THE INSTITUTION OF MODERNISM AND THE DISCOURSE OF CULTURE:
HELLENISM, DECADENCE, AND AUTHORITY
FROM WALTER PATER TO T. S ELIOT

DISSERTATION

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by

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ABSTRACT

This project rethinks the forces that shaped English literary modernism by examining the way writers like Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot respond to a crisis of literary authority that emerges from the nineteenth century through the shifting idea of culture. While these writers have been recently studied in terms of the link between literary doctrine and politics, this frame of reference fails to capture the way in which the formulation and reformulation of aesthetic ideas in the early twentieth century is intimately linked to way in which the idea of high culture was complicated by the emergence of the anthropological culture idea in the nineteenth century. The English moderns discussed here each, in various ways, attempt to exploit the ambiguities of the culture idea in order to reassert the privileged status of the arts. Previously, the authority of European literature had been posited on the basis of Greek ideals as well as religious values. The emergence of anthropology greatly complicated the Victorian understanding of both Christianity and Hellenism, which in turn leaves aesthetics in need of a new form of legitimation. The moderns would look upon the culture thesis of anthropology as both an opportunity and a source of anxiety. On one hand, the idea of culture as “a whole way of life” not only threatens the privileged status of the arts, but also legitimizes a romantic concept through, ironically, the prestige of science. On the other hand, the culture thesis offers the promise of empowering the
arts and their ability to shape modern civilization. Artist are, as Ezra Pound would proclaim, “the antennae of the race.” The first writers to register these anxieties were late romantic writers themselves. The aestheticism of Walter Pater sought to withdraw from philistine modernity in the name of the cultivation of heightened sensibility only to embrace the culture idea as a means of saving art from subjective imprisonment. Wilde’s Decadence is a response to the idea of civilization as overwrought consciousness and decrepitude. Yet, he will come to see that the animal instincts—a savagery which is the companion of decadent civilization—can only be redressed by seeing culture in terms of the survival of Hellenistic impulses that might provide the basis of a new culture. Both writers anticipate the dilemmas and trajectories that the later English modernists would experience. T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot would each seek to make art a means of shaping the collective unconscious. Their desire was to make art a living presence in society at large. The irony for the modernists is that their efforts were to have the opposite effect.

Hence, the companion story to these conceptual shifts is the way in which modernist attempts to create an audience for high art ends up being mediated through the professionalization of university criticism. The accumulation of “cultural capital” in institutions of higher learning progressively undermines the legitimacy of criticism and literature outside its purview. The late nineteenth-century writer might take pride in the coterie audience, but the momentum of emerging mass culture at the turn of the century
led the modernists increasingly to forge their audience through the university.

Modernism would win its cultural place, not by speaking from the mass mind as many of them hoped, but by merging with the interests of the academy.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Preliminaries

It was once *de rigueur* in any discussion of modernism to begin by admitting the 
heterogeneity of the concept. Such critical modesty has become increasingly rare. 
Instead, modernist writers—with the exception of Virginia Woolf, and perhaps James 
Joyce—have been increasingly read as elitist reactionaries whose work reflects, 
unproblematically, their desire for cultural consensus an attraction to fascist or 
authoritarian politics. Putting aside for the moment the theoretical problem of how 
deply politics is “reflected” in literary works, modernism’s reputation certainly suffered 
in recent years with the elaboration of postmodernism. If modernism was committed to 
“grand narratives” and cultural authority, then postmodernism stood for the “open work,” 
the “play of signification,” and above all, “emancipation” from the “phallogocentrism” of 
the modernist cultural project. And indeed, the current interest in cultural studies tends to 
ratify this view of modernism, at times seeming to enlarge it to describe “the literary” as 
such.

Hence, my aim is not to offer yet another “totalizing” theory of modernism; such 
complex phenomena tend to defy precise formulation, just as terms like “romanticism,”
“enlightenment,” and “renaissance” always exceed neat definitions, however heuristically necessary they are. Nevertheless, I do want to offer resistance to the widespread assumption of a model that simply constructs a reactionary modernist ideology, all the better to supercede it. Marjorie Perloff has dubbed this view “straw man modernism,” and while at times it may appear to some that Perloff herself has participated in the construction of such modernist paradigms, her phrase marks a recognition of the way in which some critical tendencies offer a caricature modernism that erases the manner in which our own art is still intimately bound to the institutional categories and cultural problematic that helped to shape modernism itself.¹

Modernism’s own self-understanding—that it is an art of rupture with the past, that it represents Ezra Pound’s “Make it new!”—is as problematic for critical understanding as it is inevitable. For example, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane note in their influential anthology Modernism, “the word retains its force because of its association with a characteristic contemporary feeling: the historicist feeling that we live in novel times, that contemporary history is the source of our significance, that we are derivatives not of the past but of the surrounding and enfolding environment or scenario, that modernity is a new consciousness, a fresh condition of the human mind—a condition which modern art has explored, felt through, sometimes reacted against.”² Innovation and radical aesthetic experimentation are simply expressions of social and historical novelty. Astradur Eysteinsson has called Bradbury's and McFarlane's view a “reflection theory” of modernism: its various artistic practices are said to reflect or parallel the conditions of modernity itself. “Such an analogy,” he argues, “can easily miss the sociocultural and ideological positioning of modernism with regard to social modernity,
or can reduce it to a unilaterally reproductive or symbolic act.\(^3\) Further, this acceptance of part of the modernist polemic creates a number of interpretive problems, not the least of which is explaining why modernism shares so many features of its avowed enemy, romanticism: the assertion in early modernism of radical individualism and egoism and the nostalgia for organic community to name only two of such affinities.

This project rethinks the forces that shaped the conceptual domain of English literary modernism by examining the way writers like Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot respond to a crisis of literary authority that emerges from the nineteenth century. From the perspective developed here, the aesthetes and decadents of the late nineteenth century are central to any account of modernism, notwithstanding their rejection by those writers we usually call modernists. In order to see this, we need to look beyond the usual focus on aesthetic doctrine and political ideology that structure most accounts in order to grasp the conceptual terrain that shaped late nineteenth and early twentieth century discourse. These writers all attempt to move beyond romanticism by various means but fail to move beyond the problem that romanticism announces: how can the spiritual be protected from the enlightenment assertion that progress is rational and material? More importantly, on what grounds can art be said to effectively oppose the destructive forces of modernity itself? What lay to hand were the traditional institutions and categories that put limitations on human conduct: religion, and taste as acquired through humanistic cultivation and refinement. If the enlightenment brought about the conditions that undermined the former, the latter seemed, for the romantics, complicit with the class-bound establishment because it was based on education that distorted personality and natural sympathies. How might the
alienation of humanity be overcome? Romantic thought would address this through the idea of culture. If the human person is an organism, so is the society of which that person is a part. By the late eighteenth century, “culture” emerges as the central term of a counter-discourse that sought to assert the spiritual wholeness of society in the face of enlightenment secular rationalism. As we shall see, J. G. Herder, who was so central in developing this concept, sought a means of uniting the unconscious or intuitive ground of experience with the conscious cultivation of self and community into a seamless whole. Various peoples, like individuals, he argues, possess a unique spirit, each of which moves by diverse paths toward a completely realized ideal humanity. This final unity is predicated upon divine Providence, and since fullness and totality are precisely that which rationalism threatened, culture becomes a salient weapon with which to critique not only social fragmentation and industrialism, but the political inequalities and moral failure of the modern world. The romantic poet is one who, because of imagination and feeling, is able to perceive the true spirit of the people. True poets are individual in the sense that their vision is based upon personal genius that transcends ordinary reason. But because of this imaginative capacity, they are able to bring to consciousness that which is most representative.

Hence, by the mid-nineteenth century, the idea of “culture” increasingly came to dominate thinking about the state of European civilization and the vast transformations it had been undergoing. But in the wake of the receding hopes of the early romantics, the culture idea is increasingly unable to maintain its Herderian unity as its theistic basis is progressively undermined. What emerges is a split within romanticism that exposes a fissure between the idea of general culture and the cultivation of individual sensibility.
The desire for social cohesion and the strengthening of collective sympathies is manifest in the conservative trajectory of figures like Wordsworth and Coleridge: a tradition carried on by Matthew Arnold. On the other hand, the radical subjectivism of romanticism develops towards aestheticism and impressionism. The turn towards the self and its aesthetic experience repositions the idea of humanistic cultivation centering upon the Hellenic idea of paidaia: the ideal of educating the whole person into the moral life of the community. Gone is the idea of the cultivation of broad humane sympathies and the development of moral character. In its place lies the development of aesthetic sensibility as a consolation for the degradations of modern life: art as the only paradise available that is suitably removed from the philistine mass. In decadence, this trajectory leads to a complete inversion of romantic values: artifice over nature, cynicism and wit over sympathy, a fascination with morbidity and fragmentation over health and organic wholeness. In this, decadence was as much a rejection of romanticism as high modernism would claim to be. At least this can be said of the general European forms of aestheticism, decadence, and symbolism. But in the context of England, matters are complicated in a manner that will have profound consequences for modernism. In order to see how, we must turn to the other legacy of high romanticism in which the problem of society is grounded in the culture idea.

The culture idea as it develops in the mid-nineteenth century was obviously a response to a host of familiar Victorian anxieties: working class agitation, the challenge of science to traditional religion, and the fear that material progress was actually evidence of social and spiritual decline. Yet, what needs to be understood is the way in which the culture idea comes to be shaped by the very forces of modernity it sought to oppose. As
a romantic idea, culture was posited in opposition to not only rationalism, but to the scene of conscious cultivation of civilization: the schools and universities. The romantic culture idea was the product of nature’s education. This central faith—and faith is the word—would never be completely abandoned by figures like Wordsworth and Coleridge. It would be redirected towards the traditional institution that offered resistance to worldly materialism: the established Church. The later turn towards tradition by the first generation of English romantics did not, therefore, constitute a complete surrender to the dominant socio-economic order. Published in 1830, Coleridge’s On the Constitution of Church and State could model the culture question on the idea of a National Church through which a lay Clerisy would promote culture and its values. Given the romantic antipathy towards formal education, it does not surprise that he avoids making schools and the universities the center of this activity. Yet, ironically, this is precisely where Coleridge’s ideas would be most felt. While the work’s more immediate effects would be on the developing Broad Church movement, strangely, it would become an important influence upon the High Church Anglicans of the Tractarian movement—the Oxford Movement that would leave such an impression on Matthew Arnold and the version of culture he develops in Culture and Anarchy. By bring the question of the legitimacy and authority of the Church of England to the fore, Newman and the Tractarians also inadvertently brought the question of the role of the ancient universities, still under ecclesiastical control, into the purview of the culture debate. The Oxford Movement was routed just as the university was beginning to transform itself into a center of national culture. From the mid-century on, the ancient universities were increasingly becoming the focus of research and professionalization, and as such, artistic and literary production
as well as criticism became increasingly tied to their fortunes. Most importantly, the centrality of the connection of Oxford and Cambridge with the Church of England gradually diminished. Central in this regard are the successive waves of influence from Germany: not only the scientific study of human history and language—historicism and philology—but the very idea of the university as the center of national cultural effort. The university as the site of transmission of humanistic learning was being redefined, but as long as humanists could claim the high ground of culture with its religious overtones of moral seriousness, they could resist the claims that only the scientific disciplines offered both truth and utility. Far from being irrelevant, the study of ancient languages and literature could provide a useful means of thinking about the present.

The emergence of anthropology struck at the foundation of this humanist faith by redefining culture itself. E. B. Tylor’s *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871, was not some Germanic import that insular-minded opponents could dismiss; rather, it was the product of a positivism that—despite its theoretical elaboration by Comte—was quite at home in British scientific thought. The notion that “culture”—Tylor’s concept is singular—represented unconscious structuring principles that determined the behavior of groups and individuals would create a lasting anxiety among writers and intellectuals whose work was predicated upon the belief in human freedom. Tylor’s object of study, “primitive culture,” was revealed to be bound by custom, superstition, and rigid social hierarchy, not the savage source of unrestrained freedom and vitality associated with Romanticism and Rousseau. Christopher Herbert has argued that the culture thesis was an attempt to “rediscover” prohibitions in the primitive basis of society that replace the role that Christianity once served in Western societies—a means of restricting and
controlling the unsettling and anarchic forces of anomie. But of course, to assign culture such a role is predicated upon the belief in the disruptive danger and essential reality of anomic desire itself. Hence, the emergence of the culture thesis complicates the interpretation of “savagery.” For writers and classical scholars steeped in the traditions of literary humanism, the interpretation of primitive societies would have a special significance: for throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, archaeologists had begun literally to uncover the “savage” origins of classical, and particularly Greek, civilization. Hence, for these writers, a clearer picture of the primitive basis of Western identity was intimately bound to questions of freedom and determinism, the origins of religion and the status of Christianity, the nature of art and literary tradition, and the extent to which modern civilization was the result of rational progress. And most importantly, the “Apollonian” reading of Greece upon which mid-Victorian intellectuals had asserted the contemporary significance of Hellenic civilization was to be progressively unhinged.

As a result, British classicists began to see the origins of art and literature issuing from religious experience and ritual worship. Yet, the claims for culture as a science, articulating deterministic “laws” of human development, reading the “savage” as static and custom-bound, and relegating art to a subordinate status within the larger system of the “complex whole,” created a conflict that humanistically-minded classicists and literary writers were to resolve by rejecting the strict determinism of Tylorian anthropology while retaining the notion of “culture” as both a system and a humanistic ideal. Tylor’s culture idea offered the possibility—against his intentions—of saving the humanistic construction of culture through the concept of “survivals”: the way in which
certain cultural forms persist long after their original function and meaning has been lost. Yet the idea of “survivals,” when redefined in terms of “tradition,” offered a means of asserting the continuing availability of past values and modes of being; the sense of the belatedness of the modern world might be overcome. However, this conceptual and rhetorical maneuver would bring into the open a problematic that is central to the emergence of modernism. How can culture as a realm of autonomy and self-conscious freedom and creativity be reconciled with culture as a structure of unconscious habits and beliefs? This problem is all the more vexing if the dominant culture is regarded as decadent, philistine, or otherwise unbearable. The first writers to register these anxieties were late Victorian writers.

For example, the ambiguities of the term “culture” allowed writers like Walter Pater to link the aspirational culture of humanism with the culture thesis by shifting the grounds upon which the debate over the significance of the pagan past for late Christianity has been conducted. If the debate previously centered upon the morality or immorality of specific ancient practices and attitudes toward Virtue, the Good, the Beautiful, and the like, Walter Pater would try to elide these moral questions by translating them into an ethics of perception. Pater would offer the aesthetic, not for its own sake as has so often been assumed, but for life’s sake, as a means of breaking out of the habitualized experience of modernity by recovering the Greek mode of apprehension: Pater’s version of Arnold’s Hellenic “spontaneity of consciousness.” Yet habit, in Tylor’s idea, is precisely the work that culture accomplishes. From this perspective, aestheticism is the enemy of culture, as Pater’s detractors argued.
It is here that we can see how Pater, despite the general modernist rejection of him, is central to any account of modernism. Both his criticism and his fiction were produced not only in the midst of the transformation of the culture idea, but at the central site in which those transformations were being formulated. Pater’s Oxford had become, under the influence of William Jowett, a place where the fostering of spontaneity of consciousness was cast in terms of fostering habits of thought that would serve the professions and the imperial administration. Pater’s aesthetic consciousness worked against this ideal. It is a rejection of noesis in favor of an intuitive grasp of experience; in such an aesthetic experience, the self is able to express its true freedom in the contemplation of art. Only art offers this freedom because our relationship with the world cannot be grasped through conceptual schema. In this, Pater’s aestheticism anticipates one side of modernism’s desire to penetrate through the encrustations of habitual perception: a goal shared by imagism and T. S. Eliot’s “objective correlative.” Pater’s early essay, “Coleridge’s Writings,” expresses this classical skepticism by undercutting the claim that art is to be judged by moral standards sanctioned by the dominant culture. This position is most radically presented in The Renaissance where the fugitive nature of consciousness can only attain some form of stability through the experience of art. However, Pater does not, as is often supposed, ultimately maintain this position. His novel, Marius the Epicurean exploits the new institutional discourse of Tylorian culture in an attempt to posit the basis upon which the diaphanous self might have some connection with other selves. The aestheticism of Pater seeks to withdraw from philistine modernity in the name of the cultivation of heightened sensibility only to embrace the culture idea as a means of saving art from subjective imprisonment. In this,
Pater sets the pattern that the modernists will recapitulate: the early assertion of subjectivism and egoism, which modulates into the need to make art constitutive of a whole way of life.

Pater’s role in the development of modernism is occluded not only by his rejection by figures like T. S. Eliot, but by the way in which literary decadence and symbolism distort his importance for later developments. Oscar Wilde’s literary decadence is a response to the idea of civilization as overwrought consciousness and decrepitude. The diagnosis of civilization as decadent is different from the earlier romantic opposition to industrialism and rationalism, which is grounded in revolutionary hope and the possibility of transcendence. Of course, the real decadence, for Wilde, is not to be found in advanced literature, but in the dominant society, and this attitude is central to the modernist desire for rupture with the immediate past, especially the perceived failure of decadence in opposing the real decadence of contemporary civilization. Whatever Bloomian anxieties the modernists may have harbored towards the aesthetes and decadents, Wilde’s diagnosis and his solution represent the same structural maneuver that the modernists—most clearly Ezra Pound—will attempt.

Wilde’s university education coincided with the redefinition of Hellenism and its role as the progenitor of European culture. Both anthropology and archeology had remade the Greeks. The “discovery” of primitivism within classical antiquity would be received by writers and intellectuals whose literary and artistic assumptions had been shaped by Victorian Hellenism. They were confronted both with new unsettling problems and new opportunities in the culture thesis. The anthropological notion of culture sought to undo the relationship betweenethnos and humanism, and it would lead to an interpretation that
placed “savagery” at the heart of the Greek experience: Greek “sanity” as interpreted through the exemplar of Periclean Athens gives way to archaic Hellenes driven by dark forces of irrationalism, but also an attractive vitalism and energy. In his novel, *A Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde will come to see that the animal instincts—a return of savagery which is the companion of decadent civilization—can only be redressed by seeing culture in terms of the survival of Hellenistic impulses that might provide the basis of a new culture. In this, Wilde translates Pater’s interpretation of ritual and aesthetic sensibility as a means of making art shape culture into his famous paradox that life imitates art. But the ambiguous nature of “savagery” and the homoerotic impulses of Wilde’s Hellenism would make his version something that few moderns would embrace.

Wilde’s disastrous trial and conviction would cast a disparaging light on his Greek ideals and it would overshadow his serious engagement with the aesthetics/culture problem through a New Hellenism grounded in both the archaic and the classical reading of the Greeks. Arthur Symons, who had been a promoter of decadent literature, changed his terminology, if not his theories, embracing modern literature under the name of symbolism. Wilde’s version of decadence had offered a direct confrontation with the decadence of contemporary civilization. In this, Wilde illustrated the decadent dynamic identified by Nietzsche: both the recognition of one’s own complicity in decadence, and a resistance to that decadence. Symons, on the other hand, seeks to radicalize the Paternian aesthetic consciousness by denying any connection between art and life. The habitual responses fostered by a decadent fallen world are not so much to be opposed as they are to be overcome through aesthetic withdrawal. Symons’ version of the aesthetic is truly what Pater’s is often purported to be: a Schopenhauerian release from the tyranny of will.
Culture is merely the embodiment of habit and custom that destroys artistic perception and the escape it offers. Symons’ poetry pursues strategies that are, in essence, proto-imagism. But beyond any direct influence he had on the early twentieth-century moderns, his significance lies in two related ideas.

First, the complete aestheticism he advances is a defensive gesture that seeks to protect literary values from the philistine herd. Like the French symbolists whom he admired, Symons seeks a hermetic art that finds its audience in the coterie. Unlike Wilde, whose work was aimed at popular reception, Symons views any art that finds such appeal to be non-art. This sets up the oft-proclaimed charge of elitism often leveled against modernism. As Ortega y Gasset would observe, “Modern art […] will always have the masses against it. It is essentially unpopular; moreover, it is anti-popular […]. It divides the public into two groups: one very small, formed by those who are favorably inclined towards it; another very large—the hostile majority” (5). Symons, as the conduit for French symbolism into English, certainly helped to inaugurate this tendency in modernism. Though, as the example of Pater and Wilde suggests, the later moderns will find this more of a dilemma than an ideal. Michael Tratner, in Modernism and Mass Politics, has usefully analyzed the political goals of the modernists and the fears that motivated them in the context of such figures as Gustave Le Bon and Ortega y Gasset where the masses are seen as both a social threat and potential weapon against nineteenth-century individualism. “Many of the experimental features of modernist texts,” he says, “may be understood as efforts by authors to disrupt their own conscious personalities (and the conscious personalities of their readers) in order to reveal and perhaps alter the socially structured mentality hidden inside each person's unconscious"
(3). Tratner shows that, far from simply reacting negatively to the masses, the modernists sought to write “from the mass-mind.” He argues that “In collectivist theories, a person who retreats from social life, from the herd, does not become independent, as individualists claim, but rather suffers distortions of personality and of mental functioning” (8). Tratner’s project is interesting in that it reveals the extent to which collectivist ideas informed modernism’s attack on individualism. “Modernism was not,” he asserts, “[...] a rejection of mass culture, but rather an effort to produce a mass culture, perhaps for the first time, to produce a culture distinctive of the twentieth century, which Le Bon called ‘The Era of the Crowd’” (2). Nevertheless, his argument undervalues the importance of individualism and egoism in the early twentieth century.

Secondly, the withdrawal of hermetic art from the general public mimics another withdrawal occurring at the same time. The centralization and specialization of critical discourse within the university was dividing the audience along similar lines. While the specifics of this transformation will be examined below, the dual withdrawal of advanced art and academically informed criticism from the public sphere inaugurated the surrender of that space to the forces of mass culture. Symons’ friend, Rémy de Gourmont, grasped the significance of both retreats. His criticism seeks to dialectically overcome the dead end of a complete aestheticism by asserting the vital role of the arts in the addressing the crisis of modern culture: a task that would animate Ezra Pound.

