a real person at all; he is just a few faculties of a man highly developed” (BR, 245).

¹⁸ Mrs. Ryder working as a nurse and getting killed in WWI also comes up in a short story “Charles Ryder’s Schooldays” (CRS, 264–265, 272–273). Mrs. Ryder’s “heroic” life and death seem to mock her husband’s unmanliness; clearly, it was Mrs. Ryder who wore the pants in the family.

monic masculinity. Not a single word in his speech has the same meaning as in others, while his parody of masculinity resembles a distorting mirror in a fun house:

*At the door he paused and turned back. 'Your cousin Melchior worked his passage to Australia **before the mast**'. (Snuffle.) 'What, I wonder, is "before the mast"?' (BR, 64).*

A dinner with Charles' old schoolmate proves to be a surreal play that the father musters so well: out of pure spite, he pretends to mistake the friend as an American visiting London (BR, 67–69). A soirée with old friends develops into a black comedy. Since the soirée turns out to be a total nightmare, he naturally wants to give a new party as soon as possible.

Dinner was long and chosen, like the guests, in a spirit of careful mockery. – It was a gruesome evening, and I was astonished to find, when at last the party broke up, that it was only a few minutes after eleven. – I [Edward Ryder] have been very negligent about entertaining lately. Now that you are paying me such a long visit, I will have many such evenings. (BR, 69–70.)

The relationship between the father and son is described as a long warfare of shunning proper contact, intentional misconception and oppressive silence. The aim of his relentless mischief remains hidden even from the son, who suspects the father to be fighting against normality out of sheer fighting spirit or pigheadedness. Norms regulating gentlemanly behaviour or father and son's relationship form a constant battlefield for his pugnacity:

*'There was an institution in my day called a "sketching club" – mixed sexes' (snuffle), 'bicycles' (snuffle), 'pepper-and-salt knickerbockers, Holland umbrellas, and, it was popularly thought, free love' (snuffle), '**such** a lot of nonsense. I expect they still go on. You might try that.' (BR, 63.)*

Edward Ryder's spectacle of manhood is self-conscious and utterly absurd. However, he seems to enjoy the peculiar sort of power that he wields in his somewhat restricted environment. Brideshead Flyte exhibits similar obtuseness, but his awkward performance is not a self-conscious one. He is just grave, immovably strict in his Catholicism, and totally step out with the times. Whereas the "not-wholly-human" Rex Mottram is a modern man in all its hideousness, Bridey lives forever in a pre-modern world. In his inflexibility, he is a comic figure, but in Waugh's fiction, he carries the values cherished by the author: strict Catholic orthodoxy and the ethos of a lost world. To make sure that the reader gets the point, Waugh even clumsily makes the narrator underline the respectability of the character:

there seemed no spark of contemporary life in him; he had a kind of massive rectitude and impermeability, an indifference to the world, which compelled respect. Though we often laughed at him, he was never wholly ridiculous; at times he was even formidable (BR, 269.)

The most perplexing feature about Bridey is his role in the line of the startling heteropessimism in the novel. He finds his active heterosexuality as he falls in love with Beryl Muspratt, a rather coarse widow of an admiral. Bridey

seems to be quite pleased with the sensual aspects of his married life. However, in the strangely queer universe of the novel, Bridey receives a punishment for his heterosexual awakening: the enraged Lord Marchmain leaves Brideshead Castle to Julia, disinheriting the disappointing sons. On the surface, the punishment results from Lord Marchmain's antipathy towards his daughter-in-law. On a deeper level, there might be an idiosyncratic Waughian retribution. In the oddly queer context of *Brideshead Revisited*, the punishment results not from the carnal delight, which Bridey even enjoys in valid Catholic matrimony, but from his eager adjustment to heterosexuality.

The radical heteropessimism of the novel, written by a Catholic family man, is indeed its most surprising aspect. If we name Sebastian, Kurt and Anthony Blanche as "gay" characters, we can claim that they may come to a tragic or sad end yet their lives provide some vivid moments, whereas the straight characters face melancholy, aloofness and a general feeling of disappointment. The aforementioned straight characters' heteropessimism is linked to satire and parody; however, with Charles Ryder the heteropessimism is connected to heterosexual melancholy, a concept coined and analysed by Judith Butler (1997; 1999).

Straight melancholy and the lost Arcadia

Long-lost Sebastian is the object Charles' romantic love, or better yet, his homoerotic infatuation. The generic characteristics of a pastoral (gay) romance are especially strong in the representations of the Oxford years (Woods

1998, 258).¹⁹ The idyllic scene of seduction near Swindon is filled with intense homoeroticism when Charles revels in Sebastian's beauty. The next act of seduction follows soon after as he falls under the spell of Brideshead Castle (BR, 25–26, 36.) Sebastian attracts Charles erotically but he also charms by presenting him with the unknown pleasures of the paradisiacal Brideshead with its gardens. In Venice, Cara, Lord Marchmain's mistress, quickly recognizes the relationship between the nineteen-year-olds as a romantic friendship (see, Pugh 2001). According to Cara, romantic friendships are characteristic to English and German culture, and "very good if they do not go on too long" (BR, 98).²⁰ Whereas other "gay" characters in Waugh's works are either critiqued or ridiculed, Sebastian is idealised and romanticized (Higdon 1994, 81).

