

WARTON LECTURE

Manderley Revisited: *Rebecca* and the English Country House

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EARLIER LECTURERS IN THIS SERIES have honoured Thomas Warton as a critic of English poetry. I make a departure tonight by commemorating him as a historian of literature.*

I shall discuss the depiction of Manderley in the first chapter of *Rebecca*, and place this house in the history of English culture. By culture I mean the nexus of inherited ideas and values, knowledge and belief which shape the shared traditions of society. I choose a work of popular literature for its representative status and I emphasize that this is English culture. Displace Manderley from England and the cultural context changes radically. The country house would possess a different iconographic status.

The importance of the country house as a *topos* in England and in English literature is self-evident. For centuries the country house has been the dominant source of power both in the local community and in the state; the goal for the upwardly mobile; the place of leisured retreat for the successful. As a visible sign of 'the ancient social order' (Castlereagh's phrase) the houses of the gentry are remarkably well preserved in English society, and the very existence of the National Trust (and the Trust's success) suggests that the preservation of the houses of the nobility and gentry is an undertaking which has iconographic signification in defining the nation. Thus, in literature, in so far as the forms of art are the product of some (undefined) relation to the real world, the country house has been

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* It is the Academy's intention that future Warton Lectures will be on poetry in accordance with the terms of the Warton Lecture endowment.

both a natural setting for fiction and a *topos* of extensive symbolic signification.

The 'real world' status of *Manderley*, however, is unusual. *Rebecca* was published in the year of the Munich agreement. It is late in the history of the country house order, which was already in precipitate decline, and the novel is remote from the immediate interests of a nation on the verge of war. Moreover, this fiction is targeted at a popular audience which could in no way share the life of a great house like *Manderley*. The very title, *Rebecca*, is a cultural sign that this is a romance, and the coupling of her name with *Manderley* places the novel in a long tradition of silver fork or Cinderella tales marked by titles such as *Marcella*, *Camilla*, *Pamela*. But one of the fundamental (post-Jamesian) devices of Du Maurier (itself a name of romance) is to separate her nameless heroine from the ostensible protagonist, *Rebecca*, so that every common reader may now empathize with the penniless orphan who dreamt last night she went to *Manderley*.

I emphasize the fictionality of the text in order to draw attention to the limitations of cultural history. Although the country house is of major importance in English culture, yet, if *Rebecca* were the only documentary evidence to survive of twentieth-century England, we would possess no knowledge either of the major events of contemporary history, or of the lives of most people. This novel is a crucial example of the way in which the texts produced by a culture can be separated from that culture and valued despite (or perhaps for) that very separation.

I want to eschew, therefore, an etiological reading which would see *Rebecca* as a necessary product of material culture, or of gender, class or race. Even if one might demonstrate causation, this fiction would be a highly imperfect mirror of its social origins. We only know that it was popular. I am also sceptical of taking *Rebecca* as an extended synecdoche by which a part—the cultural text—might be read as a sign of the whole—English society on the verge of war. (An ontological reading.) It is a tempting hypothesis, for there are a number of works which might be seen as *Rebecca*'s immediate context and which take the country house as an idealized sign of the nation under threat, and privilege the house from certain class or gendered positions. Such an interpretative taxonomy might relate *Manderley*, for instance, to Poyntz Hall in Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941), or to the more numinous symbolism of Eliot's *Burnt Norton* (1936) and Cary's *To Be a Pilgrim* (1942). Vita Sackville-West's *English Country Houses* (1944) and Sacheverell Sitwell's *British Architects and Craftsmen* (1945) are similar (factual) discourses which make explicit their patriotic idealization of the form and function of the English country house: 'we have travelled sufficiently far [writes Sitwell as victory approaches] to contrast our survival out of a ruined Europe, lying in shame and misery,

with those centuries of a universal language in the arts of life. . . . Let us consider . . . our own glorious past and draw profit from it for the future!’¹

These are texts underpinned by a traditional cultural nationalism. They invite the reader to value the country house as central to a heritage to be defended. But *Rebecca*, on the other hand, though belonging to exactly the same historical context, resists such cultural appropriation and the kind of political commentary which might arise from this cultural construct. The dream vision of Manderley in ruins, and Manderley revived, is innocent of that kind of overt intentionalism. The English nation is not there. That very absence carries, in context, negative signification. I see no reason why we should seek to fill a deliberate silence with an alternative discourse.