Nevertheless, the early twentieth-century moderns would begin by following the aestheticist path even as they sought to redefine it as something that overcomes aestheticist assumptions. But such redefinition tended to be more stylistic than conceptual. T. E. Hulme’s sustained attack on romanticism in favor of the classicism of
the new art is particularly instructive regarding the way the moderns accommodate and exploit shifts in institutional categories. Given the romantic pedigree of the culture concept, Hulme’s early career is an effort to avoid its assumptions at all costs. His rejection by the academic establishment led him to wage continuous warfare against university categories and disciplines. The new literature, for him, is in essence, anti-culture. He insists upon not only the discontinuity of art with its romantic past, but an aesthetic grounded in a radical breaking of habitual response. Part of this rejection is grounded in a replacement of history with the category of time: Henri Bergson’s “les données immédiates de la conscience.” Hulme’s aesthetic is deployed not in the name of Symons’ escapism; rather, it is an attempt to grasp transcendent reality masked by our habitual responses to a stereotyped world. The role of art is to put us back in some relationship with the world as is presents itself to pure consciousness. Yet, as Hulme comes under the influence of L’Action Française, he rejects the Bergsonian élan vital as a species of romanticism. Adopting the position of an “anti-humanist,” Hulme defends the idea of “geometric art” as a means of representing the absolute discontinuity between “vital” human experience and the “anti-vital” religious attitude that sees the incommensurability between life and the eternal: Hulme’s description of original sin. Yet, like Pater—however much Hulme would shudder—he is driven to posit art’s efficacy in the world on the basis of the culture thesis. In appropriating the theoretical framework of Wilhelm Worringuer, Hulme seeks a new justification for “geometric art” in primitive psychology; and in so doing, he reinscribes the problem of history and “tradition” that his anti-humanism sought to erase.
Ezra Pound’s collaboration with Hulme seems strange, given that Pound never sought the discontinuity with the past that Hulme promoted. Indeed, romanticism and Hellenism would never be Pound’s objects of attack, and the culture idea would be central to his conception of literature. Yet, he represents the reverse side of Hulme’s critical effort as an anti-humanist: for Pound, authentic Hellenism had been hijacked by the university academic. Hence Pound’s critical effort is directed at disentangling Hellenism from its academic categories. The authenticity of Western culture was dependent upon the survival of a Greek mode of being that was the genesis of the “spirit of romance” and is still available to advanced literature as the primary means of shaping a new civilization. His struggle to develop his own modernist idiom was blocked by his dependence upon the humanist assumptions that underwrote his early version of culture. Yet, in coming to a more anthropologically based version, Pound bases his theory of imagism upon the way poetic language can work directly upon the unconscious basis of culture as a whole way of life. That organic vision of culture would also lead him to the explicit fascism that would destroy his career. What ever we may think about the idea of culture as inherently liberal and liberating, Pound’s thought demonstrates the Janus-faced nature of the concept. Culture is easily deployed as a rebuke to democracy as simply procedural machinery incapable of nurturing authentic intellectual and artistic germination in modernity. It can also be a means of fantasizing a cultural purity that can easily accompany invocations of organic society. The inability to successfully process the relation between humanism and anthropology—between culture as a conscious
activity and as the unconscious basis of such activity—leads both Hulme and Pound into a political “solution” that—besides being repellent—covers over the problematic Pater had inaugurated.

Ironically, only T. S. Eliot would meet the challenge Pater announces. And if Eliot’s own politics seems repellent to many, it is at least important that we recognized how his culturalist thought has shaped our own, even in rejection. Like Hulme, Eliot’s early thought displays a great distrust of the culture idea and its romantic associations. His critical efforts cover over his anxiety towards his own recapitulation of the culture problematic. If culture is both the most conscious and the most unconscious element of human life, then how can these be reconciled? Eliot’s early attempts to confront the problem are made in the name of literature, and his first name for it is “tradition.” His description whereby poets are conscious agents who grasp the tradition through “great labour” is predicated, though he is reticent to say so, upon the unconscious susceptibility of poetic consciousness to aesthetic feeling. The act of acquiring the tradition is partly conscious, but it is also grounded in the poet’s unconscious acquisition of the sensibility that informs the tradition. By these means, a poet who produces authentically new work will also fit in with the dead. In this way, the present alters the ordering of the past. But Eliot will not remain within this paradigm. He is progressively forced to bring this unconscious element into his critical discourse, largely through his religious commitments in tandem with his anthropological reading. If, in Eliot’s view, the nineteenth century had confused the idea of aesthetics and religion, anthropology threatened to simply make religion into a department within culture as a whole. His turn towards social criticism is in part a recognition that poetry alone is not capable of
producing the renaissance that Pound hoped for. Nor can he posit the kind of solution offered by Hulme: that culture and religion are separated by an unbridgeable gap or discontinuity. During World War Two and after, Eliot was haunted by the idea that a civilization can exist without any culture at all: a condition worse in its own way than savagery. Tellingly, he does not invoke Hellenism as some essential element of Western identity; he realizes that Hellenism is not a living tradition for the vast majority of people; and a culture must be founded upon a living presence that can operate both consciously and unconsciously. Despite his rejection of the nineteenth century replacement of religion with poetry, he realizes that aesthetics and culture are dependent upon a relationship with religion: a descriptive task he takes up in *The Idea of a Christian Society* and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. Eliot would accomplish a number of things at once. First, his assertion of a relation rather than an identity between religion and aesthetics opened up the critical formalism that made the study of literature both something more than the study of form for its own sake, and also something less than the study of values “in” a particular piece of literature. The work or art becomes an incarnation of sensibility without being reducible to a statement of it. As such, the study of literature has its own specificity while still being constitutive of culture. And so it is with culture itself. Culture is an incarnation of a whole way of life, and what structures its integrity is the religious ideal. Hence aesthetics, culture and religion each contribute to what might be termed a gestalt, but one in which each element maintains its own specificity. One can have, for instance, religion without culture, but then religion is merely a cultus more or less tolerated by the dominant society. Such a society is not a culture because it is simply a negative structure without positive ideals. Likewise, art in such a society losses its
ability to do its work because it is shorn of the traditional framework that gives it depth and meaning. Most importantly, Eliot’s intervention put the culture concept on the academic agenda. The very problem that the culture idea was meant to address—the contestation of instrumental reason—had emerged as the central value term of the most rationalist of sites: the university. The elaboration of culture as a scientific object of study had ensured that the academy would be the place where it would assume institutional shape. And likewise, literature would also find its audience there. Modernism established its rhetorical and aesthetic coherence in a time of crisis of meaning for the humanities: a crisis that was imagined in terms of a more general crisis of Western civilization. Despite the aspirations of the modernists to meet this crisis by creating a literature that would speak from the mass mind, its appreciation came to depend upon the university. The accumulation of “cultural capital” in institutions of higher learning progressively undermines the legitimacy of criticism and literature outside its purview. The late nineteenth-century writer might take pride in the coterie audience, but the momentum of emerging mass culture at the turn of the century led the modernists increasingly to forge their audience through the university. Modernism would win its cultural place, not by speaking from the mass mind as many of modernists hoped, but by merging with the interests of the academy.

1.2 Institutional Dialectics

If this project seeks to grasp the way in which modernism participates in this revaluation of the idea of “culture,” and how this institutional paradigm helped to establish the terrain in which modernism would develop its key positions, my interest
does not lie in the well-worn critical practice of hunting down specific debts to anthropological ideas and allusions to myth in, say, *The Waste Land*. Rather, I focus upon the epistemological consequences of the anthropological culture idea upon how the modernists sought to reimagine art’s centrality in what they saw as a posthumanist age. Literary modernism emerged at a time when something called English Studies was first being constructed. But even more important, the grounds of authority in the humanities at large, based on the study and transmission of “culture,” was dramatically shifting. The artistic practice of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exploited the increasingly unstable sense of this concept. On the one hand, culture indicates a specific category of value—high culture, the aspirational self, for instance—and on the other, the value-free, relativist, “scientific” object of anthropology. The Anglo-American modernists I discuss all use the culture idea in both senses: indeed, they creatively and opportunistically blur them. This, in turn, allows us to see how writers who invoke the terms “anti-humanism” and “dehumanization” can also describe themselves in terms of “classicism” and “tradition.” Clearly what authorizes this kind of thought is something more than questions of aesthetics and politics; indeed, what underwrites the discourse of modernism is a subtle shift in institutional categories. Recovering the impact of these shifts necessitates an examination not only of literary works and statements of doctrine, but also discourses that may at first sight appear tangential to aesthetic concerns. By tracing the context of the way anthropological culture challenges aspirational culture—a moment that throws literature into crisis—the nature of modernism’s oppositional strategies can be more fully understood. In particular, “classicism,” repeatedly offered as a symptom of hegemonic and authoritarian tendencies of these writers, can be located as
an attempt produce an oppositional discourse capable of initiating a critique of the
normative processes of modernity and the instrumental rationality that underpins them.
In producing such a discourse, the moderns I discuss sought to create the basis of a
“culture” that could be sustained as a process of self-reflexive questioning, the goals of
which were not simply reactionary. This is not to deny the importance of authoritarian
politics for the writers I discuss. But it is to see that positing a simple and direct relation
between politics and literature can be a reductive enterprise that risks distortion of how
literary paradigms develop and what complex of needs they respond to.8

These needs are not only personal, but institutional in the widest sense. Mary
Douglas, in her influential How Institutions Think, presents a model of institutional
formation and “behavior” based on a rereading of the theories of Ludwik Fleck and Emile
Durkheim.9 Such a sociological perspective offers a particular advantage in that it resists
the problem of describing the idea of culture in terms generated by the culture concept
itself. “Minimally,” she says, “an institution is only a convention,” and “by definition, a
convention is self-policing” (46). Yet, conventions are themselves insecure unless they
can be grounded in other institutions: “The conditions for stable conventions to arise are
much more stringent than it might seem. Communities do not grow up into little
institutions and these do not grow into big ones by any continuous process. For a
convention to turn into a legitimate social institution it needs a parallel cognitive
convention to sustain it” (46).

For Douglas, institutions construct their self-sustaining stability by being
grounded in an analogy drawn from nature. And indeed, it is this grounding that makes it
so difficult to uncover the conventional basis of institutional categories. As Douglas
states, “The stabilizing principle is the naturalization of social classifications. There needs to be an analogy by which the formal structure of a crucial set of social relations is found in the physical world, or in the supernatural world, or in eternity, anywhere, so long as it is not seen as a socially contrived arrangement. When the analogy is applied back and forth from one set of social relations to another and from these back to nature, its recurring formal structure becomes easily recognized and endowed with self-validating truth” (48). Such analogies most often rely upon “superficial resemblance”; yet, “the resemblances that provide favorable social analogies are primarily constituted for legitimizing social institutions, and they are not intended for inference about physical things” (52). Hence, she argues, “Sameness is not a quality that can be recognized in things themselves; it is conferred upon elements within a coherent scheme” (59).

That the culture concept, in both its humanistic and anthropological senses, relies upon such a naturalizing analogy as Douglas describes seems to go almost without saying. It is the naturalizing metaphor par excellence in that it authorizes human artifice in terms of natural processes. Despite the clear connections between humanistic and anthropological concepts of culture, all of us, I think, sense the way in which this word can shift its meaning, complicate itself. Nevertheless, we also sense its inevitability for how we think about ourselves now. Modernism, as I understand it, in part issues from this epistemological shift in which the arts threaten to become subordinate within an ethnographic conception of culture that proposes itself as a science of human societies. From the ethnographer’s perspective, “high culture” is simply one element in a larger systematic whole of general culture without special claim to spiritual and intellectual authority. The anthropological culture idea would challenge the claim of art to be
Matthew Arnold’s privileged “criticism of life.” As Douglas observes, “Something happens to the insides of our heads” as such subtle institutional reorderings occur; “The change is not a deliberate or conscious choice. Institutions veil their influence, so that we hardly notice any change” (103). Nevertheless, it is still possible to recapture some idea of the impact of such alterations of our to our conceptual schema, despite their self-effacing tendencies. “The thinkability of the social order,” Douglas notes, “is beset with infinite regress. Institutional influences become apparent through a focus on unthinkable and unmemorables, events that we can note at the same time as we observe them slipping beyond recall” (76). This project can be seen as an attempt to remember. Part of this attempt necessitates a recognition that such “infinite regress” involves not only theoretical and abstract institutions, but also ones that tend to come in brick and mortar that represent the scene of legitimation for the former.

English modernism emerged at a time in which artistic practice was increasingly interconnected with developments in newly professionalized academic disciplines that had achieved autonomy from the explicitly religious purposes of their institutions. Those institutions themselves had undergone a vast transformation, becoming national centers of research, repositories of cultural expertise, and increasingly, the entryway into professional careers of all types. All of the writers I discuss—Pater, Wilde, Hulme, Pound and Eliot—began their careers at the ancient universities or their American Ivy League counterparts. At least three of these—Pater, Pound and Eliot—pursued academic careers, and Hulme, though sent down from university, was something of an independent
Though the Oxbridge system—and the same could be said of Eliot's Harvard—still centered upon a largely classical education, the framework in which the classics were studied was dramatically realigned by the emergence of the anthropological culture thesis.

The humanism of the nineteenth century was always invested, often overtly, in theistic values. While religious doubt would make steady progress among the educated classes of Britain and America, the arts could still be valued as a spiritual equivalent of, or perhaps consolation for, a fading Christian faith. With the slow decline of overt theological humanism in the mid-century, the essential Hellenism always at the core of the humanist idea increasingly takes over the spiritual role from its Hebraic counterpart, and the extreme forms of this “New Hellenism” can be seen in aestheticism and the decadence of the late nineteenth century. And yet, the very extremity of these latter movements already registers the crisis of the arts, and the humanities as a whole, in the wake of the new science of anthropology. Culture, once the preserve of artists, writers, critics, and men-of-letters, finds its privileged spiritual status threatened by a new discipline backed by the massive prestige Victorian society accorded to science. The twentieth century moderns are, from this perspective, not only struggling against their implication in the positions of their late nineteenth century precursors, but more importantly, seeking to redirect and redefine that inheritance, and ultimately attempting to recover the high ground of culture in the name of the future.

In order to better grasp the shadowy nature of the institutional shifts modernism inherits, we need to look at the aesthetic problem that modernity itself announces for itself. Indeed, that problem—the problem of novelty—becomes the crucial dynamic of modernity as a whole. In what follows, I want to briefly examine the way in which the
category of the aesthetic emerges precisely within the question of the status of the classical tradition. This will allow us to see why the Herderian culture idea and Hellenism have such an intertwined history. I then look at how these categories attain their normative status within the university, and how institutional needs themselves shape ideas like Hellenism and culture. This background is essential to the chapters that follow, and I end with a brief description of them.

1.3 Hellenism, Humanism, and Anthropological Culture

“Classicism” had, of course, been a locus of Western cultural authority since the renaissance. Twentieth-century modernism emerges in the aftermath of a transformation of this legitimating authority of Western civilization during the enlightenment. Unlike the antiquarianism of the renaissance humanists, the neo-classicism of the enlighteners brought into focus a central conflict at the heart of the unfolding modern age: the legitimacy of the historical present, and indeed, the future itself. As Jürgen Habermas argues, “[. . . ] Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; it has to create its normativity out of itself. Modernity sees itself cast back upon itself without any possibility of escape.”10 Given the stake Habermas has in seeing modernity primarily in philosophical terms, as well as his interest in bringing the implications of the enlightenment project to completion, his argument elides the way in which the experience of modernity generates, not simply its own rational critique, but its own resistance to instrumental reason itself. Nevertheless, his description of the self-reflexivity constitutive of the idea of “the modern” indicates both its desire for freedom and the entrapment that desire engenders.
Further, Habermas rightly admits that this self-consciousness does not first arise in philosophical discourse: “The problem of grounding modernity out of itself first comes to consciousness in the realm of aesthetic criticism” (8). He has in mind, of course, the protracted querelle des anciens et des modernes. While Habermas is unclear about why aesthetics should be that which forces the problems of modernity into consciousness, one reason lies in the centrality of art in renaissance humanism at the birth of modernity, a trend furthered by the split between reason and faith during the reformation. Art becomes uncertainly poised between the sacred and the secular. The initial late seventeenth-century phase of the debate centered upon the idea of “progress.” The Battle of the Books, as the debate was known in England, manifests the problem of relating the past to the present. The debate was cast in terms of relative moral value of the ancients as opposed to the moderns. It indicates an argument over human nature and the possibility of general human progress cast in terms of aesthetics. Moderns like Charles Perrault asserted the idea of progress, both moral and intellectual, as the ability of the moderns to surpass the ancients. The defenders of the ancients, such as Corneille and Boileau-Despréaux, could be portrayed as slavish imitators and worshipers of tradition; yet they saw themselves as the defenders of universal principles discovered by the ancients and validated by reason itself. The debate over the beautiful becomes a debate over reason, morality, and human progress. The category of the aesthetic that later developed in the eighteenth century indicates the crisis of enlightenment thought regarding sensation and conduct. At its heart, the debate centered upon the “moral sense” and the interpretation of “human nature” in regard to historical development.
Hence, the *querelle* brought into sharp relief modernity’s historical self-consciousness and the problem of grounding the moral sense in the self-reflexive acts of consciousness. But most of all, it highlighted the problem of “taste.” As Gilbert Highet notes, “First, [classicism] meant beauty and nobility in poetry, in art, in philosophy, and in life. For all its worthiness, this sounds an obvious ideal; but we should remember that throughout the preceding age men talked not so much of beauty as of correctness, of *les biensèances* [. . .].”\(^{15}\) Clearly, the centrality of taste in the debate over the status of art in modern society is not hard to understand: the category of taste links the concern for aesthetic propriety with the concern for social propriety. Surveying the importance of eighteenth-century concepts of taste for the development of the human sciences of the next century, Hans-Georg Gadamer observes, “The concept of taste undoubtedly implies a mode of knowing. The mark of good taste is being able to stand back from ourselves and our private preferences. Thus taste, in its essential nature, is not a private but a social phenomenon of the first order.”\(^{16}\) For Gadamer, the social dimension of taste plays a key role in the development of the humanistic tradition: a tradition he seeks to recover for hermeneutics.\(^{17}\) This social quality expresses itself as “tact.” Gadamer observes, “By ‘tact’ we understand a special sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations and how to behave in them, from which knowledge from general principles does not suffice. Hence an essential part of tact is that it is tacit and unformulable. One can say something tactfully; but that will always mean that someone passes over something tactfully and leaves it unsaid, and it is tactless to express what one can pass over. But to pass over something does not mean to avert one’s gaze from it, but to keep an eye on it in such a way that rather than knock into it, one slips by it. Thus tact helps one to preserve
distance” (16). This distance that underlies tact and taste also connects them as “modes of knowing” for the individual within the social whole. Here, self-cultivation becomes a means, not simply of enhancing the atomistic self, but of becoming what one really is, of realizing the potential of the self as a complete member of society.

The concept of Bildung, for Gadamer, is the center of this ideal. He notes, “[Bildung] was perhaps the greatest idea of the eighteenth century, and it is this concept which is the atmosphere breathed by the human sciences of the nineteenth century, even if they are unable to offer any epistemological justification for it” (9). Bildung relies upon an analogy from nature, and as such, it suggests a mode of becoming that transcends practical interest. “[T]he result of Bildung,” he argues, “is not achieved in the manner of a technical construction, but grows out of an inner process of formation and cultivation, and therefore constantly remains in a state of continual Bildung. It is not accidental that in this respect the word Bildung resembles the Greek physis. Like nature, Bildung has no goals outside itself” (11). Hence, it functions as what Douglas calls a naturalizing metaphor; it presents a model of human society, of culture, in which the transmission of the past can take place. It is here that Gadamer locates the institutional assumptions of nineteenth-century historical studies: “[. . .] in acquired Bildung nothing disappears, but everything is preserved. Bildung is a genuine historical idea, and because of this historical character of ‘preservation’ it is important for understanding the human sciences” (12).

This connection between Bildung and community is inaugurated, according to Gadamer, by Gambattista Vico’s concept of sensus communis: a human faculty for acquiring the sensibility of the group. Indeed, Vico argues that this capacity is what
establishes a culture in the first place. As Gadamer notes, “[t]he main thing for our
purposes is that here sensus communis obviously does not mean only that general faculty
in all men but the sense that founds a community. According to Vico, what gives the
human will its direction is not the abstract universality of reason but the concrete
universality represented by the community of a group, a people, a nation, or the whole
human race” (21). Vico’s formulation represents a direct challenge to enlightenment
assumptions about the capacity of reason alone to establish human universals. Indeed, he
registers the way in which a counter-enlightenment critique would develop. This can be
seen most decisively in the writings of J.G. Herder, who was establishing a way of
thinking about human societies that would theorize a link between collectivities and
individual development—between Kultur and Bildung—that helps us see the possibilities
and conflicts inherent in the attempt to bring ethnological concepts to bear upon
humanistic ones.9 Gadamer notes the significance of Herder’s intervention in this
regard: “The period of German classicism had not only brought about a renewal of
literature and aesthetic criticism, which overcame the outmoded baroque ideal of taste
and of enlightenment rationalism; it had also given the idea of humanity, and the ideal of
enlightened reason, a fundamentally new content. More than anyone, Herder transcended
the perfectionism of the enlightenment with his new ideal of ‘cultivating the human’
(Bildung zum Menschen) and thus prepared the ground for the growth of the historical
sciences in the nineteenth century” (9). In his effort to make Kultur into a weapon
against the assumptions of enlightenment rationalism, Herder attempts to legitimize his
concept through the divine gaze: God has placed each nation in its place so as to allow it
to develop its unique potential. For him, it is the diversity of ways of life that, taken
together, lead to the true enlightenment of mankind. Herder's articulation of this concept shows how intimately to religious ideals both the concept of ethnos and aspirational culture were from their inception: the tension between Volk and Humanität is reconciled by Herder through the concept of Bildung in which distinct “cultures” arise through what is in essence an aesthetic process: cultivation of the collective mirroring the process of individual aesthetic education. The theological underpinnings of Herderean Kultur would be further complicated by the notion of Anti-normativität and Anti-Begreiflichkeit, or the non-conceptual nature of historical reality, that was central to nineteenth-century German Historicism. In short, historical reality is not graspable by concepts; rather, it manifests itself in the aesthetic and moral outlook of a people; it is spirit or sensibility. Herder’s counter-enlightenment maneuver would be decisive for the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century. But as importantly, he would offer a conceptual framework that asserted a continuity of Bildung and Kultur that could be deployed as critique of a modernity become hostile aesthetic values. Hence, as much as the idea of aesthetics comes to dominate thinking about self cultivation and the nature of collective identity, its main task became that of providing theoretical leverage against the forces of rationalization, centralization, and bureaucratization of the social, and most importantly, the intellectual order.

