The great cultural decline of the twentieth century was first evident in the graveyard.  
(Evelyn Waugh, “Half in Love with Easeful Death”)

Waugh’s novels mourn the collapsing tradition of Englishness once long-established social forms of life have begun to disintegrate. His narratives set in the 1930s focus on the deterioration of physical locations and places, as well as the dissolution of cultural practices and inherited ideals. Waugh identifies the public school, sports field, men’s club, and particularly the country house repeatedly at the center of his fiction as epitomizing a uniquely English tradition; he represents these places in various stages of decline and decay. The country houses of the nation—and all they stand for—are literally falling apart. The decaying homes of England’s aristocratic classes, even while they continue to stand, signal what has already largely passed into history: a national tradition where transcendental certainties secured linguistic meaning, Britannia ruled the waves, and people knew their proper place in the social hierarchy. In representing the decaying country house as a synecdoche for an array of fragmenting cultural experiences, Waugh’s fiction describes a multiplicity of literal and symbolic deaths, telling stories about the passing of characters, dissolution of religious faith, decline of the aristocracy, and collapsing authority of British imperialism. But his novels do not simply describe the decline of the country house. They seek, more fundamentally, to mourn the disintegration of a national tradition and adjudicate the significance of this loss for the future.
Waugh’s effort to mourn the passing of the country house tradition hinges first and foremost on an aesthetics of decay. His writing, in fact, focuses attention on the decay of English domestic architecture more than the structures themselves. Consider, for example, *Work Suspended*, an unfinished novel of the late 1930s, where Waugh introduces what I call a form of “critical” nostalgia for the country house and distinguish from “sentimental” nostalgia. The narrator John Plant gives expression to this critical nostalgia when he identifies “a specialized enthusiasm for domestic architecture,” especially those eighteenth-century classical houses that have begun to deteriorate, as one of the “peculiarities” of his generation:

When the poetic mood was on us, we turned to buildings, and gave them the place which our fathers accorded to Nature—to almost any buildings, but particularly those in the classic tradition, and more particularly, in its decay. It was a kind of nostalgia for the style of living which we emphatically rejected in practical affairs.²

That Plant uses his inheritance to buy a country house, a place he believes will shelter him from the transience and moral dissipation of modern life, suggests that he imagines himself as a rightful heir to an English tradition of rural life, one he regards as valuable. However, he does not display any sentimental attachment to this artifact of historical distinction; Plant distances his fixation on the country estate from the conduct of everyday life. Even more to the point, he reserves his highest esteem not for the well-preserved house, but for one “in its decay.” Consequently, Waugh’s protagonist not only invalidates any project bent on historical recovery, but also views the living tradition of Englishness as a time that has essentially passed, a tradition he has been born into at the irreversible moment of its doom. If there is a species of nostalgia operating here, it does not express the sentimental longing to redeem the present by restoring the practices of the past. Instead, Plant displays a critical form of nostalgia, or what Peter Kalliney has recently addressed as a nostalgic longing for nostalgia itself.³ Rather than valuing a house that would enable him to sustain the English tradition of country life, he values a house that reiterates its loss; rather than fixating on a house that would obscure the fading splendor of the English past, Plant fixates