The implied *presence* in *Rebecca* is not ‘the English nation’ but another literary text, a hundred years older. It is, of course, *Jane Eyre*. There is no direct allusion to connect Manderley with Thornfield Hall, and only when *Rebecca* reaches its conclusion do we learn how and why Manderley was burnt. But by that time the affinities with *Jane Eyre* in the fiction are so clearly established that the destruction of the house by fire has a narrative inevitability derived from its generic prototype, and an allegorical signification as purgatorial fire clearly parallel with Jane and Rochester’s pilgrims’ progress. It would be redundant to expatiate on the other similarities between the novels—the Byronic hero and the guilty secret; the woman of a lower class who marries riches and saves the hero; the evil presence which haunts the old manor house; ‘the madwoman in the attic’ who sets fire to it.

The cultural origins of this romance for the 1940s lie in a text of the 1840s—by which time *Jane Eyre* is separated from whatever relates it to early Victorian experience and has become a series of formulaic topoi which the English reader is expected to recognize. In this respect *Rebecca* functions as a conservative and traditionalist discourse analogous to the explicit ideological conservatism of Woolf or Sitwell. What defines English culture here is a sense of the literary past. Take *Jane Eyre* away and *Rebecca* could neither be written nor read in the same way. That is merely to scrape the surface of the archaeological deposit. Both *Rebecca* and *Jane Eyre* have clear affinities with earlier Gothic romance—either in the main stream of the canon with Catherine Morland pondering the dreadful secret which involves the first Mrs Tilney, or in the cultural sediment of Austen’s ‘horrid novels’. I emphasize the analogy with *Northanger Abbey* for here too is a fiction, like *Rebecca*, originating in a period of world crisis and intense domestic stress which takes as its subject the earlier conventions of popular fiction. Thus, any reading of a text in terms of cultural history

¹ p. 1.

has to take account of the fact that the first subject of a literary work is likely to be the reworking of the topoi of the genre of which it is part; that these topoi are frequently detached from any historical circumstances with which they might originally have been connected; and that the historical conventions may accordingly be archaic and formulaic. Contemporary texts are not necessarily contemporaneous.

A text like *Rebecca*, thus, is built from a grammar and a rhetoric of motifs which is traditional, deep rooted, trans-historical. If we are to enquire in what way the processes of cultural development are specific to this text, at this time, in this place, the best evidence the text supplies will depend upon the analysis of the traces of the cultural tradition: what is carried forward, what altered, what suppressed. Our evidence is the mutation of the inherited codes. But why the changes were made remains problematical.

Let me come closer to the words of the author and the fiction of Manderley—this story from English culture between Munich and the Battle of Britain. If Thornfield Hall is the dominant inherited country house motif, then burnt Manderley has one major difference from Thornfield. Rebecca's house is seen in the beginning as an ideal place in which, in memory or dream, husband and wife might be happy. Compare Thornfield's secret chamber with Rebecca's wing at Manderley. At Thornfield the locked room, the distant screams, the flickering light, the sinister Grace Poole all suggest to the alarmed imagination (false) tales of patriarchal tyranny. At Manderley, Rebecca's wing is redolent of what is called 'culture and grace'. These signs too are false—they are mystifications which conceal the evil of a transgressive woman—but in the dream world of memory Manderley, in its perfect symmetry, is the sign of an efflorescent and perfectly preserved ideal:

Light came from the windows, the curtains blew softly in the night air, and there, in the library, the door would stand half open as we had left it, with my handkerchief on the table beside the bowl of autumn roses.²

We are taken to the library because the rich deposit of the canon of literature is the obvious sign of inherited high culture—indeed, only at a late date in English culture could such a passage be written. The bowl of roses shows the delicate female touch with which the woman pays her homage to the beauty of the place by rendering it yet more beautiful by the cultivation of nature, and by a flower traditionally associated with female sexuality. But they are autumn roses. Summer has past. Manderley's

² Sixteenth impression, September 1940, p. 7. An analysis of contemporary reviews might help clarify the cultural context, but is beyond the subject of the present paper.

time is drawing to an end. So too is the innocence of our heroine's awakened sexuality. The moment of apogee is also the time of imminent decline and fall.