In Gadamer’s view, the main reason for the abandonment of the Bildung concept was the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. In restricting taste to a formal operation of the subjective mind divorced from its social and historical dimension, Kant displaces the question of culture to the margins of philosophy. In so doing, knowledge becomes restricted to the “theoretical and practical use of reason” (40). “The importance of this,”
Gadamer argues, “cannot be easily overestimated, for what was here surrendered was the element in which philological and historical studies lived, and when they sought to ground themselves methodologically under the name of ‘human sciences’ side by side with the natural sciences, it was the only possible source of their full self-understanding. Now Kant’s transcendental analysis made it impossible to acknowledge the truth claim of traditionary materials, to the cultivation and study of which they devoted themselves. But this meant that the uniqueness of the human sciences lost its legitimacy [. . . .] In discrediting any kind of theoretical knowledge except that of natural science, it compelled the human sciences to rely on the methodology of the natural sciences in conceptualizing themselves” (41). The discovery of truth becomes dependent upon method.

Historicism and classical philology, conceived along these scientific lines, would have an increasing influence outside of Germany, especially in Britain and America. Yet, in these contexts, the new methods faced the resistance of earlier modes of classicism. The ancient universities in England were, until late in the nineteenth century, largely the preserve of Anglican clergy who saw their institutional mission in terms of theological humanism. While the work of a scholar like Friedrich August Wolf made his presence felt in the Oxbridge system, a complete submission to German methodology made slow progress. Yet, the conditions for change would come from an unlikely quarter. The Hellenism of German romanticism would elevate the Greeks to the status of Western exemplars in early nineteenth century Britain.

This represents a major ideological shift. It is important to remember that the “ancients” recognized by the eighteenth-century querelle had been decidedly Roman.
Even Alexander Pope’s famous translation of the *Iliad* used Roman names for the Greek gods. In this, the Augustans were the children of the Renaissance. As Gilbert Highet observes, “[m]en of the Renaissance, like Montaigne, would speak of ‘the ancients’, but in practice think of the Romans; they would quote fifth-rate Latin poets like Silius Italicus freely and first-rate Greek poets like Homer sparsely. This attitude was now reversed” (360). Through the efforts of J. Winckelmann—though he was acquainted with only Roman copies of Greek art—the origins of the West are re-imagined. Through the filter of Lessing’s *Lacoön*, Goethe’s Weimar Classicism, and the poetry of Heine, and Hölderlin, the significance of the Greeks would be impressed on the minds of their English admirers.11

“Hellenism,” often invokes images of Winckelmann’s “quiet grandeur” and ideal serenity: something that strikes us as romantic nostalgia. Yet, this view of the Greeks seemed to be ratified by learned scholarship that focused primarily on the fifth-century Athenian achievement. The Greeks come to be interpreted, not as eastern, oriental Others, but as the beginning of “the West” itself. For the early Victorians, the Greeks were either rationalists or idealists. Hence, Greek life was interpreted in terms of philosophical categories. One characteristic result was that the Greeks could be enlisted in various intellectual, political and theological debates. For example, George Grote would write his *History of Greece* on Utilitarian principles.12 Jowett’s Plato is a moralist whose method is the Socratic inquiry into the nature of the Good, the Beautiful, and the True: the ability to question the authority of received dogma and to discover universals whose specific manifestations may change under historical conditions but whose principles remain constant. In this way “the greatest uninspired writing,” as he called
Plato’s dialogues, could be seen as speaking the truths of Christ in a different historical context—and in his loosely “Hegelian” dialectic, the Absolute is read as a kind of Providential concept, conceived as a constellation of universals in which knowledge and virtue are synonymous. British intellectuals would resist a “complete historicism” because their theological commitments ran counter to the relativistic spirit of historicist thinking. The Liberal Anglican professorate would pick-and-choose from the results of German philology so as not to undercut the religious mission of their institutions. The version of culture that enters mid-Victorian intellectual life from German historicism offers little challenge to Jowett’s type of imaginative reading. His version of humanistic culture underwrites the notion of universals finding expression in unique forms in any given historical period and locale.

Yet, the prestige of science, German scholarship, and a general English utilitarian cast of mind worked to throw this humanist paradigm into crisis. Matthew Arnold, so sympathetic to French and German ideas, registers his own anxiety about the challenge to humanistic learning by science in the mid-century. In his lecture “Literature and Science,” he does his best to paper over the emergency the humanities find themselves in. “But when we talk of knowing Greek and Roman antiquity,” he declares, “[…] which is the knowledge people have called the humanities, I for my own part mean a knowledge which is something more than a superficial humanism, mainly decorative.” Instead, quoting F. A. Wolf approvingly, Arnold lays out a program for humanism modeled on German philology: “There can be no doubt that Wolf is perfectly right; that all learning is scientific which is systematically laid out and followed up to its original sources, and that a genuine humanism is scientific” (365). Nevertheless, doubts do surface. What, Arnold
wonders, is the special significance of art and literature if it is to become an object of scientific inquiry? It rests, he finds, upon the “instinct for beauty” and the need to translate the truths of natural science into human terms. “I mean that we shall find,” he says, warming to his theme, “as a matter of experience, if we know the best that has been thought and uttered in the world, we shall find that the art and poetry and eloquence of men who lived, perhaps long ago, who had the most limited natural knowledge, who had the most erroneous conceptions about many important matters, we shall find that this art, and poetry, and eloquence, have in fact not only the power of refreshing and delighting us, they have also the power—such is the strength and worth, in essentials, of their authors’ criticism of life—they have a fortifying, and elevating, and quickening, and suggestive power, capable of wonderfully helping us to relate the results of modern science to our need for conduct, our need for beauty” (375). Fortifying—and thus fortified—it turns out that the humanities have nothing to fear. Those who wish to replace humanistic study with science will lose in the long run; the desire to replace the study of classical languages with modern ones will come to naught. Arnold ends his lecture with breathtaking optimism: “[ . . .] I cannot really think that humane letters are in much actual danger of being thrust out from their leading place in education, in spite of the array of authorities against them at this moment. So long as human nature is what it is, their attractions will remain irresistible. As with Greek, so with letters generally: they will some day come, we may hope, to be studied more rationally, but they will not lose their place” (379). The subsequent fate of classical studies in the generations since
Arnold tells us all we need to know about his optimism; his somewhat chilling addition—“as with letters generally”—indicates the nature of the anxieties the modernists would later face.

A romantic Hellenism, so central to Arnold’s vision, would ground British classical studies through the mid-century. The underpinning of this reading of the Greeks could not withstand the revelations of archeology and anthropology. Yet, the prestige of the Greeks was not to be undone: Hellenism would be redefined. Consequently, “Hellenism” begins to refer to the attempt to recover what was seen as an authentic Greek mode of being, or at least recovering that which is still available to the contemporary world. This can be seen in Nietzsche’s work: not only in his famous Apollonian/Dionysian distinction in The Birth of Tragedy, but in his sense of the modern world as a corrupt encrustation of priestly moral codification: a burden happily unknown to the archaic Greek world. Nietzsche’s works would underwrite much of the anarchic individualism of early modernism. As Michael Levenson notes, “modernism was individualist before it was anti-individualist, anti-traditional before it was traditional, inclined to anarchism before it was inclined to authoritarianism” (79). But Nietzsche is the kind of writer one can go to get what one needs; which Nietzsche does one want?

However much his name is connected with Dionysian exuberance, the burden of argument in The Birth of Tragedy lies in another direction: to explain the origins of Greek tragic drama from a hard-fought Apollonian struggle with the irrational energy of Dionysian joy. The resulting balance—or perhaps truce—lies in the heart of the Greek achievement in the fifth century. This early work presents a thoroughly culturalist idea, and its subsequent influence on classical studies represents an important shift in the institutional category of Hellenism.
For the modernists, this Hellenism involves entering into the conscious aspiration to unify thought and feeling, knowledge and experience, perception and conception in the individual, and by implication, in society itself. Furthermore, “Hellenism” no longer means nostalgia for “paganism” so common among the romantics. The romantic Hellenist, on the other hand, had pursued ancient topics and forms—myths, historical personages, experimentation with poetic forms and quantitative meters—that instead emphasize the remoteness of classical ideals: a remoteness that makes those ideals all the more attractive. The new Hellenism draws its appeal from its commitment to an ideal that transcends the individual. Eliot’s conversion to Christianity should not be seen as incompatible with this Hellenism: his concept of “tradition” makes this clear, and his Christianity is his solution to the problem of surrendering to some principle outside of the self. Likewise, T. E. Hulme’s “anti-humanism” is offered in the same spirit of discovering some principle superior to humanity in a new “classicism” deployed against romantic schwarmerei. When Jose Ortega y Gasset describes modern art in terms of “dehumanization,” he suggests the drive to purity in art as a means of overcoming a prior art freighted with human desire and encrusted with history. Yet, his essay, “The Dehumanization of Art,” continually finds recourse to Greece as a symbol of youthful spontaneity that lightens the burden of modern historical consciousness, allying modern art to restoration of a new consciousness: “To [the present-day artist’s] mind, the kingdom of art commences where the air feels lighter and things, free from formal fetters, begin to cut whimsical capers. In this universal pirouetting he recognizes the best warrant for the existence of the Muses. Were art to redeem man, it could do so only by saving him from the seriousness of life and restoring him to an unexpected boyishness.
The symbol of art is seen again in the magic flute of the Great God Pan which makes the young goats frisk at the edge of the grove” (50). Ortega concludes that “All modern art begins to appear comprehensible and in a great way when it is interpreted as an attempt to instill youthfulness into an ancient world” (50).

Despite the excesses of Ortega’s rhetoric, his invocation of Hellenism marks the extent to which a redefined humanist project lies within modernism. The critical potential of Bildung that Gadamer explicates is appropriated in the name of the new art. Indeed, as Gadamer shows, Bildung itself was an interpretation of a Greek ideal. The Greek conception of cultivation is seen by the modern Hellenist as a social and not merely individual ideal. Werner Jaeger, himself something of a modern Hellenist, in Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture, reminds us that the Greek tradition saw the fulfillment of the individual in the polis. Paideia (paidaia), or “education,” involved the physical and mental training that would enable the individual to become a citizen. Yet, as with the term Bildung, the English word “education” does not do justice to the Greek concept. Jaeger argues that “It meant the process of educating man into his true form, the real and genuine human nature” (xxiii). As such, “It starts from the ideal, not from the individual. Above man as a member of the horde, and man as a supposedly independent personality, stands man as an ideal; and that ideal was the pattern towards which Greek educators as well as Greek poets, artists, and philosophers always looked” (xxiv). This ideal included the gaining of knowledge and skills—technē—but also the acquisition of excellence—aretē. Paideia aims at fostering an aretē which, unlike technē, cannot be taught. Rather, it involves fostering the conditions under which a sensibility can develop on its own: one that fulfills the latent potential of the self by growing in the soil of the
larger culture. **Paideia**, in short, bridges the divide between “culture” as individual attainment and “culture” in its modern anthropological sense. The earliest *arete* is that of the aristocracy—*aristos*, or “best.” It encompasses warrior virtues in which success is the criterion of excellence: the type of value system found in the Homeric epics. Yet this heroic code would be transformed, Jaeger argues, with the development of the city state: “Aristocracy is the first, and the early city-state is the second, of the vital stages in the development of the ‘humanistic’ ideal of a universal ethico-political culture: in fact, the historical mission of the city-state was to lead Greece toward that ideal. And although the early city-state developed into mass-rule, an extreme democracy guided by quite different forces, that development does not alter the true nature of city-state culture; for throughout its political evolution that culture kept its original aristocratic character [. . . . ]

The ideal of universal political *arete* is indispensable because it implies the constant creation and regeneration of a governing class; and without such a governing class no nation and no state, whatever be its constitution, can long survive” (114).

Whether or not Jaeger’s three-volume explication of the *paideia* idea is accurate is beyond the scope of this project. Nevertheless, his vision does present a good register of early twentieth-century Hellenism and the way in which classical scholarship felt deeply the impact of the anthropological culture thesis even beyond the oft-discussed mythographers like Fraser, Harrison, and Cornford. Indeed, the “impact” itself is something of a return, since the anthropological concept itself, as we will see, owes something to the classical tradition. Jaeger’s understanding of *paideia* suggests the importance of a reconceived Hellenism in the development of Anglo-American modernism and the political tendencies it can legitimize: the theorization of the collective
as an aspirational project. First, the goal of *paideia*—*arete*—theorizes an elite that shapes and maintains the social order. This, in turn, opens up a central role for high culture to both maintain its distinction from, yet remain a part of, the wider culture. For the modernists, this type of Hellenism created a way of linking aesthetic and socio-political problems in a more comprehensive—though often reactionary—way than the outworn and “naïve” romantic, “humanistic” Hellenism of the Victorians. But equally, the historicist sense precluded a simple return to some earlier social formation. Rather, modernists sought to overcome their sense of belatedness by discovering in “the manner” of the archaic Hellenes a means of critiquing modernity’s crisis of cultural authority. Ortega’s Hellenic enthusiasm is simply the most open statement of this search for authority. Nevertheless, intellectual authority in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was taking a different form than that which the moderns hoped might develop.

1.4 The University, Professionalization, and the Nationalization of Culture

The period from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century saw an unprecedented realignment of cultural institutional forces: one that sought to harness those forces at the national level. Here, Max Weber’s notion of modernity as a process of bureaucratic organization and stratification captures part of the dynamic. Yet “bureaucratization” misses the way in which older “charismatic” styles—those that authorize intellectual and cultural life—persist and resist such processes. The high Victorian world still had a place for the independent writer, the independent scholar, the self-taught journalist, the working-class self-made men-of-letters, etc.—an afterglow, perhaps, of the enlightenment tradition of the “amateur.” Yet, as the century progressed
and turned to the twentieth, the university became the locus of professional training and the legitimating body of cultural life as the German research university model swept the English speaking world. In Britain, this expressed itself in the adoption of German models of what a university should be, and most importantly, the idea of what modern knowledge should be: \textit{Wissenschaft}, against which the antiquated theological humanism of Oxbridge stood in some embarrassment. In America, it expressed itself in the emergence of a movement, equally Germanic in its origin, which transformed Harvard College into Harvard University.\textsuperscript{21} The adoption of German methods and aims is, of course, the story of the emergence of the modern university and the “professional” it was to produce. The opening of the university to ever greater numbers of the middle class, the implementation of entrance examinations for both educational institution and the civil service, struck not only at the heart of privilege in government and the ancient universities, but also helped to end the role of the public man-of-letters so prominent in the nineteenth century.

“For thirty years,” Ezra Pound wrote in 1938, “I have trumpeted that there is no adequate communication between scholars, men of letters, and the damned papers, the press. We have no standards of accuracy that an optician or a physicist wd. recognize as other than sloppy and rascally. We have no communication system worthy of the name.”\textsuperscript{22} Pound’s complaint, in his crabby idiom of the Thirties, blares the charge leveled by Matthew Arnold some 70 years previous in \textit{Culture and Anarchy}. Arnold agitated, in his ever polite and urbane way, for some mechanism of transmission, a center of correct taste, but also lively debate, which would establish authority in English cultural life. Yet, in the case of both thinkers, a system of communication worthy of the name
had nevertheless left its mark upon the literary life of the English speaking world.
Pound’s complaint suggests his nostalgia for at least the role of the Victorian Clerisy if not its sobriety. Yet that role had been significantly undermined long before Pound came to London. In *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, John Gross notes, “By the 1860s, as outlets continued to multiply, literary journalism was at last becoming a secure enough profession for it to attract a steady flow of talent from the universities. By the 1870s, the novelty of the journalist with a degree in his pocket had completely worn off.” Such a situation might seem to offer an unprecedented opportunity for the university to enrich public discourse. Yet, literary journalism found its place in Pound’s “damned papers” as part of an emerging mass culture. Concurrently, the literary journal, the cornerstone of British public intellectual life since the eighteenth century found itself increasingly unable to bridge the gap between the educated reader and expert authority.

Because the university was quickly becoming—in isolation from the general educated public—Matthew Arnold’s “centre of authority” in intellectual life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, its importance is not beside the point. What Janet Minihan has called “the nationalization of culture” found its roots in the Chartist disturbances of the 1830s as the British government sought to extend education and the arts to the working classes. The first move toward government support of the arts occurred when Parliament grudgingly appropriated funds for the establishment of a School of Design in London, which opened in 1837, and in the decade following, branch schools were established in the manufacturing cities. Previously, a Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce had existed from the mid-eighteenth century, yet its influence on national life had been minimal. As Minihan
notes, “The Society of Arts, as it was generally called, had continued its efforts to promote the practical application of fine art to industry for nearly a century,” but “by the 1840s [its] efforts were clearly flagging” (97). Prince Albert’s assumption of the society’s presidency and his subsequent vigorous intervention in the efforts of the Society led directly to the Crystal Palace, and the momentum generated by the exhibit ensured the acquisition of further funds for a national cultural effort. The long road to the British Arts Council had begun.

Minihan shows that the key phase of the nationalization of culture began in the 1850s, when, animated by the general excitement surrounding the Crystal Palace exhibition, the British government initiated the development of a new Department of Science and Art to administer art education through a system of state-sponsored art schools. As its name suggests, the aim of this national project was as intimately linked with industry and manufacture as the schools of design were. In such an atmosphere, the ancient universities could not help but find themselves challenged to justify their existence as providing something more than a hebetudinous and torpid interlude before a young gentleman took possession of his father’s estate. Education at Oxford and Cambridge was a slovenly affair in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and a similar condition reigned in America. Reform gained steam by the 1840s in an attempt to create a national elite that could meet the challenges of industrial society and imperial administration.

The Oxford Movement registers the opening round of an attempt to make the university itself play a role in national life. John Henry Newman’s goal was to return Oxford to its medieval condition, to provide a center of authority withdrawn from modern
life, devoted to contemplation and the development of moral character. The “tracts” that Newman and his allies produced sought to prove that High Church Anglicanism was the authentic Church of Christ through Apostolic succession. Against both Broad Church clerics and liberal modernizers, the Tractarians argued for the sanctification of beauty and ritual that smacked of “Romanism” to their enemies. Yet, in doing battle with the liberal Anglican clerics who controlled the university, Newman’s demise would be complete as Tractarianism, and Newman himself, moved towards Rome. His vision of cultural authority, grounded in the spiritual authority of the Church, would affect Matthew Arnold deeply and cause a lasting conflict within his thought between the spiritual and the secular legitimacy of “culture.” With Newman, the university became embroiled in the debate over the continental idea of “culture” conceived in terms of religion, and a whole generation of undergraduates would see in it the means of critiquing and opposing the materialist forces that were transforming Britain at an increasingly alarming rate.

Arnold, in Culture and Anarchy, had transformed the “Condition of England Debate” into one of “culture” proper. And here, his German influence would come full circle to undermine his position. As Terry Eagleton reminds us, “culture” (or Kultur) was primarily a response to French civilisation. Arnold would place “culture” and the famous distinction between Hellenism and Hebraism (the distinction was originally Heinrich Heine’s) at the center of debate over the development of English society. As the great interpreter of all things Continental, he was as equally impressed by the function of German universities as he was by the L’Academie Française. Yet, the former was significant to him not so much for its ability to produce an efficient Prussian bureaucracy

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as for the traditions of German Hellenism so emblematic of “spontaneity of consciousness”: Arnold’s formulation of a Greek turn of mind. The professional was not what Arnold had in mind so much as apostles or priests: his famous “aliens.”

Yet, professionalism was what William Jowett, head of Balliol College, Oxford, had in mind. His goal was to create British civil servants (Cecil Rhodes was one of his many students) within his own interpretation of the Greeks and their significance for the modern age. Indeed, a somewhat similar process can be charted in the United States, as the “college” with its moral mission of creating a “Christian gentleman” slowly gave ground to the “university” model with its aspiration of creating a national civic elite. William Jowett would launch the true revolution by placing his version of Hellenism at the center of Oxford’s curriculum, and yet in so doing, open up the aestheticism that Walter Pater would pursue.

The realignment of the role of the university in national life also would have far reaching consequences for the broader culture: the death of the man-of-letters. As John Gross notes, “Until the closing years of the century the notion of a critique universitaire scarcely existed in England, while even the labours of exhuming and annotating texts were often as not performed by private enthusiasts far from the universities—by a country gentleman like Whitwell Elwin, the editor of Pope, or a clergyman like Alexander Grosart, the Nonconformist minister from Blackburn who was responsible for the Fuller’s Worthies Library and scores of other useful reprints” (167-68). With the coming of the research university, this happy paradise of the amateur would come crashing down. The reason is not far to find. The new university would define itself in terms of Geistwissenschaft. What intrigued a younger generation of Victorian academics
was the scientific model of truth, and this model would enter humanistic study in two subjects: classical studies and history. It is well to remember that throughout most of the nineteenth century, there existed among the educated readership a keen interest in these subjects. We need not build a false image of a bourgeois businessman studying his Homer by greenshade lamp to recognize that the classics and history shared an important place in Victorian social and political debate. History and ancient literature were presumed to be valuable guides to the present. The positivist spirit, and later hermeneutics, would undo these assumptions. The impact of German scholarship on the European intellectual climate is central here. Interpreting these cultural shifts in late nineteenth-century Germany, Peter Uwe Hohedahl argues that prior to the invasion of scientific values into humanistic disciplines, “the emphasis was placed on the dialogue between the critic and the audience.” Yet, the desire for positivist rigor would break this bond. As he notes, “scientific discourse [. . .] is fundamentally indifferent to the expectations of the general public and is governed by rules of methodological purity and logical consistency” (18). Yet the intellectual reaction against Positivism—historicism and hermeneutics—would not seek to reestablish the bridge with an educated public. Indeed, historicism and hermeneutics would pursue the values of scientific rigor while rejecting the methods of Positivist science. Hohendahl observes, “When academic criticism began to follow Wilhelm Dilthey’s example, and emphasized its distinct method, objectivity and rigorous analysis were still taken for granted [. . . .]