Charles and Sebastian's subsequent choices seem to differ. While Sebastian shares his adult life with Kurt, Charles plays it straight, marries socially upwards and ends up resigned to a sterile life, painting lifeless pictures. The interpretation of his conversion in the end of the novel has divided its readers. In my reading, his Catholicism is reminiscent of the pious self-deception of Lady Marchmain. Even the campy aesthetics of the Brideshead chapel links the two of them and suggest the inauthentic nature of their religiosity. Gregory Woods analyses the centrality

¹⁹ According to Sontag, pastoral in its artificiality and affected naïveté is linked to camp. She also claims that the relation of the camp taste to the past is extremely sentimental. (Sontag 1999, 55, 57.)

²⁰ Kurt is German, and his recounting of his university years resembles significantly Charles' own experiences at Oxford (BR, 204). There is again a Waughian juxtaposition, now casting a shadow onto Charles' success in straightness after the years of romantic friendship.

of male-male love in the novel: “Although Waugh tries to present his central character’s conversion to Catholicism as spiritual triumph, it is clear that in emotional terms the loss of the male-male romanticism acceptable during the educational years accepts no compensation.” Accurately, Woods describes the tonal point of the novel as pre-modern and pre-heterosexual leading to straightness equalling privilege as well as loss and melancholy. (Woods 1998, 258.)

In the novel, heterosexuality indeed equals failure and loss, and is deeply connected to a certain melancholy. The melancholy that seems to be at the centre of all representation of straightness in the text reminds us of the concept of heterosexual melancholy theorized by Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997). While commenting on Freud’s writings on ego-formation, mourning and melancholia, Butler explicates the Freudian theory of the melancholic denial/preservation of homosexual desire and its role in the production of gender within the heterosexual frame (Butler 1997, 9, 132–150, 167–198; 1999, 73–84).²¹ She claims that the foreclosure of homosexuality appears to be foundational to certain heterosexual version of the subject. The melancholic structure of gender identification, then, stems from the loss that cannot be grieved because it cannot be recognized as a loss (Butler 1997, 23–24.) In fact, melancholy as the condition of unfinished grieving is central for every formation of identifications, homosexual as well as heterosexual. Above all, heterosexual

21 Butler’s idiosyncratic readings of psychoanalysis have mainly been criticized by the Lacanian theorists (see Copjec 1995; Dean 2000; Restuccia 2000).

melancholy is a significant part of the representation of the characters of Charles Ryder and Lord Marchmain; and in their cases, Catholicism is presented as a panacea to the gnawing heterosexual melancholy. Moreover, the concept of heterosexual melancholy helps us to understand the deeply rooted heteropessimism manifested by the recurrent, insistent sense of loss, failure and disappointment that characterize the straight characters throughout the novel.

The nostalgic religious Odyssey of Charles Ryder appears to be more or less a yearning after the lost pre-modern homoerotic Arcadia of which Sebastian has become the central symbol. In the figure of the young Sebastian, Charles Ryder re-embodies a nostalgic idea of a past as a lost pre-modern utopia, a mythic realm of freedom, where erotic object choices and sexual acts did not connect to stable identity categories in the ways we know. The lost Arcadian days in Oxford, evoked by the narrator, embody the distinctive sexual culture that before the Second World War was available for a selected group of upper middle-class and upper class men. Woods describes the lost privileged sexual culture as “homoerotically romantic at public school, homosexually active at university, and after university heterosexual married life” (Woods 1998, 258; see also Higdon 1994, 80). In the post-WWII era, one could not engage in same-sex acts and loves without identifying as sexually deviant. The pre-modern days of privileged male-male intimacy were inescapably history. Surprisingly, this forms a crucial aspect of the lost Arcadia elegiacally mourned in *Brideshead Revisited*.

The gallery of gender conformists and nonconformists in the novel is rich and in many cases surprising. Waugh seems intrigued by the price that one is obliged to pay while adjusting to hegemonic masculinity, which also provides many privileges. He also explores the price of nonconformity or sexual dissidence. In the end, Charles Ryder embodies the stalemate of straight normativity: he does dutifully all the right things – marries, has children, has an affair – but still ends up unhappy. In the end of the novel, he ends up “homeless, childless, middle-aged, loveless” (BR, 330). He experiences heteropessimism and heterosexual melancholy more seriously than the other characters. As a whole, the novel remains deeply melancholic. The utopia, seen as a timeless, pastoral bliss beyond the discursive restraints of straight normativity, turns out to be an infertile place filled with empty promises. In the end, the never-never land of romantic escapism leaves behind both the sterile Charles and the worn-out Sebastian.

Now, we pass impassively the sentimental moments in the chapel at the end of the novel. The last, oddly uplifting words of this essay belong to the narrator, Charles, describing his visit to “The Blue Grotto Club”. In the 1930s, Anthony Blanche takes him to this shoddy gay bar. “The Blue Grotto” is the urban habitat of Blanche, the ever-surviving epitome of modernity and unabashed lover of male beauty:

The place was painted cobalt; there was cobalt linoleum on the floor. Fishes of silver and gold paper had been pasted haphazard on ceiling and walls. Half a dozen youths were drinking and

playing with the slot-machines; an older, natty, crapulous-looking man seemed to be in control; there was some sniggering round the fruit-gum machine; then one of the youths came up to us and said, ‘Would your friend care to rhumba?’ (BR, 258.)

Maybe even Charles, after all, has a little hope, for, according to the second-in-command, he looks unusually *cheerful* on the last day of the novel. As David Leon Higdon (1994, 77) unforgettably claimed, it is impossible to regard Sebastian as other than gay and Charles as so homoerotic that he must at least be considered *cheerful*. It is evident that notions of male-male intimacy follow the latter everywhere, despite the author’s obstinate efforts toward spiritual loftiness. Would Charles not have fared better, if had cared to rhumba?

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19

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