It has always been in the nature of paradise to be lost, but the text here is more concerned with the mythic stasis of this moment of vision than with making (say) a readily available social observation on the contemporary problems of the declining landed aristocracy. Thinking back on Manderley the writer records:

I would think of the blown lilac, and the Happy Valley. These things are permanent, they could not be dissolved. They were memories that cannot hurt.³

That phrase 'the Happy Valley' is laden with cultural associations. Byron had used the same words to describe the ideal setting of Newstead Abbey⁴ and Byron would recollect that this was the designation of the earthly paradise in *Rasselas* in which Johnson's philosophical prince was raised. Beyond Johnson is Fielding's Paradise Hall, the happy house where Tom Jones (everyman) united to Sophia (wisdom) might, providentially and prudentially, in some measure redeem in his estate the transgression of our first parents. But the topos of the cultured garden or estate as *paradeisos* is as old as western culture itself. Thus, the narrator in *Rebecca* separates her Happy Valley from the here and now, locating it in some kind of archetypal 'memory' in which it acquires the status of a 'thing' which is 'permanent'. The idea of paradise is, for her, a transhistorical and Platonic Truth.

This idealization of Manderley is extreme—generically it is one of the signs which indicate that this is a romance. Historically, it deracinates this house, as a signifier of 'culture and grace' from an alternative tradition in which the ideal country house stood as a microcosm of the functioning of the good society. The *locus classicus* in English literature is Ben Jonson's *To Penshurst*, but, *mutatis mutandis*, Richardson's Grandison Hall, Disraeli's St. Geneviève, or William Morris's Kelmscott are reformulations of the same theme.⁵ The functional country house, as represented

³ p. 8.

⁴ *Don Juan*, XIII, 56, describing Newstead Abbey under the name Norman Abbey: 'It stood embosom'd in a happy valley, / Crown'd by high woodlands'.

⁵ I discuss the topic in *The Great Good Place: The Country House and English Literature* (London: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1992). See also G. R. Hibbard, 'The Country House Poem of the Seventeenth Century', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 19 (1956), 159–74; William Alexander McClung, *The Country House in English Renaissance Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); James S. Ackerman, *The Villa: Form and Ideology of the Country House* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990). Among the substantial critical literature on Penshurst see Paul M. Cubeta, 'A Jonsonian Ideal: "To Penshurst"',

by Jonson, out of his interpretation of classical Latin culture, is the centre of a productive estate and the focus of an harmonious community. At the heart of Penshurst is the Great Hall where all orders of society are united in a communal meal. In Jonson's feudal formulation of the ideal, the ordered hierarchy dependson the family of the Sidneys, fertile like their estate, and who hand on from generation to generation the principles of high culture in 'the mysteries of manners, arms and arts'.

In the dream of Manderley this sense of function and community is manifestly absent. It is one sign of the dislocation from that tradition that the narrator's word 'grace' in *Rebecca* is merely expressive of the aesthetic charm of 'culture' and is emptied of those Renaissance resonances it would have possessed in Jonson, linked, in his tradition, both to religion (as divine grace) and, by usual process of allegory, to the three Graces as deities associated with agriculture. Manderley, in contradistinction to Penshurst, is seen as centred within a garden, not a working estate. The intimate relationship between the folk of the estate and their lord, idealized by Jonson, will be parodied at Manderley in the fancy dress ball, confined to the gentry, who appear in historical disguises as what they are not. At this calamitous ball our heroine is led into imitating Rebecca. But Rebecca's 'culture and grace' are shown to be a corrupt irrelevance. Maxim de Winter (a chilling feudal name) from time to time disappears on estate business, but from the woman's viewpoint this is a 'mystery' (to play with Jonson's word) which is closed to her. The garden at Manderley, though a place of 'culture and grace', resembles some *jardin secret* of