Methodological reflection on the process of understanding, an essential part of the hermeneutic tradition, usually results in a higher degree of complexity in the critic’s language. Both Positivism and the hermeneutic tradition aimed at an objective method
by which scholarly criticism could be differentiated from the popular evaluations which newspapers offer in their cultural supplements. By 1900 serious literary historiography had established itself as a professional, specialized discipline with its own rather limited audience” (18). This separation of expert and general audiences anticipates the way in which modernism would fragment the literary audience, finding its home in the institution of university-centered criticism. Yet, despite charges to the contrary, it is by no means clear that the moderns intended this. As Pound’s call suggests, the intent was rather the opposite one of reestablishing the role of the man-of-letters. Indeed, the plethora of “little magazines” and short-lived reviews speak to the modernist desire to protect the arts from being subsumed by official culture. Nevertheless, the consolidation of culture would develop apace. As Gross notes, “By the 1920s, a mood of sombre professionalism had set in, best exemplified by the founding of the Review of English Studies in 1925. The academic apparatchiks were in full command, and it was too late to change the patterns which had been laid down” (189).

Hence, the distinctive challenge the modernists faced was the creation of a new art not only in the wake of the artist’s alienation from the public but from the centers of national culture itself. Of course, artists have always been at odds with critics. What emerges in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, however, is the artist’s alienation from official recognition. Previously, a French writer might engage in intellectual combat with the establishment, yet still hope to be vindicated in time by election to the Academy. By the end of the century, such a hope would be seen as a betrayal of art itself. Nevertheless, the aestheticist gesture would come to seem increasing futile for the makers of modernism. What was needed was a way of intervening in cultural life, either directly
through aggressive avant-gardism early on, and later through more indirect and subtle means by exploiting the institutional category of “culture.” By claiming for art and artists the “high culture” role of leadership—artists are “the antennae of the race,” Pound would declare—they sought simultaneously to exploit the notion of “the complex whole” as a means of indirectly transforming social life by directly operating upon its unconscious basis. Matthew Arnold had said that “culture works by indirection,” by which he meant the general conscious forces of “influence” based upon humanistic cultivation of the self, and by analogy, society at large. But the culture thesis of anthropology, based upon an unconscious “whole way of life,” offered theoretical support, even the authority of a scientific finding, to the desire that art and literature might have a more profound capacity to transform the nature of modernity. If art is threatened with losing its privileged status in anthropological culture, its position within a “complex whole” offers the compensation of being able to transform the relations of elements within that whole. On one hand, art’s position is made more secure and, indeed, more privileged in that it represents a self-conscious activity within the largely unconscious structures of culture at large. Yet, such a position is also unstable: on what basis can art differentiate itself from other cultural artifacts and practices? This problem is never fully confronted by the moderns, and one important reason is the way modernism came to rely upon the institutional authority of the university. Institutional discourse becomes the arbiter of what constitutes authentic art in the first half of the twentieth century. Hence the modernists would not succeed, or at least in the manner they hoped, in their attempt to make art speak to culture at large. Perloff’s “straw man modernism” is, in part, an effect of the rhetorical strategies that issue from the naming of “modernism”
itself. That naming, though it originated outside of the academy, would become an institutional category that constructed a programmatic coherence. As Art Berman observes, “The rise of an aesthetic professional class creates and perpetuates formalism as well as responds to it. Only formalism can give criticism the status of legitimate academic disciplines, which require formally defined objects of study” (74). The critical paradigms that would establish English literature as a discipline were formulated largely in modernist terms, and in neat symmetry, they would define the idea of English modernism.

1.5 Description of the Chapters

In Chapter Two, I discuss the specific institutional context of Oxford Hellenism as it gains coherence, only to be challenged by the culture thesis. It is in this context that Walter Pater, the subject of Chapter Three, announces his aestheticist program, first in *The Renaissance*, and then in a deft revision in his Bildugsroman, *Marius the Epicurean*. The tension here lies between Pater’s desire to protect aesthetic experience from normative moral judgements implied by Arnold’s version of culture. Yet at the same time, Pater isolates the aesthetic from the Jowett’s construction of humanism that, while opposed to utilitarianism itself, nevertheless posits humanistic Hellenism in terms of its social utility. Yet, the costs to aesthetic value are steep; art becomes an isolated experience that might seem to Pater’s critics incapable of having any effects beyond self-gratification. Between *The Renaissance* and *Marius*, Pater would find within the anthropological culture idea a means of maintaining the non-conceptual and anti-dogmatic character of the aesthetic while enabling it to act as a social force, albeit a very attenuated one. In this, Pater represents a characteristic modernist problem: the need to
theorize some means of bridging the gap between aesthetics and culture that late romanticism had opened up. Oscar Wilde and the decadents, the subject of Chapter Four, would take up and attempt to put in practice what he saw as the implications of Pater's thought. Wilde in particular would inherit Pater’s difficulty, and the result is a disjunction between his critical stance as well as his public persona, on one hand, and his narrative practice on the other. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is Wilde’s attempt to construct, however odd it may sound, a decadent “morality” on the basis of the culture idea. Arthur Symons, the subject of Chapter Five, would transmit the values of decadence and symbolism, now announced as “movements,” to a younger generation, most notably Pound and Eliot. Yet his rejection of decadence in favor of his interpretation of symbolism reinscribes Pater’s radical aestheticism as flight from Pater’s own attempt to dialectically overcome the problem of solipsism. Symons announces a crisis of legitimacy for literature in his influential *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. Aesthetic experience is presented as an escape from culture, and as such, symbolism fosters the anti-culture rhetoric and radical egoism of the early twentieth century.

Chapter Six looks at the emergence of imagist ideas in T. E. Hulme and the way in which the crisis of legitimacy is first imagined in terms of a problem of language, and later in terms of the culture idea as described by Worringer. Hulme’s trajectory is motivated by spiritual and religious needs that seek, not escape into artifice, but apprehension of the transcendent: a quest for the ontologically real. His version of the image is presented in the name of a destruction of habitual categories that hide behind ordinary uses of language. Further, Hulme’s original formulation of the image is offered in the name of emotional expressivism. In this, Hulme recapitulates Pater’s identification
of the failure of consciousness. Hulme moves from a radical “presentism,” to a rejection of the principle of continuity itself: a principle that returns in anthropological terms.

Chapter Seven, looks at Ezra Pound, whose conceptual difficulties stem, not from a rejection of the culture idea, but from his devotion to it in its humanist form. Pound’s hatred of academia’s will to power over culture is accompanied by his desire usurp the authority of the university in the name of artists. Pound’s claims for art’s authority is dependent upon a fantasy of overcoming the fragmentation of modernity, first imagined in terms of a revival of Hellenism, and later through a disastrous attraction to Italian fascism and Mussolini as a leader who could use the power of the state to restore an organic society that would make Hellenism a living reality. The culture idea provides the theoretical justification for his anti-Semitism. The progress of Eliot's gradual displacement of Pound as the spokesman of modernism is subject of Chapter Eight. Eliot, as is often noted, accomplished the institutionalization of modernism, but in the rush to disassociate themselves from Eliot's political conservatism, critics often miss the significance of Eliot's institutionalization of a particular culturalist discourse that still informs our own. In my Conclusion, I attempt to show how this is so, and to explore some of the consequences for our own critical practice.


4 This focus upon the role of anthropological concept of culture would seem to suggest that my project is about to recapitulate the well-worn topic of "primitivism" in modernism. Of course, primitivism has always been a topos of criticism of modernism, especially in the visual arts, and it has been central to the
interpretation of certain key modernist works such as "The Waste Land." However, the importance of the development of anthropological culture idea in the making of modernism, when noted at all, is most often simply mentioned in passing or used as a critical tool in the explication of particular modernist works. One notable exception is Robert Crawford's *The Savage and the City*, which represents one of the most extensive examinations of this topic in, not only the poetry, but the essays of T. S. Eliot. Crawford brings important unpublished material to light that suggest the depth and range of Eliot's interest in, and anxiety toward, the anthropological concept of culture. Yet, most of Crawford's description is in the service of intellectual biography, and he rarely draws any conclusions about the role of Eliot's attempts to make the savage confront the city, nor does he draw many inferences about what significance this may have for modernism in general.


7 Tratner, Michael. *Modernism and Mass Politics*.

8 Anthony Libby questions the tendency to posit such a direct relation between aesthetics and politics in “Conceptual Space, The Politics of Modernism” (*Chicago Review* 34 [Spring 1984]: 21). He argues that “the relation between aesthetic shape and political implication is too complex and variable to be described so reductively.” Yet, this does not mean that modernism is without political dimension. Astradur Eysteinsson--agreeing with Libby’s assertion that, “at least in non-totalitarian societies, one primary instrument of political oppression or manipulation is rhetoric” (21)–asserts that “what modernism does to language is therefore of primary political importance, since it breaks through habitualized communicative structures and calls signifying practices into question” (*The Concept of Modernism* 228). Such arguments for the subversive force of modernist practice were often self-consciously theorized by the moderns themselves: most notably by Viktor Shlovsky and the Russian Futurists.


10 Douglas’s post-Kantian conception is reminiscent of Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, to which it is partly indebted. Yet, her model encompasses more accurately a wider range of institutional functions and behaviors than the special case of the sciences that Kuhn pursues.

11 *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 7.

12 Jonathan Swift’s famous send-up of the debate in *Battle of the Books* would be the source of Matthew Arnold’s famous description of culture as the spreading of “sweetness and light.” Swift’s allegorical “ancient” is the bee, whose wax honeycomb is an eternal source of happiness to Man.

13 While Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s formulation of the concept was developed without a focus on the fine arts, he effected unwittingly a split between the act of experiencing and knowing that was not lost on thinkers as diverse as Herder and Kant, both of whom tied the experience of the beautiful and works of art to the moral sense, though in different ways. Furthermore, these questions would later frame the arguments that Hulme would deploy against romanticism in a strangely reversed form: it is the modern who rejects progress and accepts the classical view of humanity.

14 Perrault’s *Parallels Between Ancients and Moderns* argues for the superiority of modern thought on the basis of greater modern scientific understanding and social sophistication: a linking of aesthetics to broader cultural interpretation that we will encounter again. Significantly, Perrault’s most lasting contribution to French literature was as a pioneering folklorist.
The defenders of the moderns were not often prepared to offer a thorough-going historicist argument. As the English modern John Denis argued, “That which we call Taste in Writing, is nothing but a fine Discernment of Truth. But as Truth must be always one, and always the same to all who have Eyes to discern it; he who pleases one of a true Taste at first, is sure of pleasing all the World at last.” Quoted in Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp, 263.

The Classical Tradition, 361.

Truth and Method, 36.

Gadamer’s argument for a reconceived hermeneutics is similar to the situation that the modernists would face in asserting the significance of art. Gadamer claims, “What makes the human sciences into sciences can be understood more easily from the tradition of the concept of Bildung than from the modern idea of scientific method. It is the humanistic tradition that we must turn. In its resistance to the claims of modern science it gains new significance” (18). The modernists would face the appropriation of “culture” by the “science” of anthropology by appropriating the “resistance” of humanism to positivist assumptions about knowledge while disavowing the humanist label. Yet, that disavowal would force them to seek conceptual legitimacy in anthropology itself.

Culture for Herder was the unique expression of the experience and genius of a particular people that transcended the enlightenment anthropology of reason. As such it was a spiritual definition of mankind that also sought to displace the universalizing reason of the Enlightenment. It is also an implicit critique of modern social and political life conceived in terms of instrumental reason. Bringing identity into consciousness.

See Jenkyns, The Rise of German Historicism.

See Butler, The Tyranny of Greece of Over Germany. Butler charts the progress of the Greek idea in German literature, and the way in which the Greeks were used to address contemporary problem of the writers she discusses.


See Linda Dowling. Hellenism and Homosexuality.

The change of episteme whereby knowledge is increasingly associated with positivism and science leads to a reaction: a split between feeling and thinking—Eliot’s dissociation of sensibility—which in turn puts humanism in the lurch. What is the value of humane letters? Humanism falls prey to the very processes it set in motion. Where once humanism presented itself as an enlightened counterpart or alternative to revealed religion, it now finds itself represented as so much superstition and humbug. Strangely, the humanistic ideal relied upon religion for its value. With the waning of religion, humanism finds its own authority in doubt. Traditionally, that authority was located in ethical formation: an interpretation of Hellenistic paideia, in Christian terms. Yet this increasingly involved evermore attenuated appeals to character, ethical feeling, and the consequent need to connect aesthetics with the moral. Now one had to ask, ethical in what way? The good, as the ancients themselves saw, always needs to be grounded in a conception of truth. Yet science was powerfully altering the very definition of truth toward the quantitative, the measurable, the testable and verifiable. The new positivism was keenly felt by the humanists themselves.

From The World of the Victorians: an Anthology of Poetry and Prose, 365.
It is important to remember that before Nietzsche became the prophet of nihilism he was a trained philologist and became a professor at Basel. He perceived the limitations and resulting distortions of positivist methods in philology first hand, and that establishment rejected his early manuscript. His subsequent influence on twentieth-century classical scholarship would give him, of course, the last laugh.


It is important to recognize that Eliot’s “conversion” is a good deal more complex and fraught with anxiety than is generally recognized. I deal with this more fully in the chapter devoted to him.


*Guide to Kulcher*, 55.

Gross, John. *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, p.25


See Fredrick Rudolph, *The American College and University*.


Frank Turner, in *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain*, offers an extended study of the ways in which the Greeks became central to Victorian discussion of a host of social and political crises. The Greeks were seen as exemplars, but this status becomes complicated as the Greeks themselves are subject to varying interpretations.

See *The Institution of Criticism*, 17-18.

In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer interprets this focus on method as a consequence of Kantian assumptions that redefined and restricted the humanist tradition in self-defeating ways. He argues for a version of hermeneutics that recovers the insights of humanism: in particular the concept of Bildung. Gadamer’s argument is important for my interpretation of how “culture” comes to be enmeshed in the conflicting assumptions of the humanist and anthropological idea at the time when modernism was establishing its key doctrines.
CHAPTER 2

OXFORD HELLENISM AND THE CRISIS OF CULTURE

2.1 The Decline of Theological Humanism

The shifting grounds of literary authority, the polemical role of the idea of culture, and the emergence of aestheticism, and later decadence in the Victorian period, are most usually interpreted through the work of poets, novelists, men of letters, and the great prophetic sages of the century: in short, those who spoke directly to their nineteenth-century publics. The vital importance of such approaches is, of course, obvious. Yet, relatively little attention has been given to the role of the massive transformations in academic life of the period in the shaping of specifically literary values. Yet it was within the universities that the moral and intellectual crisis brought on by increasing secularization would not only be immediately felt, but exploited by those who saw the possibility of placing British civilization on new grounds. That art and literature would share pride of place with philosophy and history in this “cultural” ideal was obvious to many of those for whom “classics”—the traditional center of the curriculum, especially at Oxford—meant ancient literature, philosophy, and historiography. The shifting notions of culture would be intimately tied to the changing interpretations of antiquity that arose in part from the process of professionalization of scholarship, specialization, and the development of new disciplines. It is within this
context that writers like Pater could make claims for the ultimacy of art based upon a specifically aesthetic faculty. Furthermore, academic specialization, as T. W. Heyck has shown, would destroy the cultural authority of men of letters, the Victorian sage-critics outside of Oxbridge, not by replacing them but by transforming the nature of knowledge itself.¹ Now knowledge would be the property of the initiated few who pursued their disciplines for their own sake. And the similarities between this shift in the definition and status of knowledge and the aestheticism of Pater are not coincidental; both possibilities exploited by late-Victorian intellectuals find their source in the way in which German influences recast the idea of the classical past, the institutional framework in which it was studied, and the educational role it was meant to serve.

The traditional eighteenth-century justifications for the central role of classical authors in British education lay in the mental discipline that linguistic training and translation was assumed to provide. But beyond this pedagogical aim, knowledge of the classics served the interests of class cohesion. This gentlemanly style was seen to embrace moral as well as social cultivation. “In the eighteenth century,” Heyck states, “liberal education was supposed to produce the beau ideal of a gentleman: a person with the attributes of independence, civility, sociability and paternal generosity” (68). Such moral qualities were, in the Augustan age, still intimately associated with questions of taste. Indeed, the cultivational model—the culture of a moral self—was seen to be accomplished best through example as expressed in classical literature rather than philosophy. According to M. L. Clarke, eighteenth-century educators “generally agreed that, though with the progress of knowledge the philosophy of the ancients had been
superseded, this was not the case with literature” (168). The general connection between taste and morality so prevalent in the period is seen in the central role this union played in very diverse thinkers, from Shaftesbury’s “disinterested” ethics, Hume’s “moral taste,” to Adam Smith's equation of pleasurable sensation with virtue. This kind of cultivation, “the culture of the heart” as A. R. Humphries’ terms it, underwrites much of the eighteenth-century high esteem for ancient literature.

Yet despite this high appraisal of the classics, the actual state of teaching in the universities was abysmal. According to Clarke’s study of classical education, “In the eighteenth century university teaching was in a state of decay” (68). Though some good scholarship was produced, the institutional structure of Oxford and Cambridge, particularly the former, meant that undergraduates spent a few years of haphazard reading and examination before taking a degree, years no less desultory than the academic careers of their teachers: “The professorships of Greek had become mere sinecures, and their holders apart from an inaugural oration gave no lectures. Teaching was monopolised by college tutors. At Oxford the degree exercises had sunk to a mere farce, so that tutors were at liberty to devise their own lecture courses, or leave pupils to themselves” (68). Much of this description of Oxford instruction could be applied to the early decades of the nineteenth century as well. Indeed, the various waves of reform at Oxford would be set against this backdrop of tutorial rigidity, if not always against professorial absence. Reform in classical studies first made itself felt at Oxford in the establishment, in 1801, of examinations for graduation in Literae Humaniores. “The examination was to be in the main a classical one,” Clarke notes, though it would also include logic and moral
philosophy “in so far as they are derivable from the ancient authors,” in the words of the Oxford University Statutes (99). Yet, if the Oxford authorities had intended to improve the quality of instruction by establishing the School of Literae Humaniores, the result was to increase the dominance of tutors whose role was ever more narrowly confined to preparing student for examination. The establishment of Honours Schools in 1807 only strengthened this trend, which took a similar course at Cambridge. Heyck describes the effect on university life of the increasing number of students seeking distinction on the honours list: “By the 1830s, about one-half of all Oxbridge students were opting for honours courses. Their lives were devoted to cramming for examinations, since one's place on the honours list constituted a principle avenue to fellowships, clerical careers and even political appointments. By the same token, the college tutors inevitably became examination crammers, and they had to restrict their teaching to a small set of standard, frequently-examined texts” (72-3). Added to this dominance of the tutorial was the increasing importance of private coaches who constituted “an impressive cottage industry,” both of which made the professoriate rather superfluous. Many stopped lecturing altogether. Since the primary function of the universities was to provide professional opportunities for undergraduates in the world of affairs or in the Church, academic professionalization of the kind that was developing on the continent, especially in Germany, was simply unthinkable. The most able students sought success outside of Oxbridge. As Heyck puts it, “the professorships could not be career attractions for aspiring professionals because they stood in very low repute; the business of Oxford was education of undergraduates, and the professors had little to do with teaching them” (72).
Against this climate of professorial indolence and undergraduate self-seeking, John Henry Newman inveighed. But he also sought a practical solution. As Linda Dowling has shown, his efforts primarily focused upon the restructuring of university forms, in particular the college, which Newman hoped “could function as intimate moral communities for each resident,” and where the college tutorial could be revitalized: “Newman began by working to restore his own college, Oriel, to its medieval condition under the founding statutes as a body of resident fellows devoted to both educating the younger students and pursuing their own studies.” To recover the genuine educational function of the college was to strip structures such as the college tutorial of all their old accreted crust of condescension, impersonality and sloth, that eighteenth-century tradition of donnish coldness and indolence [. . .]] (40). The “pastoral” nature of the tutorial, as Newman conceived it, would promote spiritual and moral growth among Oriel’s residents in a setting of monastic fellowship. Yet within this institutional structure, the curriculum was not significantly revised; Newman's interest chiefly lay in making the courses of Divinities and Literae Humaniores more effective instruments of what he saw as historical Oxford's essentially religious mission. Newman's purposes were, of course, aided by the fact that Oxford still functioned as an ecclesiastical training-ground. “Because by collegiate statute,” Dowling notes, “every tutor was a fellow, and every fellow was either in Anglican orders or preparing for them, Newman could insist that ‘a Tutor’s profession was of a religious nature’ and could defend his claim by appealing to the statutes through which flowed the transcendental authority of the visible
Church” (72). Hence, Newman's reforms did not entail revolution, but rather, an involution, as it were; by emphasizing the “pastoral” involvement of tutors in the personal development of their students, and by appealing to historical legitimacy of the Church's role in university education, “his reform in college teaching could be accomplished, not by proposing any new change, but simply by recalling the tutorial to its original religious purpose” (41).

Though it was published seven years after Newman's conversion, The Idea of a University remains his most definitive statement on the aims of education. Written during his tenure as the first rector of the new Catholic University of Ireland, his experience at Oxford could hardly have been far from his mind. Newman's concern is to argue in favor of “Liberal education,” as opposed to “instruction” in “Useful Knowledge.” The latter Newman condemns as a “mechanical process,” the kind of process that defined the Oxford examination system; “But,” Newman asserts, “education is a higher word; it implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of character; it is something individual and permanent, and is commonly spoken of in connection with religion and virtue” (V.6). Such an education strives to develop the "joint action of many faculties and exercises of the mind" (VII.1).

But such qualities cannot, in his view, be fostered by the activities that university life typically encourages. Rather than the attainment of honors and future position, the business of a university is to bring the minds of student to truth: “Truth of whatever kind is the proper object of the intellect; its cultivation then lies in fitting it to apprehend and contemplate truth” (VII.1). Hence, the “many faculties” of the intellect must combine to
apprehend truth; and there is no doubt about which “truth” has the power to unite the various forms of knowledge into a comprehensive moral vision. And here, the centrality of Newman's tutorial makes itself felt. The impersonality of the Oxbridge system will not do. “Such a union and concert of the intellectual powers,” Newman insists, “such an enlargement and development, such comprehensiveness, is necessarily a matter of training; and again, such training is a matter of rule; it is not mere application, however exemplary, which introduces the mind to truth, nor the reading of books, nor the getting up many subjects, nor the witnessing many experiments, nor the attending many lectures” (VII.1). Rather, proper habits of mind can only be passed on by personal involvement; only the pastoral role of the tutor, as a spiritual exemplar, can hope to be a counter to the forces by which the intellect is “formed or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose, some specific trade or profession, or study or science,” and the last instance in this litany of temptation is telling. For Newman is also defining liberal education as a process in which the intellect is “disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own proper object, and for its own highest culture” (VII.1). We are all familiar with the defense of a liberal education based upon the notion “knowledge for its own sake.” Indeed, that assertion is one of the legacies of Newman. Yet, familiarity may occlude the fact that he is arguing, not “knowledge for its own sake,” but something more like “knowledge for the sake of truth,” its own “proper object,” a truth grounded on the premises of theological humanism. Newman is careful to exclude narrow academic pursuits from the business of a university, just as he will exclude the notion that it should strive to be “a birthplace of poets or of immortal authors, of founders of schools, leaders
of colonies, or conquerors of nations” (VII.10). His ideal aimed at comprehensiveness, “training good members of society.” Yet, this balanced purpose could only be maintained as long as the founding assumptions of theological humanism remained strong. Once they weakened, the ideal of higher moral and social utility would fade also. Yet, the notion of intellect “disciplined for its own sake” would remain to be transformed into its own ideal. In this sense, Newman had unwittingly helped to create the conditions by which the specialization and professionalization of academic disciplines might proceed.

