

# ON UNHEALTHY PICTURES

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What makes a picture “unhealthy”? Evelyn Waugh is the author of this turn of phrase, and the setting for this description is a conversation regarding his protagonist’s paintings in *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). We are told that Mrs. Stuyvesant Oglander (a lady of society) declared Charles Ryder’s paintings were, for certain, “unhealthy pictures”. The brilliance of this remark comes to life when Anthony Blanche repeats it with relish, as he has an enormous desire to see these “unhealthy pictures.” Anthony Blanche, a secondary character from *Brideshead Revisited* is memorable for his stutter; insight and wisdom trip over themselves in Blanche’s speech when he expresses opinions, both high and low, about art, culture, and ways of life. “Take me,” he says with such whimsy, “to Charles’s unhealthy pictures!”<sup>[1]</sup> Blanche desperately wants to see the paintings and determine what they mean.

The episode of the “unhealthy pictures” unfolds while Charles Ryder is holding an exhibition of his newest paintings. The works on display are tropical scenes, painted during his recent two-year sojourn to Mexico and Central America. As he says of his trip abroad: “Now while I had the strength I would go to the wild lands where man had deserted his post and the jungle was creeping back to its old

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strongholds.”[2] Ryder is known in the art community of the novel as an “architectural painter,” who specializes in the magnificent country houses of the English aristocracy. An architecture picture, perhaps “facile” as one of his critics called it, at least offers a kind of documentation for its owner of the place’s interior and exterior. Paintings like this are also illustrations of a moment before decay, the depiction of what once was, and of taste. This kind of representation, nevertheless, becomes like a monument to nostalgia. And nostalgia is a great enemy to progress.

*Brideshead Revisited* is widely known for its portrayal of Charles Ryder’s coming of age at Oxford, his great friendship with Lord Sebastian Flyte (namely, their adventures and misadventures), Ryder’s passion for the exceptional Flyte house of Brideshead, and the sickly influence of nostalgia throughout. Ryder becomes what Waugh terms an “artist” while in the company of the Flytes, after painting the walls of “the office” (“a small room opening on the colonnade”)[3] at Brideshead during a summer break from Oxford. All members of the family seem to adore Charles and adore his paintings. He himself is completely enamored with the Flyte family, and this is both good and bad. After the joy and games of Oxford, he leaves the Flytes for a while as he pursues his own things. He studies art in Paris where he hones a talent and taste for traditional illustrations (nothing modern!).

Thus, we find Ryder at his new show of novel pictures of Latin America. Members of high society, the Tate Gallery, and the National Art Collections Fund, are all curious to study this evolution in subjects from the safety of English country homes to the savage jungle. As one important critic, who had previously derided Ryder’s earlier work, puts it: “I knew you had it. I saw it there. I’ve been waiting for it.”[4] But what is *it*? One could say this progression in subjects recalls a shift in taste from the English architecture paintings of Samuel Prout to the visions of Henri Rousseau. This “it,” nevertheless, is an example of Ryder’s delusion before his own work. Before Blanche shows up at the gallery, Ryder has spent the day basking in the attention of high society and superficial commentary. As the Duke of Clarence remarks: “Awfully clever the way you’ve hit off the

impression of heat. Makes me feel quite uncomfortable in my great-coat.”[5]

There are many differences between Blanche and the other viewers at the gallery. Blanche arrives late to mark his entrance. He is hardly able to get in the door because he does not hold an official letter of invitation for the show. And, despite having a theatrical way of speaking, Blanche is not at the exhibition to be seen. He is not there for a party, but to partake in an aesthetic experience. Blanche approaches “the most prominent canvas – a jungle landscape” and stands before it. He turns to Ryder and then says “where, my dear Charles, did you find this sumptuous greenery? The corner of a hothouse at T-t-Trent or T-t-Tring?”[6] Blanche, with his “self-taught stammer,” uses these chains of consonants to let his meaning land. In other cases, the deluge of consonants creates a poetic alliteration with banal speech. “Trent” and “Tring” sound like colossal locations; the irony of course is that the greatness in sound is a counterpoint for Blanche’s meaning. The accusation on the surface here is that Charles has not painted actual jungles, but that he visited artificial ones in glassy enclosures at Trent (Dorset) and Tring (Hertfordshire). Curiously enough, as the story goes, Ryder did travel to real jungles. For this reason, Blanche’s comment stings with a different kind of suggestion.