Philological Quarterly 42 (1963), 14–24; Jeffrey Hart, 'Ben Jonson's Good Society', *Modern Age* 7 (1963), 61–8; Hugh MacClean, 'Ben Jonson's Poems: Notes on the Ordered Society', in Millar MacLure and F. W. Watts (eds), *Essays in English Literature from the Renaissance to the Victorian Age Presented to A.S.P. Woodhouse* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 43–68; Charles Molesworth, 'Property and Virtue: The Genre of the Country House Poem in the Seventeenth Century', *Genre* 1 (1968), 141–57; and "'To Penshurst" and Jonson's Historical Imagination', *Clio* 1 (1971), 5–13; Alastair Fowler, 'The "Better Marks" of Jonson's "To Penshurst"', *Review of English Studies* new series 24 (1973), 266–82; and 'Country House Poems: The Politics of a Genre', *The Seventeenth Century* 1 (1986), 1–14; William E. Cain, 'The Place of the Poet in Jonson's "To Penshurst" and "To My Muse"', *Criticism* 21 (1979), 34–48; Heather Dubrow, 'The Country House Poem: A Study in Generic Development' *Genre* 12 (1979), 153–79; Mary Ann C. McGuire, 'The Cavalier Country-House Poem: Mutations on a Jonsonian Theme', *Studies in English Literature* 19 (1979), 93–108; Richard S. Peterson, *Imitation and Praise in the Poems of Ben Jonson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Don E. Wayne, *Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place and the Poetics of History* (Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press, 1984); Harold Tolliver, "'Householding and the Poet's Vocation": Jonson and After', *English Studies* 66 (1985), 113–22; William Alexander McClung, 'The Country House Arcadia', in Gervase Jackson-Stops (ed), *The Fashioning and Functioning of the British Country House* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1989).

medieval romance in which the heroine and her courtly lover are guiltily concealed. To separate Manderley from the estate, and from the world outside, the lodge gate, in the dream, is fastened with a padlock and chain.

This dislocation of Manderley from its social function within an estate is reflected from the beginning in the divorce in the narrator's vocabulary between culture and Nature. One remarkable quality of the description of Manderley is that the house is seen both as ideal and yet within a sinister context—and the sinister quality arises from the encroachment of Nature.

Nature had come into her own again and, little by little, in her stealthy, insidious way had encroached upon the drive with long, tenacious fingers. The woods, always a menace even in the past, had triumphed in the end. They crowded, dark and uncontrolled, to the borders of the drive . . . there were other trees as well, trees that I did not recognize, squat oaks and tortured elms that straggled cheek by jowl with the beeches, and had thrust themselves out of the quiet earth, along with monster shrubs and plants, none of which I remembered.⁶

This is a radical dislocation of the humanist ideal of the country house in harmony with Nature, a topos given classic formulation in Pliny's description of his Tuscan and Laurentine villas, or, in English, most clearly represented by the landscape garden movement. Departures from that norm are unnatural, as the 'inverted Nature' of Timon's villa in Pope indicates. Timon's false culture cannot survive:

Deep Harvests bury all his pride has plann'd
And laughing Ceres re-assume[s] the land.⁷

But at Manderley the sensibility of the visitant to the padlocked secret garden is more 'medieval' than 'humanist'. The narrator is distrustful of the processes of Nature as alien to culture, or worse, as falling towards the monstrous. Instead of 'laughing Ceres' the estate yields to processes which are 'stealthy', 'insidious', menacing, dark, uncontrolled. These strong emotive overtones are also given social context. Although one might pass unnoticed the political resonances of the 'dark and uncontrolled' crowd of the wild wood, yet the description as a whole is heavily metaphorical as Nature goes 'native' and then by 'alien marriage' spawns 'a host of nameless shrubs' and nettles that 'leant, vulgar and lanky, against the very windows of the house'. This wild wood, allegorically conceived, is a proletarian mob, the *vulgus* who, left uncontrolled, swarm over the works of culture and grace, threatening to inundate the country house, although, at this moment, they occupy only the outworks of the garden and peer, alien voyeurs, through the casements of Manderley.

⁶ p.5.

⁷ 'Epistle to Burlington', 175–6.