But Newman’s influence on the course of British intellectual life would not be confined only to his explicitly educational efforts. The religious controversies surrounding the Oxford Movement would mark an entire generation of students and intellectuals. As Frank Turner notes, “[f]rom the years of the Tractarian movement on, the questions of the nature of truth and the meaning of verbal expressions in matters of theology, ecclesiastical oaths, and biblical criticism had haunted and often poisoned the intellectual atmosphere of the university” (439). The major weapon wielded by Newman and his allies in these controversies had been an appeal to historical authority of the early Church. But such a strategy of legitimation also served to foreground the essentially historical nature of Christianity itself. Liberal Anglicans would attempt to maintain the centrality of religion within Oxbridge, often using historicist principles to assert the “higher” nature of its essential truth. Christianity, already besieged, could not be defended by Liberal Anglicans from the corrosive effects of the very tools they, and their Tractarian opponents, had deployed to save it as an intellectual foundation. Faith
would retreat to personal conviction within Oxford, as it already was doing outside of it. Given the intensity of antiquarian interest at Oxford, a new possibility arose: the possibility that the balance between the largely classical curriculum of the universities and the underlying Christian assumptions that guided study and scholarship would be progressively undermined.

In the wake of Newman's final conversion in 1845, which struck a death-blow to the Tractarian movement as a whole, Oxford remained in the hands of his liberal opponents. The interpretation of civilization, centered upon a theory of Christian providential history, that the Tractarians had worked to make a living tradition in Oxford retreated from the scene; yet it would continue to influence the likes of Matthew Arnold who despite, or perhaps because, of his father's Liberal Anglicanism, continued to be drawn to Newman's ideals, which, as David DeLaura has argued, provided Arnold “with key attitudes that he developed later in Literature and Dogma and elsewhere. Feeling as an essential element of religion, the close tie between religion and poetry, the profound concern with conscience and morality—all these Tractarian emphases survived the period of Arnold's greatest alienation from Christianity” (18).

But, with the waning of the Tractarian influence, Oxford would become the scene of competing interpretations of civilization that had vanquished Newman and his allies, and at the center of this conflict lay classical antiquity. Frank Turner has demonstrated the importance of these differing interpretations for the emergence of Greece, rather than Rome, as the central exemplar of what the Victorians saw as the spirit of Western Civilization, the two most important of which, for present purposes, are liberal Anglican
historiography which insisted on drawing “relevant parallels” between antiquity and the present, and a Hegelian “concept of historical development.” As Turner states, “these theories provided the major framework by means of which Victorian writers sustained the belief that the experience of Greece was directly significant for their own culture” (12).

Much of this new interpretation of Greece was indebted to transformations within German Hellenism, which, as I discussed in the previous chapter, had increasingly relied upon a notion of “culture” synonymous with “ethnos”: the organic emergence of a people’s distinct identity. In describing the development of ethnological thought in the Victorian period, Richard Stocking emphasizes the importance of Liberal Anglican historiography, both as a conduit of German culturalist thought and in creating the conditions for the articulation of an anthropological theory of culture: “Responding to the stimulus of Niebuhr’s *History of Rome*, the Liberal Anglicans tried to build a comparative ‘science’ of history based on Vico's conception of development in terms of organic cycles of growth and decay. Behind or beyond the Vichian cycles of profane history, however, the Liberal Anglicans felt that there was a progressive moral development that they conceived in essentially Herderian terms—and with a similar ambiguity of cultural relativism and racial determinism. Rejecting the associationalist uniformity of human nature, they saw *history* as composed of a plurality of cultural worlds, each to be understood in its own terms. *Progress*, on the other hand, had moved historically westward across the earth, transmitted from race to race, until now in Britain ‘the crisis of civilization’ must be faced, and only the saving power of Christianity
offered hope that the natural cyclical order of periodic national calamity might finally be broken. From a methodological point of view, there was thus a distinction between those aspects of history governed by God's general Providence, which could in a certain fashion be studied scientifically, and those aspects governed by his special Providence, which were beyond the realm of scientific determination” (37). Having rejected Newman's interpretation of an essential unity and historical continuity between Latin Christendom and the present, Latitudinarians such as Thomas Arnold needed to retain a Providential notion of history, now methodologically split as Stocking notes, in order not to succumb to the relativism of their own Germanic sources. In an important sense, this split was simply unstable—the existence of a “special Providence” is a matter of faith rather than demonstration—and it represents a refusal to separate human history utterly from the sacred historical narrative, or indeed to interpret sacred texts in terms of a larger secular history, as the German hermeneuticists were. To include Christianity in the process of Vichian natural cycles, of course, would not only subject it to the forces of change and decay, it would deny the possibility of the intervention of a special Providence that promised the regeneration of Britain. The doctrine of special Providence not only guaranteed the transcendent truths of Christian faith and civilization, it provided an interpretation of pre-Christian antiquity wherein Classical writers, though living in civilizations subject to general Providence, could be seen as precursors, through special Providence, of Christian revelation. The scale of value among academic disciplines depended upon this understanding. To erase the distinction between special and general Providence would be to acknowledge within the Christian West a competing rather than a
complimentary Hellenism. This was a step, despite the developments in German scholarship that they admired, that Thomas Arnold and William Whewell resisted, the latter arguing that because man was “a moral as well as a natural agent,” only the Sacred Narrative could make his historical nature “consistent and intelligible.” However, though he shared their Broad Church sympathies, Benjamin Jowett would take that step. Of the “place of religion in an increasingly embattled literary humanism,” DeLaura notes, “The older tradition of ‘literae humaniores,’ in which letters (including history) shared room, perhaps the smaller room, with philosophy and theology, was the shifting synthesis within which European Civilization, ‘theological humanism,’ defined itself. Only in the rapid breakdown of that tradition in the nineteenth century did letters move to the center of the humanist scheme,”9 a breakdown that Whewell and other Liberal Anglicans were determined to forestall, and Benjamin Jowett, and his friend, Mark Pattison, were willing to risk.

2.2 The Tyranny of Greece over Oxford

The mid-century climate of demoralization and anxiety that plagued British intellectuals has been remarked so many times it hardly bears repeating. The catalogue of religious, social, political, and economic fears is so extensive that one cannot help but be surprised at the rather cheerful energy and confidence with which Victorian thinkers went about their business. Nowhere is this clearer than in the career of Benjamin Jowett, whose presence shaped the lives of Oxford undergraduates for almost half a century. Five years older than Matthew Arnold, he had experienced Tractarianism at its height.
Securing a fellowship at Balliol in 1838 and an appointment as tutor in 1842, he would not be elected master of Balliol until 1870, after a failed attempt in 1854. His career was marked by controversy, first being attacked for unorthodoxy after the publication of his book on Paul’s Epistles in 1855, and though he was appointed regius professor of Greek the same year, his salary was only a quarter of that which the position usually held. Further controversy erupted in 1860 over his contribution to Essays and Reviews, and he was summoned before the vice-chancellor's court, and though the charges were dropped, efforts on the part of his allies to have his salary increased only overcame opposition in 1865. In short, by the time Jowett became master of Balliol in 1870, he was ready for reform.

The reform Jowett and his allies had in mind, though, was not a transformation of the university machinery, a political machinery Jowett was not loath to use to hinder Pater's career later. Rather, Jowett was interested in defeating the narrowness of mind in Oxford's curriculum, if he could not mend it in his enemies. Jowett saw, as Linda Dowling argues, that Oxford could have a new “secular purpose of producing a new civic elite to lead Britain out of sociocultural stagnation and into a triumphal age of imperial responsibility: Britain as a world civilization, with Oxford as its intellectual center” (xiv). Jowett's instrument was the college tutorial that had been at the center of Newman's efforts: “Coming to power through the revolution of university reform in the 1850's and 1860's, Jowett and the university liberals were to commandeer the Oxford tutorial, recommissioning it in the name of 'mental illumination,' Greek studies, and more generally, Hellenism” (35). In short, Jowett was to displace the central axis of the
classical curriculum at Oxford—the course of study known as “Greats” or Literae Humaniores, previously focused upon Latin antiquity—by placing Plato at its center. “In this context,” Dowling observes, “Jowett and others would call upon Greeks studies, and in particular the philosophy of Plato—‘the greatest uninspired writing,’ Jowett called it—as an alternative source of transcendent value to replace the basis previously provided by Christianity”(xiv). Though Dowling overstates the extent of Jowett's desire to “replace” Christianity—he never rejected “higher” religious belief—he did insist upon the equal status of Greek, especially Platonic, texts in the cultivation of a moral life: a living Hellenic tradition within the West that undid the tenets of Liberal Anglican historiography.

Where theological humanists had seen a prophetic Plato who had anticipated many of the doctrines of Christ, and where utilitarians, especially George Grote in his History of Greece, had seen a skeptical Plato who despaired of true knowledge (due to the lack of definite closure at the end of many Dialogues), Jowett, in the introduction to his translation of the Dialogues, saw Plato as “the father of Idealism, who is not to be measured by the standard of utilitarianism or any other modern philosophical system. He is the poet or maker of ideas, satisfying the wants of his own age, providing the instruments of thought for future generations. He is no dreamer, but a great philosophical genius struggling with the unequal conditions of light and knowledge under which he is living. He may be illustrated by the writings of moderns, but he must be interpreted by his own, and by his place in the history of philosophy. We are not concerned to determine what is the residuum of truth which remains for ourselves. His truth may not
be our truth, and nevertheless may have extraordinary value and interest for ourselves.”

In short, Plato's method turns out to be an anticipation of the Oxford tutorial. What the new “Greats” curriculum was to produce, in Jowett's estimation, was not simply discipline and training, but Bildung: the cultivation of the whole person. But unlike Newman's vision of the tutorial (or Plato's, for that matter), Jowett's would not proceed on the assumption of some fixed truth. Rather it was a search for truth. Jowett's own tutorials, famous for their excruciating silences and devastating interruptions, were more on the model of a Socratic thrashing of sophistry than the model of Newman's “cure of souls.” Yet, he did not seek to instill unbelief in his students; rather he aimed at the development of wit and agility that allowed one to make connections and syntheses. For Jowett, Plato was an admirable vehicle for such cultivation of the self's powers precisely because the study of him makes one aware of a process of development at work in history itself. “Aristotle is dead while Plato is alive!” he was fond of asserting. Jowett's general Hegelian turn of mind led him to regard Plato's thought as representative of a particular moment in the evolution of the human mind. As Frank Turner states, “The development, purification, and amplification of major moral and philosophical concepts represented for him the story of humankind coming to perceive more clearly some eternal truth,” and since modern philosophers had progressed further toward this truth, they “were able to understand more completely and precisely what Plato had been trying to say and they could remove apparent contradictions or embarrassments from his writings” (418). This last Jowett proceeded to do in his famous commentaries that accompanied his translations. Glossing over the authoritarianism as well as the homoeroticism in Plato's
works, Jowett's Plato is a moralist railing against the selfishness and philistine commercialism of his, and Jowett’s, day. Socrates becomes a Victorian.

Yet it is precisely the way in which Jowett’s Plato is brought to bear upon the problems of Victorian life, always speaking in the cadences of the King James Bible in his translations, that opened up the possibilities of a richer conversation with antiquity for a whole generation of Oxford undergraduates. Walter Pater had learned what might be termed the “Oxford style” of relating ancient and modern thought to one another, and particularly powerful in this regard is the example of Jowett’s commentaries on The Dialogues of Plato, whose insistence upon the living tradition of Greek thought was tempered by his insistence on historical relativism in which modern minds, through imaginative engagement with the past, could extract the contemporary relevance without dismembering the original. On the one hand, this aim fostered an encounter with Continental, and especially German, classical scholarship which, though regarded with suspicion for the picture of the ancient world it was literally unearthing, still set the standard for “scientific” thought; on the other hand, the need for accuracy—“the past as it really was” in Ranke's memorable phrase—confronted the very different educational ideal that Oxford represented. Oxford did not define itself as a “research institution” on the German model. Rather, it remained in important ways—ones Jowett fostered—the institution of Newman: one devoted to the moral cultivation of undergraduates. Hence Jowett's Oxford valued the humanistic tradition of the generalist who, like Coleridge’s Clerics and Arnold's Men of Culture, would “make reason and the will of God prevail.”11 With the possible exception of T. H. Green, whose interest in Hegel was marked by
rigorous expertise, the Oxford professoriate characteristically avoided the specialization that they associated with the German university. The analogical method which sought affinities between various systems of thought, reaching back to the diverse traditions of Newman's Tractarianism and Whewell’s Liberal Anglicanism, was part of the ethos of scholarship in Victorian Oxford.

Yet the grounds for Jowett's elevation of Greece were, for a younger generation, to undercut his sense of the “extraordinary interest and value” of the ancients. That ground, for Jowett's insurgents as well as for more orthodox Liberal Anglicans, was History, or more properly Historicism. While the Tractarians had fostered what might be more properly called “antiquarianism,” the Liberal Anglicans had pursued a more systematic historicist project; yet there were limits to how far they were to push historicist principles. As Peter Allen Dale has noted, a “complete” historicism was a source of great uneasiness for most Victorian intellectuals: “Through most of the nineteenth century such a resolution as this, with its apparent acceptance of the historical relativity of all values and concomitant reduction of reality to a precarious stream of tendency called human culture, would not have been in the least welcome. Certainly in the nineteenth century there were very few prepared to carry historicism to this length.”

Historicism, in its most radical form, “names a mode, or stage,” Carolyn Williams says, “of historical consciousness in which one inquires about a thing in the past and at the same time questions the procedures of that inquiry and the meaning of its results.” Jowett was already tipping the careful balance between Hellenic and Scriptural authority at Oxford, and he did so on the basis of a less radical historicist program that sought to
instill an intellectual agility and openness in his students and future imperial servants. But his role as, not only a teacher, but as an Anglican divine and biblical critic who remained true to the tutorial's “pastoral” model, would not allow him to abandon the spiritual truth of Christianity, however attenuated his High Church sympathies became. Jowett, in Oxford style, could hold his “Hegelianism” as a loose historical description that might be interpreted in consonance with his theology.

Of course, Jowett's direct influence was initially limited to his own college of Balliol; nevertheless, as his influence increased in the 60s and 70s, it made itself felt throughout the institution, and indeed, outside of it. And Jowett's “Greats” had become central at a sensitive time in Oxford's history. The abolishing of religious tests in 1871 which opened the university to Dissenters was part of a process of secularization that, throughout the last quarter of the century, marked the effective withdrawal of the Anglican Church from institutional governance. When seen in the light of the self-assurance of new scientific disciplines during the same period, the stability of even Jowett's attenuated Liberal Anglicanism was undermined.

Indeed, the seeds of this possibility were already being sown at the height of Newman's influence. “The trek of English students to Germany,” notes George Haines, “beginning in the thirties, became an ever-enlarging stream decade by decade until nearly the end of the century.” If German Hellenism was already familiar to a generation that had read the works of Goethe and Heine, those Victorians who went to study in Germany brought back other, more dangerous Teutonic imports: historicism, Hegelian Idealism, neo-grammariand philology, and a sense of a new secular model of scholarship based upon
scientific rigor. Among those who traveled to Germany was Benjamin Jowett. Though Jowett would never truly embrace the “research” model of the German university, his friend and fellow “Germanizer,” Mark Pattison would struggle to make it a reality at Oxford, often against Jowett himself. M. L. Clarke has noted that the Tractarian controversy diverted attention and effort from classical study to theology. Pattison, looking back at the retreat of the Oxford Movement, would declare, “our thoughts reverted to their proper channel, that of the work we had to do.”¹⁵ That work involved a major reinterpretation of the past, especially classical antiquity. As Clarke puts it, “the ancient world had ceased to be a unity and had broken up into distinct periods and personalities. It is hardly possible to speak anymore of classical influence without further definition. Historical study brought a new consciousness of the different character of different periods in the thousand years or so of ancient civilisation, and wider reading revealed the variety of ancient literature” (174). With this new understanding of classical antiquity came a new crisis of European identity, one that German intellectuals had already experienced. Two closely related problems emerge: the basis of an underlying unity amid diversity, and the basis of continuity through historical time. In short, how could one defend the relevance of the classics given the seemingly heterogeneous nature of ancient experience and its historically alien conditions? One solution could be found by turning to the philosophy of history. One could define analogues between ancient conditions and modern ones: this could, but need not, include some form of Vichian cycle. Or one might borrow from Hegel’s dialectic, in which the sublated forms of the past lay in the development of Spirit in the present. In addition, one might, on analogy
with the biological sciences, argue for some form of evolutionary process to provided a means of making the past, above all Greece, relevant for the modern world. By late century, this vision of the essential “sanity” and “clarity” that had underwritten the vision of Greece at Oxford would be undermined.

2.3 Toward a “Complete Historicism” and Aesthetic Priority

Pater’s reputation is bound to the notion of l’art pour l’art, but his aestheticism grew out of the historicist principles that underwrote Oxford Hellenism. Pater, however, would be a historicist of the “complete” kind, and this in turn produced his version of Hellenism that would unhinge Matthew Arnold’s categories and bend them to new purposes. “Pater,” as Turner states, “was not caught up in Arnold’s concept of analogous stages of historical development. His view of history, so far as he had one, derived from Hegel and from contemporary anthropologists. For him the human spirit manifested itself throughout the entire past, and all facets of civilization seemed vital and potentially interesting. Pater’s entire consideration of Greek civilization also had a more secure foundation in recent scholarship and archeology than Arnold’s.”16 Indeed, Pater had encountered Hegel as early as 1864, and though he would not embrace Hegel’s system, largely because it was a system, Hegel’s scheme of history, and art history in particular, would have a lasting influence on him.17 Feeling lightly the obligation to accept the philosophy of anyone in toto, Pater would instead seek out the lineaments of the “spirit” of an age, an artwork, or a writer. Ironically, he would find in Hegel not system but a
tendency of modern thought that found expression in many places. The most important
of those places were books like C. T. Newton's *History of the Discoveries at
Halicarnassus, Cnidus, and Branchidae*, Karl Müller’s work on the Darians, and the
extensive late-nineteenth century literature on Greek myth. What emerged from this
scholarship was a Greece far from Apollonian; rather, it was a tribal Greece with its
irrational rituals, bloody contests, and robust sexuality that demonstrated to Pater and
others the immense distance between the Greeks and contemporary society. And with
the “complete” historicism that such revelations force upon the Hellenic critic come the
epistemological problems that are inherent in that position: ones that are reflected in
Pater's treatment of perception, in *The Renaissance*, and elsewhere. The more dynamic
Hellenism that Jowett had instilled into the Oxford curriculum, more dynamic than
Arnold's classical humanism, had taken an unforeseen turn in a younger generation of
classically trained critics like Pater, and with that turn the problem of culture would be
transformed.

Jowett had fostered an interpretation of Greek thought that stretched the limits of
Anglican Humanism. Indeed, a humanistic interpretation of culture would be
sustainable, despite the challenges of Darwinism and historicism throughout the
nineteenth century. As Turner notes, “Hellenism as a source of humanistic wisdom was
transformed from a static attitude toward life into a dynamic force whose values each
generation must rediscover for itself and make its own. In this way humanistic Hellenism
survived the evolutionary challenge and continued to provide literary and ethical ideals
for the early twentieth century” (17). Yet, this was true only so long as humanists
themselves did not succumb to the forces of complete historicism; and always implicit in such historicism is the possibility, pursued by Pater, of a radical aestheticism that would commit treason against the very humanism that it emerged from. Although Jowett's Hellenism would remain central to Oxford through the close of the nineteenth century, the interpretation of Greece so important to his vision of a liberal education as well as the ethical Idealism he saw as vital to the Bildung of students destined to enter the Civil Service of a great empire, was to be challenged by the very forces he set in motion.

Writing in 1875 he would complain: “As knowledge is reduced to sensation, so virtue is reduced to feeling, happiness or pleasure. The different virtues—the various characters which exist in the world—are the disguises of self-interest. Human nature is dried up; there is no place left for imagination, or in any higher sense for religion. Ideals of a whole, or of a state, or of law of duty, or of a divine perfection, are out of place in an Epicurean philosophy. The very terms in which they are expressed are suspected of having no meaning. Man is to bring himself back as far as he is able to the condition of a rational beast. He is to limit himself to the pursuit of pleasure, but of this he is to make a far-sighted calculation;—he is to be rationalized, secularized, animalized: or he is to be an amiable skeptic, better than his own philosophy, and not falling below the opinions of the world.”

As much as this passage may be directed against, as Turner has argued, Jowett's growing fears of “reductionist scientific naturalism,” “utilitarianism,” and “the psychology of associationalism and sensationalism,” it seems clear that Jowett has another target in mind as well; Walter Pater's Studies in the History of the Renaissance had appeared the year before, in 1873, and if it did not appeal to utilitarianism, it did
appeal to the authority of “science,” to sensationalism, and it did offer a defense of an “Epicurean Philosophy.” Further, Jowett could not help but recognize lineaments of his own Hellenism in the scandalous book by his Oxford colleague.

