

Pre-Raphaelitism in *Brideshead Revisited*

When Alistair Graham, an Oxonian friend who had acquired a printing press, needed an original manuscript for typesetting, Evelyn Waugh promised a twenty-five page essay on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.¹ The essay was quickly provided because Waugh had recently buried himself in the literature of the Brotherhood while he was recovering from a badly sprained ankle.² Of this period in his life he wrote on November 14, 1925:

*The Pre-Raphaelites still absorb me . . . I think I can say without affectation that during the last week I have lived with them night and day. Early in the morning with Holman Hunt—the only Pre-Raphaelite—untiring, fearless, conscientious. Later in the day with Millais—never with him but with my [imaginary] biography of him—a modish Lytton Strachey biography. How he shines through: Holman Hunt's loyal picture of him. Later, when firelight and rum and loneliness have done their worst, with Rossetti soaked in chloral and Philip Marston's 'Why is he not some great exile king, that we might give our lives to restore him to his kingdom?'*³

Some two years later Waugh had just such an opportunity for the restoration. His friend Anthony Powell introduced him to the Duckworth Firm, which was interested in publishing a biography of Rossetti on the centenary of his birth; and on the strength of his privately printed essay and Powell's recommendation Waugh was advanced £20 to begin work expanding his essay and restoring Rossetti to his kingdom.

The 1928 *Rossetti: His Life and Works*, Waugh's first London publication, was a substantial well-researched book. His career as a writer was launched despite the small financial profit. In one of his last books, *A Little Learning: The First Volume of an Autobiography* (1964), Waugh again referred to Rossetti when discussing the life of his clergyman great grandfather James Hay

Waugh, who held for forty-one years the living at Corsley from the Marquess of Bath. Waugh wonders whether his great grandfather discussed with Lady Bath her act of patronage in purchasing Rossetti's first painting at the urging of his Aunt Charlotte, governess in the household.⁴

It is not surprising, then, that an atmosphere of Pre-Raphaelite aestheticism should color Waugh's best-known novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). This phenomenon is so subtly managed that it has been little remarked in the larger array of criticism centered on biographical, Catholic, and theologic aspects of the novel. In 1944 when Waugh requested a leave of absence from the commanding officer of the Household Cavalry Training Regiment, he stated, among other reasons for writing this novel, "Once an idea becomes fully formed in the author's mind, it cannot be left unexploited without deterioration. If, in fact, the book is not written now it will never be written."⁵ Wearing from a variety of World War II services, Waugh, now an experienced novelist, was anxious to write a story of romantic memories about those golden days of his own youth between wars.

Waugh chose as his narrator a one-time Oxford student and would-be-artist like himself and subtitled the novel "The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder." *Brideshead Revisited* opens, after its Prologue, with Ryder's first arrival at Oxford. He "proudly hung a reproduction of Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers' over the fire and set up a screen, pointed by Roger Fry with a Provençal landscape." But in remembering those days he says, "I should like to think—indeed I sometimes do think—that I decorated those rooms with Morris stuffs and Arundel prints."⁶ Outside his ground-floor room he "savoured the gillyflowers in bloom under my windows" (p. 45). It was in this same flower bed that he first met Sebastian Flyte, the novel's central character, who stopped to be sick there after too much drinking. The gillyflowers become a symbol of