I have called the sensibility of the narrator more 'medieval' than 'humanist', deliberately distorting chronological progression. But if this description is read politically, it suggests, in historical terms, that one may place *Rebecca* as a post-Jacobin novel. One might, more specifically, contextualize Du Maurier in relation to Gissing, Mallock, Mrs Humphrey Ward,⁸ or compare *Rebecca* with James's *The Princess Casamassima* with which it has remarkable affinities. It may be that the discourse, after all, is unwittingly betraying a class position which opens up the novel to an ontological and contemporary interpretation. An upwardly mobile writer—Du Maurier—reveals here her fear of the proletariat. The text is caught in a contradiction between the radical culture of a decadent and passing feudal order and the emergent (natural) ideology of the proletariat. *Rebecca* shows, thus, the dialectic of an historical epoch, for the bourgeois heroine, who is neither of the residual nor the emergent ideology, is divided by her desire to marry upwards into a world she has conceived in a state of false consciousness (a mystifying dream), but, forced to learn that she can neither belong to nor reconstitute the residual social order, she ends as she begins in the contradictions revealed by the opening chapter, passing her time in a hotel, a place which resembles Manderley in its outward signs, but is totally without social function. The romance, after all, encodes and reveals 'real' contemporary history.

The problem with this reading is that the theoretical generalities are vague enough to fit any text. This is not a necessary sign of their truth. It might equally be a sign of their imprecision. Since my concern is cultural history, this reading constitutes an appropriate hypothesis, but it does not seem to me specific to the experience of *this* work of literature. The actual words of the text which were used as a kind of trampoline to launch this disquisition seem to me, read in the context of this novel, to be concerned with a number of inherited issues intrinsic to country house tradition in general, and the position of the narrator in particular. The rhetoric is not a give away of something else—the social reality.

Let me return to the vulgar nettles, the alien marriage of the shrubs, the jungle law of the encroaching woods. On one level this description is merely literally true. Neglected gardens run wild. That is a simplistic explanation, but naturalistic fiction depends upon establishing literal verisimilitude. But the text, accordingly, by its very literalism, has broken radically from the ideology of the English landscape movement which harmonized culture and Nature. The 'false consciousness'—if any—was

⁸ See *Demos* (Gissing); *The Old Order Changes* (Mallock); *Marcella* (Ward). For country house literature post James see Richard Gill, *Happy Rural Seat: The English Country House and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

in the landscape ideal, and not in the heroine. This specific vocabulary is chosen too for what it tells the reader about this heroine, who is our centre of consciousness for the perception of Manderley. It is proleptic. The words about 'alien marriage', misalliance, vulgar encroachment and jungle law relate precisely to her state of mind in marrying Maxim de Winter, and to the story which follows. These words reveal the fears and the experience of the penniless orphan parvenue who is, as it were, a vulgar natural scion who peers in through the windows of the great house, and who will be involved with violence and murder. Since this experience is specific to her, it is not an inadvertent give-away of Du Maurier's class position (nor of the author's psychic fixations). The heroine is both a general type—a Cinderella figure—but also a character whose specificity is as carefully wrought by the choice of words as that of a Dorothea Brooke or Isabel Archer. It is a vital requirement of the fiction that she be an outsider, and in some measure a naïvely inadequate outsider—in this respect a heroine constructed more on the model of a Catherine Morland than a Jane Eyre. Her passivity is essential to her narrative function, for her key role is to be the responsive centre of consciousness of the ghost of Rebecca, who, invisible as presence, is present in every lovely object at Manderley and in the words of every other character there. One woman, therefore, serves as a mirror for the other, the passive for the dominant possessor, orphaned Cinderella for Acrasia in her Bower of Bliss.

A traditional humanist emphasis upon character is essential, therefore, if the topoi of the text—the commonplaces of the narrative tradition—are not to be reduced to so many glass beads strung on a chain of ideological theory. The perception of Manderley is charged with a deep sense of emotion which is part of the very 'literariness' of the text—works of art invite us to feel—but which criticism, as an analytic discipline, is ill-equipped to record. Yet the strength of the feeling which gathers round Manderley is pre-eminently what the rhetoric seeks to arouse. That feeling comes, in part, because of the intensity of the emotions of the character who speaks to us—this is the place in which the life of this woman who tells this story was inevitably changed by traumatic and passionate personal events—which you, gentle reader, are invited to share by pouring your own character into the substantial void which is our nameless heroine's place. Without character, and without common human sympathy with character, the emotional charge of the writing would not be effective.