Jowett’s Hellenism, centered upon Plato’s Idealism, does not undermine the traditional moral authority of the Bible: a tradition as old as the early Church Fathers. But once the notion of abstract universals is challenged by historicism’s relativism and Anti-Begreiflichkeit, Hellenism becomes a subversive force. For Pater, the non-conceptual nature of historical experience, the “tendency of modern thought,” as he repeatedly formulates it, undoes the Platonic identity of Truth and Beauty. If there is no timeless and universal truth—no being, but only becoming—then what remains is beauty itself: a beauty no longer itself an absolute, but rather one that is relative to conditions and to personal temperament. For Pater, aestheticism saves the self from the artificial constructs of the intellect. It rewrites Jowett’s vision of a liberal education—liveliness and agility of mind—into a freedom from all external claims upon the development of consciousness. In this way, the modern mind overcomes the decrepitude of the modern world. An authentic Hellenism becomes thinkable. Modern thought has produced, in Pater’s view, a means of superceding the belatedness of modernity itself. The consequences of this idea for modernism are elaborated in the next chapter. That Pater’s thought has such consequences has been occluded by the considerable energy modernists like T. S. Eliot devoted to displacing him from modernism’s history. But of course, Eliot, perhaps more than any other modernist, knew that the new art would stake itself on the relation between aesthetics and historicism.


9 See De Laura, xviii.


11 The phrase is, of course, from Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*. See 7.


14 See Haines, George, 21.

15 In *Classical Education in Britain*, 112.

16 In *The Greek Heritage*, 69.

17 See Billie Inman’s incredibly useful *Pater’s Reading*. This two volume work was produced by examining the entire Oxford library records from Pater’s tenure to produce a compendium of his borrowings and generous selections of relevant material from those works. This is a real tribute to the usefulness of old-fashioned scholarship, not to mention the labor of a small force of graduate research assistant.

18 Quoted in Turner’s *The Greek Heritage*, 421.
3.1 Displacing Pater

To raise the question of aestheticism's, and particularly Walter Pater’s, relationship to the emergence of modernism is immediately to confront long-standing prejudices inherent in English high modernism’s self-understanding as presented by T. S. Eliot, and the subsequent critical assumptions that issue from his views. In an essay entitled “The Place of Pater,” Eliot devotes over half of his discussion, not to Pater, but to Matthew Arnold and his defense of “culture” and identification of “a religious phase still possible for the modern mind.”1 Characteristically, Eliot dismisses Arnold's religious writings, and he finds Arnold's definition of “culture,” though confused, “powerless to aid or to harm.” Rather, Arnold, in Eliot’s ambivalent reading, is on one hand “rather a friend than a leader” who is “at his best in satire and in apologetics for literature, in his defence and enunciation of a needed attitude,” and on the other, one whose religious writings effected a “divorce” of “Religion from thought” which in turn is “a counsel to get all the emotional kick out of Christianity one can, without the bother of believing it” (96).

Yet if Eliot can find some congenial attributes in Arnold, he finds little, if any, in Pater. Without Arnold’s broad humanism, Pater’s thought becomes, in Eliot’s estimate, a
negative consequence of Arnold’s religious errors: “The total effect of Arnold's philosophy is to set up Culture in the place of Religion. And Culture is a term which each man not only may interpret as he pleases, but must indeed interpret as he can. So the gospel of Pater follows naturally upon the prophecy of Arnold” (99). Whereas Arnold remains a “friend” of Letters and a “stimulus to proceed” in their cultivation despite his religious attitudes, Eliot finds Pater simply “propagated some confusion between life and art which is not wholly irresponsible for some untidy lives” (105). The nineteenth century’s “degradation of philosophy and religion, skillfully initiated by Arnold” is, Eliot tells us, merely “competently continued by Pater” (100). And yet, it is the issue of competence that Eliot turns against him; the content of Marius the Epicuriean is simply “a hodge-podge of the learning of a classical don”—the charge of “donnishness” placing Pater's manner firmly in the mold of pre-scientific classical scholarship of the early nineteenth century. After telling us that “Arnold Hellenizes and Hebraicizes in turns; it is something to Pater's credit to have Hellenized purely,” Eliot asserts that “[Pater’s] intellect was not powerful enough to grasp [. . .] the essence of Platonism or Aristotelianism, or Neo-Platonism” (104), which leaves open the question of what it might mean “to have Hellenized purely.” Eliot cannot mean that such purity is to be found in Pater's doctrine of “art for art's sake,” since it “is itself a theory of ethics; it is concerned not with art but with life” (102). Eliot's Pater is primarily a moralist in the line of Carlyle, Ruskin, and Arnold, rather than the line of artists devoted to their craft—those who engaged in the “right practice of ‘art for art’s sake’”—Flaubert and Henry James.
Eliot devotes the final portion of his essay to an assessment of the importance of Pater's *Marius*, and the nature of the “importance” that he locates bears some examination. He hastens to assert that it “is not due to any influence it may have exerted” (105). Pater’s aestheticism, reduced to mere moralizing, receives scant attention as Eliot tells us, “I only feel sure that with the direct current of religious development it has had nothing to do at all” (105). Rather, Pater’s *Bildungsroman* is made to serve as an emblem of a failed nineteenth-century religious sentiment: “The true importance of the book, I think, is as a document of one moment in the history of thought and sensibility in the nineteenth century. The dissolution of thought in that age, the isolation of art, philosophy, religion, ethics and literature, is interrupted by various chimerical attempts to effect imperfect syntheses. Religion became morals, religion became art, religion became science or philosophy; various blundering attempts were made at alliances between various branches of thought. Each half-prophet believed that he had the whole truth. The alliances were as detrimental as the separations” (105-6). Safely restricted to a “moment” in the previous century—“I do not believe that Pater, in this book, has influenced a single first-rate mind of a later generation”—*Marius*, and indeed Pater’s whole effort, becomes simply representative of the failure of a line of Victorian writers extending through Carlyle, Ruskin, and Arnold to the dead end of aestheticism. An essay that purports to define Pater’s “place” in the English tradition ends by denying him any significant place at all.

Most critics, even those more sensitive than Eliot to the Victorians, have followed his assessment.² Eliot, looking back on previous literary developments, clearly saw the
threat that Pater's aestheticism opened up to his concept of cultural consensus and objective criticism. Yet, Eliot’s famous dismissal of Arnold and Pater is motivated, as we shall see, by a rejection of views perilously close to ones that Eliot himself held in his youth. Indeed, the notion that Pater had not influenced “a single first-rate mind of a later generation” would have surprised Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, all of whom, it has been shown, found the Oxford don to be a background presence in their own work.  

The longevity of Eliot’s strategic severing of any relationship between modernism and Pater’s aestheticism by making it a simple consequence of Arnold’s Culture has only been challenged since the final belated waning of High Formalism. For instance, Louis Menand traces the influence of Pater's aestheticism on the development of modernism seeing “the Imagist poem as a work built to the specifications of Pater's critical doctrine” (60-1). F. C. McGrath argues that “Pater’s texts as a whole present a conceptual paradigm that constitutes a substantial portion of the intellectual foundations of Modernist aesthetics and that consequently elucidates many of the premises, themes, motifs, and techniques of the major Modernist texts” (3). Yet studies such as these—and the list could be extended—focus primarily on the question of Pater’s direct relationship to the emergence of specific doctrines and techniques; and while they represent vital contributions to our understanding of the relationship of Pater to the development of modernism, they tend to occlude an issue that is central to any account of the making of modernism: an issue that, curiously, T. S. Eliot saw more clearly than most.
Eliot's effort at displacing Pater from the main “current” of the Tradition, a side-stream of Arnold's critical effort, is almost exclusively focused upon the question of “culture.” Hardly unaware of the semantic complexity of the term, Eliot is at some pains to restrict “Culture” to the secular world of art and literature, which in turn can be played off of “Religion.” What offends him is Arnold’s claim that Culture is broader than Religion, that it usurps “the place of Religion,” leaving the latter to be “laid waste by the anarchy of feeling.” Yet the mature, post-conversion, Eliot is also an Eliot who had, in his youth, read deeply in Frazer and Weston, Jane Harrison and the Cambridge Ritualists: writers whose emergent anthropological sense of culture certainly encompassed Religion. And though I reserve a fuller discussion of Eliot's culturalist thought for later, it is important to note the incompatibility between the Tylorian idea of culture as “a whole way of life”—a notion that underwrites much of the technique of The Waste Land—and Eliot's later Christianity. In holding fast to “Religion” as a frame superior to “Culture,” he accepts the terms of the Arnoldian debate, and here we begin to see why an essay ostensibly devoted to the placing of Walter Pater meditates so intently upon Matthew Arnold. The opposition between Culture and Religion, a product of mid-Victorian religious doubt, is imposed on Eliot by his own religious anxieties. When he finally turns to consider Pater, Eliot’s categories are uniquely tone-deaf to the notion of culture that produced The Renaissance and Marius the Epicurean. Despite Eliot’s disparagement of his academic abilities, Pater was a highly trained classicist, one who would feel
profoundly the transformations at the heart of this discipline as it struggled to come to
terms with the development of a rich but troubling concept: the culture thesis of a newly
insurgent anthropology.

3.2 Placing Pater

To his contemporaries, Pater’s gospel did not so naturally follow from Arnold's prophecy. Shortly after the publication of *The Renaissance*, John Wordsworth, Pater's Oxford colleague, angered by the notorious “Conclusion,” wrote a letter declaring his “duty” to oppose him publicly and to ask him to turn over his portion of the responsibility for Divinities Examinations. John Mackarness, Bishop of Oxford, used the occasion of an address to the diocese to attack Pater's “Conclusion” specifically, and he complained: “Thirty years ago the ablest and most highly esteemed of Oxford Tutors took it for granted, in their ethical teaching, that Christianity furnished the only certain standard in morals, and were accustomed to correct the shortcomings of other systems by its rule: Christians are expected to forget the existence of such an authority, when they cross the threshold of their lecture-rooms, now.” Pater had, in short, become something of a lightning-rod for conservative reaction to an extent that Arnold never was. But the distinction between Pater and Arnold is, of course, starker and more significant than their reputations. Somewhat naively, Pater was dismayed by the backlash from his colleagues. These accusations of moral negligence would lead Pater to remark to Edmund Gosse later: “I wish they wouldn't call me a hedonist; it leaves such a wrong impression on those who do not know Greek.”
The remark is not only characteristic of Pater’s donnish isolation; it also, in conjunction with the Bishop of Oxford’s outrage, hints at the deeper structural transformations that were reshaping classical studies as well as Oxford’s institutional identity. The shift within Oxford from an emphasis upon the cultivation of gentlemanly undergraduates to one based upon scholarship and research is the essential backdrop to the crisis of intellectual life in the mid- and late-nineteenth century. The secularization of the Oxbridge system so deplored by Bishop Mackarness had come about precisely in the years of Tractarian reform and those following its catastrophic demise. As I argued in the previous chapter, Newman’s failed attempt to defeat Broad Church Liberalism, combined with his desire to resanctify Oxford education through a successful revitalization of the college tutorial, had the unintended consequence of furthering the possibility of secularization in the university; on one hand, the Tractarian appeal to early Church doctrine had placed history at the center of Oxford’s concerns: on the other hand, a taste for reform at a university, now largely in the hands of Liberal Anglicans, would progressively displace the Church from the center of university life. But lastly, the conditions were created in which academic professionalization could develop. The university would be left in the hands of men like Pater who did “know Greek”—and historicism, philology, higher criticism, and much else besides. The cultivational model that Newman had placed at the center of Oxford's educational ideal—the cultivation of the intellect in concert with religious truth that would produce a wholeness of character—became increasingly hard to sustain as the framework of theological humanism waned. The increasingly felt “historicity” of Christianity undid the assumption that religious
truth could constitute the principle unity of knowledge. Indeed, to some the authority of Christianity would come to appear no greater than that of classical antiquity.

Hence it is not surprising that the notion of “culture,” with all of its attendant ambiguities, would become central to Victorians in search of a discourse that would connect an emerging sense of a historical relativism with the traditions of classical humanism. But the instability of the culture concept itself is central to its ability to be enlisted in support of greatly different aims: as an ideal of self-formation, or as the canon of the “best” intellectual products of a civilization, or as the “spirit” of an age, or of a people, also still cognate with “civilization.” All of these meanings were greatly complicated by the development of the study of “actual” culture as an integrated totality in which all elements are functionally related to one another: E. B. Tylor’s “whole way of life” of anthropology.

This redefinition of a key value of literary humanism, however, presented as many problems as it did opportunities for writers, especially those who found their own actual culture gravely flawed. Ideal culture held the promise of secular salvation from the narrow materialism of modern life. But Tylor, in defining his concept as one which “includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society,” seemed to define ideal culture out of existence, or to at least put it firmly in its place. Of course, one could ignore the conflicting interpretations by simply placing them in different semantic fields. Increasingly late-Victorian defenders of the humanist ideal would speak of High Culture—a relatively late semantic development—perhaps mirroring the concept of a High Church. Anthropological culture could be restricted conceptually to the study of
“savages,” surviving “folk” traditions and other “primitives,” while the complexities of “modern” societies could be relegated to the emerging rival discipline of sociology. But within the universities where classical studies was still central to the activities of a professionalizing scholarly class, these semantic fields were not so easy to separate; disciplinary boundaries remained extremely fluid, and few mid-century humanists would resist the temptation to find implications for their own studies in scientific theory. This is certainly true of Walter Pater, whose interest in philosophy, classics and fine art, combined with literary aspiration, never prevented him from linking those interests to his often hazy interpretation of contemporary physics and chemistry, let alone such a “trespassing” science as anthropology.

Through the nineteenth century, as we have seen, the study of ancient civilization came increasingly to center upon Greek rather than Roman antiquity, and archaeological discoveries revealed a primitive tribal Greece. This vision of archaic Greece would make the emergence of anthropological theory directly relevant to those who, like Pater, had learned to see the Greek “spirit” as embodied in Periclean Athens. As he developed his aesthetic theory, Pater attempted to exploit the ambiguities of the culture idea by synthesizing it with his humanism. He sought to answer the question of how art, viewed as a product relative to its time and place, could also have an enduring claim upon a consciousness that was itself formed by relative conditions. Though he would never be intrigued by “primitive” non-Western societies, he would see that the culture thesis provided him with a way of conceptualizing the history and identity of the West itself. It is in these efforts that the nature of Pater's aestheticism and radical historicist vision of
culture, distinct from Arnold's “Culture” as “disinterested criticism of life,” become part of the story of the emergence of English literary modernism. To see how, we need to examine the shifting development of Pater's thought before, during, and after his encounter with anthropological concepts. Pater is often seen as simply an aesthete whose full range of thought can be grasped through a text like the “Conclusion” to The Renaissance. However, seeing Pater's development requires that we cast a larger net. By examining the early essay, “Coleridge's Writings,” The Renaissance, and Marius the Epicurean—Pater's self-proclaimed attempt to "explain" the ideas in his notorious "Conclusion"—we can discern the genesis of a conceptual maneuver that the modernists themselves would attempt.

3.3 The Shadow of Arnold

Besides a few essays and scattered polished phrases, Walter Pater's general reputation has been largely shaped by Studies in the History of the Renaissance, or indeed, the famous “Conclusion” to that work. Even among specialists, there is a marked tendency to read Pater's corpus in terms of that book and to see his early essays as anticipations of its major claims and characteristic attitudes (it is hard to say “arguments” in Pater’s case), and his later ones, especially Marius the Epicurean, as simply elaborations of its critical method and aesthetic outlook. Pater's first published essay, “Coleridge's Writings” (1866), would seem to be an anticipation of the assertions that later became the central argument of the “Conclusion” to The Renaissance. In this early work, we see the same suspicion of fixity and finality of concept that the later piece turned into an ethical injunction to make “one desperate effort to see and touch.” And
like the “Conclusion,” “Coleridge” begins with an effort to define the “tendency” of modern thought: “Modern thought is distinguished from ancient by its cultivation of the ‘relative’ spirit in place of the ‘absolute.’ Ancient philosophy sought to arrest every object in an eternal outline, to fix thought in a necessary formula, and types of life in a classification by ‘kinds’ or genra. To the modern spirit nothing can be rightly known except relatively under conditions” (2). In this late outbreak of the querrelle des anciens et des modernes, Pater seems already clearly on the side of the moderns, and as in the “Conclusion,” Pater's empiricism is already evident. “The moral world,” he tells us, “is ever in contact with the physical; the relative spirit has invaded moral philosophy from the ground of the inductive sciences” (2) and the result is that the modern mind encounters “not the truth of eternal outlines effected once and for all, but a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions, shifting intricately as we ourselves change; and bids us by constant clearing of the organs of observation and perfecting of analysis to make what we can of these” (3). Pater's aim is to contrast Coleridge with this modern spirit, to show that “[t]he literary life of Coleridge was a disinterested struggle against the application of the relative spirit to moral and religious questions” (3). His “charm” lies in being a member of “the elder generation exquisitely refined by the antagonism of the new” (1). As much as Pater’s essay presents not only a reading of Coleridge’s career in the light of an emerging aestheticist doctrine, and a definition of the modern spirit, it also struggles with a complex Oxford inheritance as Pater attempts to clarify his deeply entwined concern: the way in which “culture”—which Arnold was in the process of defining as a social ideal of transcendent “authority”—could be exploited to describe a
sort of nexus of the forces of historical and experiential flux. In “Coleridge's Writings” we can see Pater straining to unite the various meanings of this term under a general, if not rigorously conceptual, coherence.

The articulation of some principle of continuity becomes the essential problem for those who, like Pater, struggled to assert the value of humanistic culture as a realm of Bildung. If the traditional Oxford avoids this problem by asserting the claims of universal principles, Pater seeks it in the principle of change itself, in a vaguely Hegelian formulation: “Nature, which by one law of development evolves ideas, moralities, modes of inward life, and represses them in turn, has in this way provided that the earlier growth should propel its fibres into the latter, and so transmit the whole of its forces in an unbroken continuity of life” (1). Despite his invocation of a fashionable Darwinism, this dialectical concept runs counter to biological determinism, though it still suggests an historical one: some undefined “law of development.” If the concept of evolution was stimulated as much by the fact of extinctions as it was by the notion of ancestry of species, Pater's appropriation of dialectical thought here marks a strong contrast; nothing, no influence, no inheritance ever disappears as “earlier growth” infuses its “fibres” into later forms. However, in Hegelian fashion, these earlier “modes of inward life” are sublated into new forms, ones that are the essence of historical change. Coleridge, in Pater's view, was one who could not submit to the Zeitgeist. And though his work has a certain “charm,” his refusal to “abandon” himself to historicity could only lead to “a situation of difficulty and contention” (1). Historical change leads to a generational conflict: “Then comes the spectacle of the reserve of the elder generation exquisitely
refined by the antagonism of the new. That current of new life chastens them as they contend against it. Weaker minds do not perceive the change, clearer minds abandon themselves to it” (1).

Behind such notions lie not only Herder and historicism, but the loose influence of Darwinism as well: “Always as an organism increases in perfection the conditions of its life become more complex. Man is the most complex of the products of nature. Character merges into temperament; the nervous system refines itself into intellect. His physical organism is played upon not only by the physical conditions about it, but by remote laws of inheritance, the vibrations of long past acts reaching him in the midst of the new order of things in which he lives” (2). Pater would later drop this passage; the biological determinism that underwrites it is counter to his intent to define culture in terms of freedom and self-consciousness. But the early gesture toward Darwinistic implications in Pater reveals the increasingly hazardous complexity of organic conceptions of culture in the nineteenth century. Pater would repudiate the path of Social Darwinism embraced by so many intellectuals through the turn of the century. He is only interested in such scientific principles to the extent that they seem to allude to each other, to suggest or intimate the existence of some deeper principle that connects the apparently disparate categories of thought and life.
One of the problems in confronting the influences on Pater is his essentially
dialectical cast of mind in an institution that valued analogues rather than processes.
Pater often seems to read for the “tendency of modern thought” in not only diverse
contemporary sources, but in ancient sources as well. Given that he was deeply skeptical
of “system” throughout his life, Pater rarely displays anxiety about the incongruity of the
sources that he refers to. Billie Inman has noted that the work of Fichte, as well as
Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum*—a work that stood alongside Plato in Jowett's
reformed curriculum—are probable early sources of Pater's abiding skeptical turn of
mind. Pater, receiving his M. A. and being elected as Fellow of Brasenose College in
1865, was well read in ancient as well as modern philosophy, either through primary
texts or through secondary histories. He would pick and choose ideas that seemed
suggestive—and legitimating—of his developing theory of aesthetics. Pater, speaking
of himself no less than Coleridge, slyly quotes Heine's dictum: “Es giebt kien Plagiat in
der Philosophie” (14). Given this “Oxford style,” one finds in Pater's writing the traces
of many sources, none of which are quite there in any full sense. But for our purposes,
we need to see that Pater's historicism allows him to synthesize ideas that, on their own,
make uneasy fits. The resulting combinations in his thought allow us to discern more
clearly the development of ideas that, on cursory examination, seem to be mere
restatements of his sources. This is particularly true of his treatment of the concept
of “culture.”

Hence, behind Pater’s review of Coleridge’s work stands the figure of Matthew
Arnold, just as T. S. Eliot claimed. If Arnold's phrases ring throughout Pater’s work, as
David DeLaura has convincingly demonstrated, they also tend to rewrite them, not merely to say “special paternian things,” but to seriously challenge the basis upon which Arnold’s “culture” lies by transferring the analysis from questions of social class to ones of historical consciousness and change.¹⁵ Pater's emerging notion of culture does not fall so naturally from the “prophecy of Arnold” as Eliot supposed. In the Coleridge essay, Pater retains the Arnoldian vocabulary of culture as “perfection,” both in works and individual cultivation, “criticism” as the essential activity of the man of culture, and the notion of a conflict between culture and religion. And the Hellenes will play as great a role in Pater’s essay as they do in Arnold’s Culture and Anarchy. But through the lens of historicism, these concepts are refracted in ways that will lead to the sort of crisis of solipsism that we find in The Renaissance: one that will lead to the struggle to reassert the basis of communal life in Marius.

Pater views Coleridge’s career as a tragic hunger for the Absolute, an always-thwarted effort to grasp transcendental foundations.¹⁶ Though Pater is in sympathy with his “poetic gifts,” they are marred, in his view, by Coleridge’s philosophic turn of mind so clearly displayed in his criticism: “On the whole it may be described as an attempt to reclaim the world of art as a world of fixed laws—to show that the creative activity of genius and the simplest act of thought are but higher and lower products of the laws of a universal logic” (13-14). In place of this desire for the transcendent logos, Pater, of course, argues for the relative spirit that, “by dwelling constantly on the more fugitive conditions or circumstances of things, breaking through a thousand rough and brutal classifications, and giving elasticity to inflexible principles, begets an intellectual finesse,
of which the ethical result is a delicate and tender justness in the criticism of human life” (29). Of course, this is a theme that Pater's fame rests upon. Yet, in this early version, we can see Pater much more tied to the Arnoldian vocabulary than he would be in the “Conclusion” to The Renaissance six years later. Arnold’s “criticism of life” is still in the service of “urbanity” and “spontaneity,” but it has completely lost its role as a foil to social anarchy, as a “centre of authority.” Rather, the flux of historical change which makes manifest the relativism of all values signals a withdrawal into consciousness itself as a source of supreme value. Of the fugitive nature of impressions, Pater says, “To the intellect, to the critical spirit, these subtleties of effect are more precious than anything else” (3).