The descriptions of the jungle pictures with their “heat” and sumptuous fronds recall the luxurious dark greens of Henri Rousseau’s “The Dream” (1910) and the tonalities of emerald in “The Equatorial Jungle” (1909). Rousseau did in fact paint these images based on experiences at hothouses and carefully developed a jungle world through the imagination. This insult of inauthenticity — that is, not-jungle jungle paintings — is not what Blanche is after. The lack of refinement in Rousseau’s execution in style adds to its authenticity as a representation of something and evinces its sincerity. Rousseau’s jungles are pictures of the joy of art for art’s sake, by an individual who spent most of his days in non-artistic activity for survival. The integrity of this kind of life and talent is laudable for its dedication to art and that it does not break under the strain of daily life. Rousseau’s paintings offer a light into a world of mystery as honest as it is fantastical, balancing the artist’s technique

with the visions of a space beyond hothouses and conservatories full of cultured greenery.

It is clear that Ryder did not go to Latin America to find something exotic to paint. Ryder went to Latin America to run away from life and responsibility. He chases nostalgia and charm to the ends of the Earth. As Blanche remarks, Ryder illustrates charm as tigers in the jungle in the same way he painted the interiors of provincial architecture. To really make progress in style, and also as a person, it would seem he would need to suffer a crisis that would enable him to let go of the nostalgia that plagues his actions. Ryder's unhealthy pictures stall his progress, inhibiting his development as an artist. What makes a painting unhealthy is not necessarily its subject or its style. What turns a picture, or any example of art, unhealthy is its inability to let its audience grow with it and to learn from it.

All art certainly does not have an ethical agenda. The critical comments on Ryder's paintings, however, express something deeper about the paintings' subject. They are not just a snapshot of a particular jungle, but they are also a depiction of nature. They express "heat" – that is, nature as a metaphor for misery and exaggeration. They are "so virile, so passionate"[7] – that is, nature as human. The pictures are "very forceful," "quite barbaric" [8] – that is, nature unhinged. There is little change between Ryder's earlier pictures and the unhealthy ones: the jungle paintings are an illustration of nature in a similar way that the architecture paintings were an illustration of nature. The architecture reveals opulence, a symptom of the human condition. The jungle pictures illustrate nature in the sense of habit and the ugliness of habit, tangled up with a lack of reason in the context of the natural world.

The ill that unhealthy pictures suggest is of the egotism of humankind and of hollow subjects, anemic images of glory without consequence. To correct the desire to consume these kinds of cultural (and artistic) products requires thought on whether the products are proper to consume if we want to become a certain kind of person. In Waugh's novel, Blanche already knows the kind of person he is, and he is eager to warn others of the dangers of life. Ryder does not yet see the sense of progress that would enable him to

paint healthier pictures. Ignorance, unsettling and grotesque, bursts forth from this kind of art.

As humorous as Blanche makes the situation with the clever turn of phrase, his final scathing criticism of the paintings as bad art brings the meaning to a head. Art like this, if it can be called art at all or merely “charm” on a canvas, has a subversive motive. It makes the Duke feel “quite uncomfortable.” The pictures reach for a sympathetic response in a way that is less than honorable. At least there are people like the Duke who find something disagreeable about the whole thing with respect to their sensibilities. To this we add that Blanche calls the other visitors at the exhibition good and plain people; they find “innocent pleasure” in the paintings.[9] But the fact that Ryder’s paintings are low art masquerading as fine art is another ethical conundrum. These people are experiencing innocent pleasure, at a great distance from any sense of catharsis; they look at these jungle paintings and feel whatever it is a child might when eating a scoop of strawberry ice cream or taking a dive in the ocean. This experience is a natural enjoyment, and once again we return to the argument of nature versus aesthetic refinement. If only aesthetic health could be regained (or gained in the first place) in the same fashion as giving up ice cream.

[1] Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* [1945], ([London]: Penguin Classics, 2016), 254.

[2] *Brideshead Revisited*, 212.

[3] *Ibid.*, 74.

[4] *Ibid.*, 250.

[5] *Ibid.*, 249.

[6] *Ibid.*, 252.

[7] *Ibid.*, 250.

[8] *Ibid.*, 254.

[9] *Ibid.*, 252.