It is an essential proviso to this topological study, therefore, that the theme is made living by the intensity of the emotions which the characters generate. If this were not so, Manderley would not be burnt. I have called this a generic commonplace derived from the *Urttext* of *Jane Eyre*. But it is Mrs Danvers who lights the flame. This is her last necrophiliac act of

worship for the first Mrs de Winter, performed so that the second Mrs de Winter shall not possess Manderley. It is character driven, and arises from a unique and remarkable emotional state of mind. But it is an act too on which the text bestows symbolic meaning. A last acolyte sacrifices herself to a mythic dead goddess. And it is a purgatorial fire invested with the larger archetypal significance of the story of paradise lost. Expelled like Adam and a second Eve from the Happy Valley of Manderley, Maxim and his wife, through their experience of suffering, seek a better basis of happiness in their loss of innocence.

Essential for that growth of experience is the destruction of Rebecca, and it is in the creation of the character of Rebecca, and in the permeation of Manderley by Rebecca, that the novel most forcefully moves from the literal to the symbolic through character. Some sort of expression like 'the presence of evil' might serve initially to define her general role, though that vague numinosity suggests rather the James of *The Turn of the Screw* than the graphic and intensely detailed experience of this person. But her evil is specific to Manderley. It does not exist in any other place, and that is why the burning of the house extirpates the *genius loci*. Her evil is the corruption of that world of culture and grace embodied in the perfect symmetry of the house and its unfallen relation to the Happy Valley. The paradox of the story is that beauty and corruption can be one and the same, as place and person are symbiotically related.

Since my concern is with the topoi of country house tradition, what I am describing is clearly a post-Jamesian theme, but I have suggested that the historical timewarp has far wider parameters. The symbiotic relation of the beauty of high culture with the corruption of culture is intrinsic in the topos of the country house from the beginning. The classical humanist ideal defined the good life by contrast with those villas of luxurious ostentation whose roofs are fretted with gold, but whose owners are slaves to lust and passion.⁹ If one returns to the historical origins of things, the contrast between the specific characters of the two Mrs de Winters—one beautiful, ostentatious, corrupt—the other moral, chaste, domestic—derives from the ancient divide in classical culture between the plain living and moral probity of the *Urvolk* of the Italian countryside, and the sybaritic civilization which corrupted the people even as they acquired aesthetic graces. The same essential division structures English country house tradition as the classical world penetrates the Gothic feudal order. Jonson's *To Penshurst* begins its praise of the ancient house of simple

⁹ See *The Great Good Place* ch. 2; John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); James A. Freeman, 'The Roof was Fretted Gold', *Comparative Literature* 27 (1975), 254–66.

goodness by defining it in comparison with the prodigy houses of the English Renaissance—‘Thou art not, Penshurst, built to envious show’—and central to the good house is the good mistress, fertile, religious and domestic. So too in the dialectic of Jane Austen’s novels, at Mansfield Park Fanny Price stands to Mary Crawford as the second Mrs de Winter to Rebecca. The attempt to find a *modus vivendi* between these alternatives is the reiterated matter of the debate/reconciliation between Nature and Culture in country house tradition.

Seen as part of this tradition, the death of Rebecca and the burning of Manderley acquire special signification. The fiction rejects both the classic humanist divide which separated the good house by contradistinction from the house of Pride, and rejects also the kind of compromises an Austen or a James had offered. Mansfield Park, or Gardencourt in *Portrait of a Lady*, remain living signs of worth despite the deep flaws within their worlds of culture and grace. But in *Rebecca* the purgation of Manderley by fire is a ritual act of cleansing. It burns out Rebecca, but the cost of burning out Rebecca is the destruction of the house, and thus all the history which is intrinsically associated with old places. It gives to the ending of the novel a far more downbeat conclusion than the generic *Urtext* of *Jane Eyre*. The last sentence of *Rebecca* tells merely of the destruction of Manderley: ‘And the ashes blew toward us with the salt wind from the sea.’ A childless life thereafter in the boring little hotels of Europe is, one guesses, very far from the romantic dream of most readers. This is not, ultimately, an escapist romance, but a rewriting of a European myth which marks a point of termination. If *Rebecca* has contemporaneous signification, it lies in that sense of something old now having an ending.