These statements may seem to be heading toward burning with “a hard gem-like flame” and the like; and of course they are. Yet, Pater’s handling of the theme, at this point in his career, betrays anxieties that will not be in evidence in the famous “Conclusion.” One of the chief interests of the Coleridge essay is the way in which the theme of extreme subjectivism sits uneasily with the historicist underpinnings of the argument; the ligatures of Pater's thought are much easier to discern in this essay than in the later work. When Pater published “Coleridge’s Writings” in Appreciations (1889), he omitted significant passages that relate to the basis of Christianity, the nature of Greek thought, biological determinism, and an upbraiding of Kant’s influence on Coleridge's thought. The later discussion follows the predictable line of attacking Kant’s theory of apriori categories and his “fine-spun theory of the transformations of sense into perception” (16). But the other omissions are of direct significance to Pater’s conception
of culture; for in it he implicitly transforms Arnold's distinction between Hebrew and Hellene—a balanced alliance in Arnold—into one of open warfare between them. Furthermore, Pater struggles to articulate, in this essay, a means of asserting the claims of humanistic culture, of the continuity of tradition and the free development of the individual, within the idea of change itself. And in so doing, the essay reveals the developing tensions inherent in the idea of culture.

Having noted that Coleridge believed in the necessary rationality of religious belief, he writes: “And yet ever since the dawn of the Renaissance, had subsisted a conflict between reason and faith” (10). Yet, in Pater’s analysis, the split between them is no mere effect of the relative spirit, a consequence of Renaissance modernity. Rather, as he asserts, “From the first, indeed, the Christian religion had affirmed the existence of such a conflict, and had even based its plea upon its own weakness. In the face of classical culture, with its deep wide-struck roots in the world as it permanently exists, St Paul asserted the claims of that which could not appeal with success to any genuinely human principle” (10). All turns here upon the interpretation of that qualifying “genuine,” and its referent is clearly related to the values he ascribes to “classical culture.” Yet given the relentless relativism of Pater’s argument, the notion of such a culture being grounded in “the world as it permanently exists” is curious. And Pater is too careful a stylist to mean to restrict such a phrase merely to ancient self-understanding. What kind of permanence and genuine human principle this radical historicist has in mind will become clear shortly. “In the Middle Ages,” Pater tells us that “it might seem that faith had reconciled itself to philosophy” (10). However, this is an illusion produced
by much Scholastic cogitation. Rather, “it is not that faith has become one with reason; but a strange winter, a strange suspension of life, has passed over the classical culture which is only the human reason in its most trenchant form. Glimpse after glimpse, as that pagan culture awoke to life the conflict was felt once more” (10).

We can come closer to understanding the nature of these tensions in the essay by looking at how Pater relates Coleridge to a particular current in Greek philosophy, this time in unexcised text. As much as Coleridge borrowed from Schelling, the latter’s “Philosophy of Nature,” Pater tells us, is actually a modern manifestation of a “permanent type of speculative temper”(14), one that lies behind the genesis of Hellenic thought: “That mode of conceiving nature as a mirror or reflex of the intelligence of man may be traced up to the first beginnings of Greek speculation. There are two ways of envisaging those aspects of nature which appear to bear the impress of reason or intelligence. There is the deist's way, which regards them merely as marks of design, which separates the informing mind from nature as the mechanist from the machine; and there is the pantheistic way, which identifies the two, which regards nature itself as the living energy of an intelligence of the same kind as, but vaster than, the human” (14).
Pater, in effect, allies this deistic turn of mind to all subsequent forms of monotheism, and such “mechanical” processes that issue in blind adherence to a monological principle, an ontological truth pursued, as he says earlier, by “a backward school of logicians” (3). Such Western philosophical obsessions are equally indebted to the strict observance of dogmatic religious principle. Yet, Pater is not arguing here for pantheism against the strictures of Judeo-Christian religion or the equally sterile absolutist ontology.
of Western philosophy in any straightforward sense. The problem, of course, is the status of Greek philosophy itself in the history of Western thought. “Greek philosophy,” he continues, “finding indications of mind everywhere, dwelling exclusively in its observations on that which is general or formal, on that which modern criticism regards as the modification of things by the mind of the observer, adopts the latter, or pantheistic way, through the influence of the previous mythological period” (14). Pater’s view of this “mythological period” is heavily indebted to the theories of F. Max Müller, which saw the origins of myth, and consequently of religion itself, in a “disease of language”: the capacity of a name to have many different referents (homonymy), or for the same object to have many names (polynomy). Müller's theories dominated late nineteenth-century mythography, and they clearly inform Pater's interpretation: “Mythology begins in the early necessities of language, of which it is a kind of accident” (14). However, Pater's interest is not primarily in elucidating the origins of religion or exploiting the implications of Müller’s version of the “solar myth”; rather, he is more concerned with the consequences of the mythological for the emergence of Greek philosophy: the way in which Greek philosophical ambitions are, in their earliest form, allied with the poetic. In as much as Greek thought begins in the service of pantheistic religion, Pater asserts, “at a latter period its essence changes; it becomes what it was not at its birth, the servant of a genuine poetic interest, a kind of vivification of nature” (14).

Yet this “vivification” of nature would not ultimately lead to the vivification of Greek thought. “This unfixed poetical prepossession reduced to an abstract form, petrified into an idea,” Pater claims, “is the conception which gives a unity of aim to
Greek philosophy” (15). Pater is, here, concerned with the ultimate sterility of Greek philosophy, and indeed all transcendental philosophy which issues from it: its tendency to ossify into formal categories that deny the claims of immediate sensation. And the burden of his essay is to tar Coleridge’s philosophical and critical efforts with the same brush. Though Pater seems to express some hesitation to reduce Greek thought to mere abstraction—earlier in the essay (in a portion of text that latter fell to Pater’s editing pencil) he notes that “An ancient philosopher indeed started a philosophy of the relative, but only as an enigma” (2)—the philosophical hunger for the Absolute, so evident in Coleridge, begins with the Greeks. Rather, this prefiguring of the modern “relative spirit” simply demonstrates that “the germs of almost all philosophical ideas were enfolded in the mind of antiquity”, and the primary value of their Hellenic intellectual temper lies in the way its concepts were “fecundated one by one in after ages by the external influences of art, religion, culture in the natural sciences, belonging to a particular generation which suddenly becomes pre-occupied by a formula of theory, not so much new as penetrated by a new meaning and expressiveness” (2). The true value of philosophical ideas, Pater insists, lies in their ability to be the stimulus of ideas more or less remote, “external” to, the aims of philosophy. The inside/outside structure of this relationship is misleading; Pater’s thought here is clearly within the organicist traditions of Herder more than the absolute relativism of German Historicism. The seeds of concepts are present from the beginning, “fecundated” by later external “influences.” Pater's logic only makes sense if the externality of these forces is only apparent, an effect of the historical position of the modern who lives in the midst of a complexity that masks an original unity.
Despite the seemingly equal claims of these “external” influences, given Pater’s rejection of conceptual thought, his Anti-Begriefflichkeit, the basis upon which the continuity of culture can be said to exist is not found in philosophic thought, nor in religion, nor even in science, but in the experience of art itself. Only the aesthetic experience can connect the disparate forces in culture. Culture, as self-development, is a striving toward “perfection”—a thoroughly religious value in the nineteenth century. Yet Pater finds that the religious sentiment is most valuable as an aesthetic concept: “The life of those who are capable of a passion for perfection still produces the same mental states; but that religious expression of them is no longer congruous with the culture of the age. Still, all inward life works itself out in a few simple forms, and culture cannot go very far before the religious graces reappear in it in a subtle intellectual shape. There are aspects of the religious character which have an artistic worth distinct from their religious import” (23). Inasmuch as the tentativeness of Pater’s language suggests that religious graces of a more usual kind are still possible, though not “congruous,” the effect of this statement is to make religion an effect of feeling, an expression of one of the few simple forms of inward life which are essentially aesthetic. A page later, Pater is more confident: “Our culture, then, is not supreme, our intellectual life is incomplete, we fail the intellectual throne, if we have no inward longing, inward chastening, inward joy. Religious belief, the craving for objects of belief, may be refined out of our hearts, but they must leave their sacred perfume, their spiritual sweetness, behind” (24).

Yet if organic metaphors proliferate in Pater’s discussion of culture, both as Bildung and as high culture, surprisingly they have become a somewhat different fate in his
discussion of the nature of the artwork. This becomes clear as Pater confronts the problem of defining the classic and the romantic, with an implicit criticism of the latter: “the work of art is sometimes likened to the living organism. That expresses the impression of self-delighting, independent life which a finished work of art gives us; it does not express the process by which that work was produced” (19). But such romantic pleasures are denied the artist. Rather, artistic activity is characterized, if not by ascêsis, then by intellectual restraint and technical self-discipline: “By exquisite analysis the artist attains clearness of idea, then by many stages of refining clearness of expression. He moves slowly over his work, calculating the tenderest tone, and restraining the subtlest curve, never letting his hand or fancy move at large, gradually refining flaccid spaces to the higher degree of expressiveness” (19). The artwork is not primarily a statement of theme, but a handling of it. Philosophy and religion are parts of culture because they are susceptible to artistic treatment, because of the stimuli they afford to the artist who has the “talent of projection” (19). Indeed, Pater's language even implies that religious and philosophical ideas, in an incongruous age, depend upon artistic representation: “Culture, at least, values even in transcendent works of art the power of the understanding in them, their logical process of construction, the spectacle of supreme intellectual dexterity which they afford” (19). This is not quite aesthetic formalism—he has not boldly asserted the ultimacy of form as such—but it is close to it.

This emphasis on craftsmanship, however, does not imply that the artist is coldly intellectual. Rather, artistic power is dependent upon the artist’s engagement with the
world. “What constitutes an artistic gift,” he tells us, “is first of all a natural susceptibility to moments of strange excitement, in which the colours freshen upon our threadbare world” (19). In this description of what constitutes the stance of the artist we can see the outlines of the central poetic credos of the twentieth century—epiphany, “enstrangement,” “defamiliarization.” And furthermore, the sharp distinction Pater draws between reception and creation, audience and the status of the work, prefigures some particular modernist obsessions. But also, the aesthetic provides Pater a means of asserting the principle of continuity in historically conditioned manifestations of culture. At the heart of Western identity lies not a Greek idea, but a Greek manner—one open to recovery at conducive historical moments: “That projection is of all degrees of completeness; its facility and transparence are modified by the circumstances of the individual, his culture and his age. When it is perfectly transparent, the work is classical” (19).

And yet, this notion of degrees of transparency, of a kind of spectrum between the classical and the romantic ends up being the descriptive side of a more general prescriptive intent. “Criticism,” Pater states, “may still discuss the claims of classical and romantic art, literature, or sentiment; and perhaps one day we may come to forget the horizon, with full knowledge to be content with what is here and now; and that is the essence of classical feeling” (30). The classical takes precedence over the romantic after all. Hence, what Pater attempts to recover is the Apollonian ideal in the midst of historical flux. “The Greek spirit, with its engaging naturalness, simple, chastened, debonair [. . .] is itself the Sangraal of an endless pilgrimage [. . .]” (30). The Grail will
restore the kingdom, but the search for it turns out, happily, to be endless, continually
deferred. Coleridge, in Pater's estimate, failed to grasp Hellenic significance because he
refused the historicity of ideas, the judgment of what was and was not possible, or
desirable, at a given stage of history. Pater’s editorial changes to his essay suggests the
extent to which he perceived the incompatibility of some of his own earlier ideas with his
emerging sense of historicism's implications for the humanistic culture of organic self-
development. In suppressing the biological determinism, the frontal assault on religion,
and the rejection of abstraction, Pater was attempting to bring into relief the themes that
he would pursue later, perhaps trying to establish continuity between his earlier and later
thought: an ironic maneuver for a proponent of the un governed relativism of
consciousness in the historical moment. Pater’s commitment to historicist principles, in
this essay, sits uneasily with the organicism of humanism and the abstract principles of
historical change that he still retained. Increasingly, he would turn toward a radical view
in which sense perception, aesthetic awareness, would provide a means of composing the
identity of the self. Yet in doing so he would create for himself a new set of problems.
After “complete historicism” had done its work in the “Conclusion” to Studies in the
History of the Renaissance, Pater’s difficulty would not be that of establishing continuity
within history as much as any continuity between the self and the world.

3.4 Discriminating the Object

Pater’s views are rarely seen as developing very far beyond the formulations of
the “Conclusion”; like the Marius described by Eliot, Pater “drifts [ . . . ] if he can be said
to have any motion at all” from theme to theme without ever straying very far from the
injunction “to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame.” Indeed, this view of Pater's work started with his contemporaries for whom The Renaissance (and perhaps Marius) represented his major claim to fame outside of a narrow group of acolytes both inside and outside of Oxford. And yet, from within this group Oscar Wilde, in calling The Renaissance “my golden book,” implicitly linked that work with Marius's encounter with his own “golden book,” Apuleius's The Golden Ass. Pater’s “Conclusion” has remained ever since a kind of Arnoldian touchstone, an exemplum of the “authentic” Paternian manner, upon which his other works can be tested.

Pater himself asserts the connection when he explains, on the occasion of the publication of the third edition of The Renaissance with the offending “Conclusion” restored (though altered), his reasons for withdrawing it from the second edition: “this brief ‘Conclusion’ was omitted in the second edition [. . .] as I conceived it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall [. . .] I have dealt more fully in Marius the Epicurean with the thoughts suggested by it.” In the end, though, Marius is hardly an amplification of those positions that are most striking about the “Conclusion.” Marius recasts the terrain upon which Pater’s earlier defense of aestheticism struggled, and in order to approach the consequences of this translation of value for not only Pater’s thought but for the unfolding possibilities later exploited by literary modernism, the nature of the ideal that the Renaissance represents for him bears some examination in light of the struggle to define culture and the Hellenic ideal that the Coleridge essay initiates.
The Renaissance, or rather the “Conclusion,” has received so much critical examination that yet another reading may seem unlikely to bring forth much news. The traditional focus upon the “Conclusion” itself is understandable since it has the programmatic force of a manifesto, if not the animus that we usually associate with that form. In fact the book is hardly a book at all, or at least it was not originally conceived as such by Pater. Rather it is a gathering of essays, five of which were previously published, the earliest being “Winckelmann” in 1867. Even the “Conclusion” had previously appeared in an unsigned review of the poetry of William Morris. Yet, given what are, to my mind, the significant differences between the Coleridge essay and the position articulated in the “Conclusion”—positions that are not always in line with other parts of The Renaissance itself—it is useful to rehearse Pater's themes in this work in light of the culture question that I have been pursuing.

The much-neglected “Preface” defines the Renaissance as “a complex and many-sided movement.” In a barely disguised slight of Ruskin, whose name was so much associated with a fifteenth-century definition of the period, Pater acknowledges “giving it a much wider scope than was originally intended by those who originally used it to denote that revival of classical antiquity in the fifteenth century which was only one of the many results of a general excitement and enlightening of the human mind, but of which the great aim and achievements of what, as Christian art, is often falsely opposed to the Renaissance, were another result” (xxxi-ii). Pater's Renaissance becomes a revolution, an “outbreak of the human spirit,” in revolt against “those limits which the religious system of the middle age imposed on the heart and the imagination.” As such,
the historical parameters of the period established by Ruskin are redrawn to include an “earlier Renaissance within the middle age itself,” but also the eighteenth-century German Hellenist Winckelmann who “really belongs to the spirit of an earlier age” (xxxiii).

Yet what makes this reconfiguration visible, Pater argues, is impressionistic criticism. “What is important,” he tells us, “[. . .] is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects” (xxx). The essays that follow set out to exemplify the proper stance that one should assume toward beautiful works so as to be open to all of their power. The power of great works is, in essence, their sensible qualities that create pleasure for “the aesthetic critic” who “regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as power or forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind” (xxx). In the “Preface,” therefore, aestheticism remains a particular mode of perception for critics as they go about their business. And because such a critic has “temperament” rather than “definitions,” the Arnoldian value of “disinterestedness” in a “criticism of life” is put in the service of a more narrow criticism of art. And if Pater’s position had remained here, then T.S. Eliot’s assessment of the relationship between Arnold and Pater would be more secure. But Pater wrote a conclusion, one that, as Adam Phillips notes, was to “reveal Arnold’s prophetic muddle.”22
Pater begins the “Conclusion” by telling us that “to regard all things as inconstant
modes or fashions has more and more become the tendency of modern thought” (150).
Beginning with a discussion of “that which is without—our physical life,” Pater asks,
“what is the whole of physical life [. . .] but a combination of natural elements to which
science gives their names? But these elements, phosphorus and lime and delicate fibres,
are present not in the human body alone: we detect them in places most remote from it.
Our physical life is a perpetual motion of them—the passage of the blood, the wasting
and repairing of the lenses of the eye, the modification of the tissues of the brain by every
ray of light and sound—processes which science reduces to simpler and more elementary
forces. Like elements of which we are composed, the action of these forces extends
beyond us; it rusts iron and ripens corn. Far out on every side of us these elements are
broadcast, driven by many forces; and birth and death and the springing of violets from
the grave are but a few out of ten thousand resulting combinations” (150). The
combinations may indeed be many, but the ones that Pater chooses to tell us about are
significant. His examples of the mutability of the body—circulation, the regeneration of
the eye, the effect of sensation on the brain—are hardly meaningless for Pater's critical
project, and neither are his examples of processes “remote from us”—the rusting of iron
and the ripening of corn, figures of culture and nature, are simply, material reminders of
our own mutability and inevitable death. To “begin with that which is without,” Pater is
saying, is not to encounter objects at all, but a current of forces and elements “to which
science gives [merely] their names.” Any attempt to grasp the nature of the physical
world ends with the realization that “[t]hat clear outline of face and limb is but an image
of ours, under which we group them—a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass
out beyond it” (150).
Having shown the consequences of a failed positivism, Pater turns to “the inward world of thought and feeling,” where “the whirlpool is still more rapid, the flame more eager and devouring.” Pater offers a self which moves from the immediacy of sensation that is no sooner “dissipated” under the influence of “reflexion” to become “already reduced to a group of impressions” which is “ringed round for each one of us by a thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on it way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without” (151). This self who keeps “as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world” is further diminished in Pater's radical empiricism. Each impression is “in perpetual flight,” an experience in time that is “gone as we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is” (151).

After such a claim, it is astonishing to see Pater attributing much value to the inner life of such a fugitive self. And yet we are told, “Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end” (152). But experience, reduced to “a single sharp impression,” is, Pater has told us, “a relic more or less fleeting.” Pater’s impression is torn apart in “that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves” (152). Yet it is precisely the problem of time and consciousness that gives the Paternian self's quest such urgency; such a self must decide how to “pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy” because it is aware of life’s “awful brevity.” Pater’s time is not the duration of time-philosophies like Bergson’s, but a
consecutive passing from privileged moment to privileged moment. The self relates to the world in a paradoxical fashion. On the one hand, the Paternian self must submit to experience, to the privileged moment; on the other hand, such moments become idealized by that self. As Wolfgang Iser has noted of Pater’s thought: “These reactions of submission and idealisation show that man's dependency on experience creates fundamental gaps, though these can only be perceived as it were negatively. The incompatibility of man and world turns out to be a dynamic force in so far as man is constantly set at odds with the world by way of the experiences that shape him, and he must therefore be at odds with those experiences themselves; this discrepancy brings out not only the fragility of the man-world relationship, but also the constant necessity to counter-act that fragility.”

It is here that we can identify the motivation behind Pater's assertion that, among the “passions” that can yield a “quickened sense of life,” the experience of art has the most to offer. Pater’s “Conclusion” is haunted by the awareness of death’s inevitability, hence apprehending moments in which time seems to be arrested is a way of experiencing a “quickened, multiplied consciousness.” If burning with “a hard, gem-like flame [...] is success in life,” for the Paternian self, then “failure,” in the forgotten half of Pater’s most famous formulation, “is to form habits; for habit is relative to a stereotyped world”: the narrow world of philistine indifference. In Iser’s interpretation, the Paternian self is not only shaped by experience but takes an active role in “the aesthetic composition of that experience” (25). Such aesthetic composition opens up the possibility of expression as “a continual objectification of inwardness, which in turn
subjectifies neutral experience into a form that will at least modify, but more often actually change, the experience” (25). Hence, the desire for self-expression which arises from a basic incompatibility of experience and the world, allows, in theory, a reconciliation of the self to a world of objects. But this reconciliation, for Iser, is largely on the subject's own terms: “Pater wants to endow self-expression with a power upon the outside world (not locked-up inwardness made manifest). Expression is for him, a ‘correction of the world,’ a battle against the ‘burden of experience’ while being based upon experience in some sense.” Hence expression “reproduce[s] those parts of experience that accord not with the patterns of outside reality but with the secret wishes of the expresser” (27). Thus expression for Pater becomes a desire for freedom, for potential power, whose source is experience as an act of creativity. “Expression,” Iser states, “opens up a region that transcends the given and proclaims the freedom of the individual. This freedom can only come about by way of art, for, as Pater’s skepticism shows most clearly, the gap between man and world cannot be bridged by ideas” (28).