But like Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, the end is the beginning, and the fiction—or might I now call it ‘myth’?—is linked by an inescapable circle back to the first chapter. ‘Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.’ That dream exists in the absence of Rebecca. In the dream the house is seen, by the imagination and only in the imagination, as restored to its perfect symmetry, a sign of culture and grace in which the domestic fire burns forever in the library, the autumn roses will not wither on the table, and the Happy Valley, like paradise, is always in bloom. That experience is separated both from the world of the ‘vulgar’, but separated too from the corruption of Rebecca, blown like ashes about the viewless winds.

The inter-relationship between a contemporaneous ‘now’—an efferrescent reality, burnt Manderley—and ‘then’—a permanent place in the imagination—is intrinsic both to this fiction and to its place in cultural history. For the humanist reader, it is the backwardness of the text, its long processes of association, its conservative relation to a canon of forebears, which constitutes its permanence, its timelessness. It exists as

part of an historical process which separates the work of art from the mere moment of time in which it comes into being. The connection with past tradition and separation from immediate specificity helps constitute that quality in the text which I have vaguely called 'symbol' and 'myth'. But the interpenetration of 'then' and our 'now' depends upon past and present sharing a common cultural heritage. Without that common heritage many of the historical and emotional resonances of the text could not function. Intrinsic to the success of *Rebecca* as a popular romance is a spontaneous immediacy of empathetic experience by which the heroine's point of view of Manderley can be immediately understood in relation to our own. That common cultural experience is that of being English—that immediate knowledge of place in time which I will call cultural nationalism. I end, thus, by returning to my beginning (like *Rebecca*) and to the specificity of English literature. Consider the cultural accretions for an English reader of an associative series of words: house, country house, English country house, English country house garden, and the way these associations inform this passage:

There was Manderley, our Manderley, secretive and silent as it had always been, the grey stone shining in the moonlight of my dream, the mullioned windows reflecting the green lawns and the terrace. Time could not wreck the perfect symmetry of those walls, nor the site itself, a jewel in the hollow of a hand.¹⁰

That word 'our' is collusive, for it means more than the Manderley of the de Winters. It is the 'our' of the English reader who possesses the country house as a cultural heritage, and yet is, like the heroine, a spectator from the outside. The passage depends upon 'our' instinctive memory of some image of a Renaissance house—the symmetrical jewel is not precisely described so that each imagination may create spontaneously its own cultural image. The house is built in the local stone of the English countryside, and early in history, for the builders could choose freely the perfect site sheltered in a hollow, and a hollow not of the land, but of a hand, as if the living land held the house. It is in a hollow because Manderley is neither a sign of military domination—like a castle on a high hill—nor some Italianate villa seeking the cool breezes of a hilltop. The house is hidden from storms as it is from the world, a jewel in the foil of 'green lawns' (an Homeric epithet, unobtrusive but essentially English in its emphasis on the colour of the shaven grass). It is set off by a terrace for this is a house of leisured prospect as well as retreat.

'Time' could not wreck this vision, the narrator claims—paradoxically

¹⁰ p.6.

since the house is burnt. But this is an assertion by the very text itself that it too is timeless, not of any specific moment in history. Why Time cannot wreck Manderley is that this is a folk icon lodged in the imagination of the race. It is an archetype of the desired house and home quite different from any historic house actually restored (by a National Trust). The claim that the house is beyond the power of Time is analogous to the claim in Shakespeare's sonnets that the words of the artist give immortality more lasting than material monuments. But Shakespeare's claim is the hubristic boast of a self-assertive Renaissance maker—it is his powerful rhetoric which will outlive even the works of patron or prince. The narrator of *Rebecca*, on the other hand, is ostensibly not claiming pre-eminence for herself as artist bestowing immortality upon Manderley. On the contrary, the character shrinks into anonymity to foreground the collective nature of the general creation by popular, romantic imagination of 'our' Manderley. The timelessness of the house comes from the ability of the imagination to transcend time. Manderley is 'ours' as readers of the text, but 'ours' also as those who share an experience of that sense of place in history created by the body of works called 'English literature' which preserve, develop and communicate cultural history. The image of Manderley seems to arise unmediated, spontaneously in the popular imagination through a shared experience of the narrator's dream. But that dream is the product of that complex and long process of cultural history of which this lecture is merely an inadequate sketch.