Iser’s description of Pater’s aestheticism helps us see how the “Conclusion,” which seems at first so gratuitous, the irritating piece of moralizing of Eliot’s description, is actually central to the historicist “tendency of modern thought.” If reality cannot be grasped by conceptual schema, then the self who seeks to pierce the veil that concepts place between consciousness and world discovers, not a rugged assent from the depths of Plato’s cave, but fundamental discontinuity between thought and feeling, between ideas and perception. On one hand, this realization makes the self into the “solitary prisoner” of the “Conclusion.” Yet, it also opens up not only a freedom of expression, but a means
of overcoming the despair of our “historicity” both personally and culturally. The aesthetic mode of apprehension is, on one level, an attempt to defeat time through the expression of “mood.” As Iser observes, “mood is a passive state that reflects the calm of timelessness, and even where there is passion and animation, the lack of intention takes away the destructive force of time” (42). This sense of timelessness that art can evoke for the self is also a freedom for the critic, as Pater’s method in The Renaissance demonstrates. The tradition becomes a storehouse of associations, impressions, and allusions that can be called forth to sustain the presentation of mood. While this idea appears to be remote from Eliot’s idea of tradition—an “ideal order”—it nevertheless anticipates his sense of the presence of the past. But more importantly, it prophesies the “mythic method” that Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and others would make into modernism’s signature technique.24

Yet, Pater also anticipates in other more fundamental ways the problems later modernists would face. His aesthetic impressionism functioned as a means of exploiting historical relativism in order to save art from the humanistic Hellenism of Oxford. Yet, charges of moral irresponsibility led Pater to consider how an ethics of perception might be justified. Tylor’s culture idea, selectively borrowed in the Oxford manner, provided Pater with a way of seeing social life in aesthetic terms. In his recourse to anthropological concepts, Pater prefigures the fundamental turn of modernist thought. In Marius the Epicurean, Pater would bring the aesthetic to bear upon the problem of community. And like the modernists, Pater would find in ritual the link that he sought.
3.5. Marius and the Funerary Imagination

Marius the Epicurean moves beyond the vision of culture presented in The Renaissance largely because Pater has found, in the new Tylorian concept of culture, a way to unite his aestheticism with his historicism in a manner that does not leave the self “a solitary prisoner.” Set in the second century, the book tell the story of a young man of the minor nobility who, following the death of his parents, leaves his ancestral home to be educated in Pisa. His sense of isolation from other youths eventually draws him into a friendship with Flavian, a young aspiring poet whose character displays brilliance, but also something of the perverse. Together, Marius and Flavian plot a “euphuistic” poetic revolution, a reinvigoration of the Hellenic Epicurean manner, the “New Cyrenaicism,” that is cut short by Flavian's untimely death in an outbreak of the plague. With nothing to tie him to the north, Marius secures a position as a secretary in the Imperial bureaucracy, travels to Rome, and on the way meets Cornelius, a captain of the Guard, with whom he strikes up a friendship. In Rome, Marius has the opportunity to observe the condition of Roman society, the character of the Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, his Stoic philosophy, and other philosophical controversies of Antonine Rome. But most significantly, Marius’s friendship with Cornelius leads him to encounter Christianity, a religion that attracts Cornelius. Yet, during renewed outbreaks of the plague—blamed on the Christians—the Emperor initiates persecutions. Marius and Cornelius are mistakenly arrested as Christians. Marius convinces their captors to release Cornelius so that he might prove their innocence, but while in captivity, Marius contracts the plague and is left to die
among the Christians. The book ends with Marius’s death as the Christians administer
funeral rites, serving him communion in extremis and calling him a martyr of the faith.

A summary of the plot suggests a false sense of action in the book, as much as it
can be seen as describing action at all. The novel’s subtitle, His Sensations and Ideas,
gives a fair description of its narrative manner: more of an extended “imaginary portrait”
than a novel. Marius has usually been interpreted, following Pater's suggestion, as
simply an extended defense of aestheticist positions expressed in the “Conclusion.”
However, such a reading seriously underestimates the extent to which Pater's book treats
the positions in the “Conclusion” as a problem to overcome. Rather, the book’s structure
can be seen as a dialectic from Marius’s boyhood paganism, in which aesthetic
experience and the sacred are united, to his awakening pleasure in the poetic under the
influence of Flavian, to the philosophical self that emerges in his experiences at court.
He struggles with the conflicting demands of philosophic abstraction and the appeals of
“the bodily eye.” Yet, the philosophical path, Marius finds, will not provide him with the
means of unifying the demands of consciousness and conscience, the unity of thought
and act that characterizes his youthful paganism. Only by re-attaining the conditions of
religious experience, if not the belief, is he able to bridge the gap between “sensations
and ideas” that, in the “Conclusion,” is simply posited as an abyss. Marius, in rejecting
the violence of civic life, the cruelty of Roman public entertainments, the actual
decadence of pagan civilization rather than the “comely decadence” of Flavian's
euphuism, is also led to reject Aurelius’s Stoic tolerance of that violence, his cold
indifference to the slaughter of the amphitheater, his withdrawal into Stoic pessimism as a defense against decadence and decline. Hence the attraction of the Christian religion for Marius lies not simply in its beliefs—beliefs that hardly affect his Epicurean temperament at all—but in its cultivation of beauty, of ritual, and the power of that beauty to create a cultus. Christianity becomes, ironically, the authentic heir of pagan sensibility, more authentic in fact than the nominally pagan empire itself. Since most critical accounts of the novel center upon the role of aestheticism in Marius’s Bildung, the book continues to be glossed as a fictionalization of the themes of the “Conclusion,” seemingly following Pater’s own assertion that Marius deals “more fully” with its assertions. Yet, Pater’s reason for suppressing the “Conclusion,” his fear that it might “mislead” the young, suggests the extent to which ethical questions were becoming central to him. Far from a fictionalization of the dynamics of burning with a hard gem-like flame, Marius struggles to recast the terms of his aestheticism into the ideal of a “whole way of life” not simply for the isolated self, but for a self among others. Hence the book struggles to define a social or communal ideal by connecting humanistic aspiration with the newly available anthropological vocabulary of Tylor.

Of the concepts that Pater acquired from Tylor, few are more important than the idea of the "survival" of historically remote cultural forms. Early in the book, he states that “it was in places remote from town-life that the older and purer forms of paganism itself had survived the longest” (37). Despite the plethora of new cults in the Imperial capital, the old “religion of Numa” maintained itself in the countryside where it “lingered on with little change amid the pastoral life, out of the habits and sentiment of which so
much of it had grown. Glimpses of such a survival we may catch below the merely artificial attitudes of Latin pastoral poetry” (37). Poetic self-consciousness, here, becomes “merely artificial” in comparison with the authentic culture, based upon the unconscious “habit” and “sentiment” that issue from a whole way of life. It was, we are told, “A religion of usages and sentiment rather than facts and belief, and attached to very definite things and places [. . . .]” (37). Pater introduces the character of Marius by way of an aside about the ascension of Marcus Aurelius to the throne, a man who was “about to test the truth of the old Platonic contention, that the world would at last find itself happy, could it detach some reluctant philosophic student from the more desirable life of celestial contemplation, and compel him to rule it” (38). It was “about the time” when Marcus Aurelius, that philosophic emperor, assumed the throne from Antonius Pius that “there was a boy living in an old country-house, half farm, half villa, who, for himself, recruited that body of antique traditions by a spontaneous force of religious veneration such as had originally called them into being” (38). Pater’s book is structured around the tension between the highly cultivated, self-conscious philosophy of Aurelius and the natural, unconscious and spontaneous religiosity of Marius’s early years.

After the death of his mother, Marius begins a trajectory that would seem to set him on the intellectual path toward the Stoic emperor. Yet, he is taken to live with his tutor to “attend the school of a famous rhetorician, and learn, among other things, Greek” (61). It is in this school, modeled on Plato’s Academy, that Marius cultivates knowledge of the past; but it is in the streets of Pisa that his senses are opened to a world beyond the isolated comforts of his country estate and the beauty of pagan ancestral worship of
household gods: “His entire rearing hitherto had lent itself to an imaginative exaltation of the past; but now the spectacle actually afforded to his untired and freely open senses, suggested the reflection that the present had, it might be, really advanced beyond the past, and he was ready to boast in the very fact that it was modern” (62). As a fictional reconstruction of Rome, Pater's book is bound to disappoint; but as a barely veiled commentary upon Victorian England, the novel never fails to intrigue. The academy at Pisa is essentially an ancient version of Oxford—he speaks of its “chapel” rather than a “temple”—and as such, it represents his struggle with the Oxford inheritance as he searches for a way to reconceive the relationship between aesthetic immediacy and historical sensibility. Like the Oxford intelligentsia and the Victorian civic elites, the “polite world” of Antonine Rome, “in a voluntary archaism [. . .] went back to a choicer generation, as it fancied, for the purpose of a fastidious self-correction, in matters of art, of literature, and even, as we have seen, of religion.” And if such conservative historical consciousness could not lead to more open and dynamic modes of life, the narrator finds that “at least it improved, by a shade or two of more scrupulous finish, on the old pattern” (62). Yet, the narrator continues, “the new era, like the Neu-zeit of the German enthusiasts at the beginning of our own century, might perhaps be discerned, awaiting one just a single step onward” (62), and with this invocation of the German Hellenists, we can see how Pater’s book problematizes the relationship between historical consciousness and the ideal of absolute modernity: a “perfected new manner [. . .] as regards the things of the imagination and the actual conduct of life,” an “ideal,” we are told, that “demanded entire liberty of heart and brain” in contrast to “that old, staid,
conservative religion of his childhood” that “certainly had its being in a world of somewhat narrow restrictions” (62-3). Whereas the claims of the senses are “absolutely real, with nothing less than the reality of seeing and hearing,” Marius finds “the other” to be “vague, shadowy problematical!” (63). Marius’s earlier paganism had been attractive so long as it remained tied to the sensory gratifications of ritual and continuity of place. But with his discovery of the manifold claims of the visible world as such, figured by analogy with the German Hellenists whose rediscovery of Greek modes of apprehension become, for Pater, the very expression of “modernity,” we see a turning of the burden of history against itself by recovering an even more primordial relationship to the world.

It is this tension that will draw him to Flavian: the delight in the sensual world and the desire to shape a new literature to express it. Flavian is presented as a “perfect pagan type.” His pleasure-seeking in the streets of the city, the hint of debauchery about him, both intrigue and trouble Marius. Indeed, as Linda Dowling argues, a homoerotic subtext often accompanies Victorian invocations of Hellenism. As opposed to the “pure and disinterested friendships of schoolmates” (63), Marius, when he first encounters Flavian, "felt something like friendship at first sight” (63). Yet whatever homoerotic discourse Oxford Hellenism may have provided, Pater represents the relationship between Marius and Flavian more in the spirit of those unconsummated “Oxford friendships” based on male homosociality. For it is the poetic brilliance of Flavian that seals their friendship: that and a shared book. Both come to a consciousness of the power of literature through The Metamorphoses, better known as The Golden Ass, of Apuleius. In Flavian, the encounter stimulates “literary ambition”; in Marius it spurs his critical
consciousness, becoming his “Golden Book.” As Pater says, “A book, like a person, has its fortunes with one; is lucky or unlucky in the precise moment of its falling in our way, and often by some happy accident counts with us for something more than its independent value” (87-8). Of course, Pater’s critical efforts, his descriptions of the scene of Bildung, figure people as books: the self as a work of art. To say that Pater’s reverse analogy here of books as persons suggests that he is struggling to place literary art within the social may seem to over-emphasize a brief and inconsequential passage. After all, Pater’s reputation as one who sought to elevate art and literature to an exquisite plane should argue against reading such moments this way. Pater’s art works by slow accumulation of details; rarely does he show his full hand in a concentrated passage. The figure of Apuleius’s “Golden Book” as a personality indicates the problematic at the heart of the novel: how can art be integrated into life, not merely in order to intensify the self, but to intensify art, and hence its ability to participate in transforming culture into communal Bildung?

The solution lies, early in the book, in the nature of the poetic revolution that Flavian hopes to accomplish: one that seeks to maintain continuity of identity—a central problem for the paternian self and its flickering impressions—in terms of literary tradition by, paradoxically, initiating a revolution of the word. “The literary programme which Flavian had already designed for himself,” the narrator tells us, “would be a work, then, partly conservative or reactionary, in its dealing with the instrument of literary art; partly revolutionary, asserting, so to term them, the rights of the proletariat of speech” (88-9). The motivation behind this program is, surprisingly, one we more commonly
associate with modernists like Ezra Pound: restoring the “dead art of poetry.” The narrator tells us, “Latin literature and the Latin tongue were dying of routine and langour; and what was necessary, first of all, was to re-establish the natural and direct relationship between thought and expression, between the sensation and the term, and restore to words their primitive power” (89). The “direct relationship” between word and thing, the aim of revitalizing literary language by restoring to words “their primitive power,” the assault upon an overly-routinized expression: in all of these aims we recognize the project of the early modernists. But furthermore, the description of these aims as “partly reactionary” and “partly revolutionary” prefigures the characteristic stance of English modernism in ways that Pater could not consciously anticipate. Pater attributes to Flavian a literary program, and though he uses political language to describe it, he does not imply a direct political interest. And yet such interests are latent, and in the politically charged atmosphere of the early twentieth century, they would be expressed. Pater, in his own context, would hardly be termed a political reactionary. The way in which he attempts to negotiate the demands of artistic revitalization and the claims of tradition neatly indicate the problem that English modernists would inherit. It is not so much the conflicting claims of tradition and innovation—a problem that always confronts the artist in some form—that indicate the problem, but rather the way in which they are now framed for Pater. The revolutionary part of Flavian’s poetics, the assertion of the “rights of the proletariat of speech” might suggest Michael Tratner's assertion that the modernists sought to “speak from the masses,” and in a certain sense it does. But it does so not merely as a political conflict, but as an attempt to imagine the literary constituted
along the lines of the communal ideal of the culture thesis. To “restore to words their primitive power” is also to restore the ethnos: “Others might brutalize or neglect the native speech, that true ‘open field’ for charm and sway over men” (89). But Flavian seeks to restore “the really mediatorial function of the poet, as between the reader and the matter of his experience” (92): to express the “old pagan culture,” which is “an accomplished yet present fact, still living, united, organic whole, in the entirety of its art, its thought, its religions, its sagacious forms of polity” and do justice to the experience of the “actual world” with its “eager self-assertion” (92). In its registering of the impact of the culture thesis, Pater’s novel struggles to ally the ends of aspirational culture of the individual with the Tylorian “whole way of life” while still asserting the centrality of literary language.

The “theory of Euphuism”— an anachronistic labeling— that Flavian develops is essentially the prose style of Pater himself; as such, we can see the way in which Pater allies the sense of history with the aesthetic consciousness that, together, bring the self into an awareness that it, and the cultural forms that help constitute it, are embedded in a “complex whole” that is in essence anthropological. The nature of this synthesis is defined in terms of Marius’s critical consciousness. While not a poet himself, “there was everything in the nature and the training of Marius to make him a full participator in the hopes of such a new literary school” (89). From his training, Marius has learned to value the directness and simplicity of the Greek genius, yet he also knows that history has made Greek naturalness something impossible to recover in its entirety: “Hellas, in its early freshness, looked as distant from him even then as from ourselves” (91). Rather, Marius
concludes, “true literary tact would accept the difference in forming the primary conception of the literary function at a later time [. . . .] Perhaps the utmost one could get by conscious effort, in the way of a reaction or return to the conditions of an earlier and fresher age, would be but novitas, artificial artlessness, naïveté; and this quality too might have its measure of euphuistic charm, direct and sensible enough, though it must count, in comparison with that genuine early Greek newness at the beginning, not as the freshness of the open fields, but only a bunch of field-flowers in a heated room” (92). Nevertheless, by being “derived immediately from lively personal intuition” such an art would be “saved . . . from lapsing into mere artifice” (93). Thus, consciousness of the Hellenic ideal united with craftsman-like discipline avoids the “fopperies and mannerisms” of a more general “Roman Euphuism, determined at any cost to attain beauty in writing” (90). Yet, Marius also perceives more than the potential literary “charm” of the new school. If Marius has lost the simple pagan faith of his childhood, he discovers an adequate replacement for it in the new “euphuism” of Flavian: “there was something which ministered to the old ritual interest, still surviving in him; as if here indeed were involved a kind of sacred service to the mother-tongue” (89). Like the complex whole itself, Marius is constituted by “survivals” that center upon a deep ritual need. Crucially, Flavian’s poem turns out to be the Pervigilium Veneris. Pater’s fictional representation of the poem’s composition will stand behind Ezra Pound’s fascination with the anonymous late Roman lyric, and T.S. Eliot’s parody of it in “Prufrock’s Pervigilium”: part of his attempt to write a new kind of “love song.” 26
With Flavian’s death, these literary ambitions disintegrate in the unfinished poem he attempts to complete in moments of lucidity on his deathbed. But the principals themselves nourish Marius’s Epicureanism, an authentic Greek Cyrenaicism that pursues not so much any pleasure, but rather the pleasure of perceptual awareness. He comes to a position near to that of the “Conclusion” to The Renaissance. If Marius had, under the influence of Flavian, found within language itself a possible source of human community and cultural regeneration, he finds this faith in the ability of language to be coincident with things undermined as a result of his philosophic interests. His primary obsession is with truth-certainty, and he finds this problem of the “subjectivity of all knowledge” (112) to be something “which confronts all philosophies at their starting, but with which none have really dealt conclusively, some perhaps not quite sincerely; which those who are not philosophers dissipate by ‘common’, but unphilosophical, sense, or by religious faith” (113). Unable to discover a criterion of truth outside his own impressions, Marius finds “‘common experience’, which is sometimes proposed as a satisfactory basis of certainty, being after all only a fixity of language” (113).

It is this philosophy that will be challenged by Marius’s contact with the Stoicism of Aurelius. Upon coming to court, he is initially intrigued by the emperor, in part because of the seriousness with which Aurelius treats the ceremonial nature of Roman public life. In celebrating his triumph over the barbarians, Aurelius, Marius senses, “gave, to himself, an air of unapproachableness, and to his whole proceeding, in which every minutest act was considered, the character of a ritual” (143). Yet, a different emperor slowly emerges for Marius in the consequences of court Stoicism. Though Aurelius was one whose ritualism and pious observances suggested that he “thought
manners a true part of morals,” (143), and though his virtue stemmed “[f]rom the great Stoic idea, that we are all fellow-citizens of one city” which led him to “a more equitable estimate than was common among Stoics, of the eternal shortcomings of men and women” (158), Marius's esteem for the Emperor disintegrates as he watches Aurelius's reaction, or non-reaction, to the slaughter of the amphitheater.

“The entertainment would have,” our Oxfordian narrator tells us, “an element of old Greek revival in it, welcome to the taste of a learned and Hellenizing society” (167). The Games, being a “religious occasion” still retained “a kind of sacrificial character”; thus, Aurelius's pontifical role demands his attendance. Dedicated to the worship of Diana, the games suggest, to the Paternian narrator rather than Marius, “two allied yet contrasted elements of human temper and experience—man’s amity, and also his enmity, towards wild creatures, when they were still, in a certain sense, his brothers” (167). Hence the most ancient of audiences, far from seeing animals in the “pastoral relationship” of later times, regards them as “equals, on friendly terms or the reverse,—a state full of primeval sympathies and antipathies” (168). The Roman spectator, though he “could enter into the humours of those ‘younger brothers’, with an intimacy,” yet found the original religious meaning displaced, “the ‘survivals’ of which in a later age seem often to have had a kind of madness about them” (168). The Roman enjoyment of animal slaughter, in the “fantastic accidents of their agony,” expresses “the deficiencies of an age fallen behind in this matter of manly amusement” (168). Watching the grim scene, Marius feels himself “isolated in the great slaughter-house” (169) amid the cheering blood-drunk multitudes. But Marius’s isolation is based upon his rejection of
finding pleasure in cruelty; he acknowledges the viciousness of the scene. Aurelius, by
contrast, “had sat impassably through all the hours Marius himself had remained there.
For the most part indeed, the emperor had actually averted his eyes from the show,
reading, or writing on matters of public business, but had seemed, after all, indifferent.
He was revolving, perhaps, that old Stoic paradox of the Imperceptibility of pain; which
might serve as an excuse, should those savage popular humours ever again turn against
men and women” (169). From this episode, Marius concludes that “what was needed
was the heart that would make it impossible to witness all this; and the future would be
with the forces that could beget a heart like that” (170). Of course, such a heart Marius
will discover in the early Christian cult, against which “savage humours” will turn with
the acquiescence of the emperor.

Given that Marius ends somewhat ambiguously with the death of the protagonist
among the sympathetic Christians, we can see that the book leaves its central problem
unresolved. Pater’s struggle to discover, articulate, and represent an ethic that he feels
must arise out of the very act of perception itself, grounded in the aesthetic moment as
such, and able to vindicate the moral authority of the Paternian cultivated self, seems
continually thwarted by the very qualities that secure this self’s privileged insights. Yet
the positive struggle of Marius is redeemed by others who have sacrificed a part of their
experience in favor of an ideal, who have chosen Christ, and who have put their
sympathetic force to work in the world.

This underscores the tension between action and reflection that marks so much of
Pater’s work. This tension, in essence, recapitulates the distinction between the Hebraic
and Hellenic made famous by Matthew Arnold. “The governing idea of Hellenism,”
Arnold tells us, “is spontaneity of consciousness; that of Hebraism, strictness of
conscience.”27 In Arnold's reading, both of these conceptions of human nature emerge
from a struggle with the demands of the body: “The Greek quarrel with the body and its
desires is, that they hinder right thinking; the Hebrew quarrel with them is, that they
hinder right acting” (92). Both principles, he tells us, aim at the same “perfection or
salvation” but by different means. For Arnold, a triumphant Hebraism pervades the
middle-class and is reflected in its “paramount sense of the obligation of duty, self-
control, and work, this earnestness in going manfully with the best light we have, as one
force” (90). But where Arnold sees both forces, by themselves, as inadequate or
incomplete and argues for the contributions of both, Pater finds that the demands of
consciousness outweigh the demands of conscience. Arnold’s Hebraic conscience, its
earnest devotion to duty, becomes for Pater simply obedience to convention: “The theory,
or idea, or system, which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in
consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract morality we
have not identified with ourselves, or what is only conventional, has no real claim upon
us” (153). Pater’s autobiographical heroes are engaged precisely in the search for a
morality that they can identify with themselves; yet the act of assent, of identification, is
itself figured in Pater’s texts as a confrontation with death, the end of consciousness.

And so it is in Marius. Though “[t]he gentle Seneca would have reverent burial
provided even for the dead body of a criminal,” we are told that “when a certain woman
collected for internment the insulted remains of Nero, the pagan world surmised that she
must have been a Christian: only a Christian would have been likely to conceive so chivalrous a devotion towards mere wretchedness” (237). The pagan Seneca can recommend the extension of dignified burial to common criminals, but it is the Christian, we are reminded, who puts principles into action, ironically so in Nero’s case in that he was one of the great persecutors of Christians. The figure of Nero here is interesting given his epicene character and his pretensions to being an artist; Pater’s text is continually aware of the dangers of hedonism, and it works hard to dissociate Marius’s values from an unbalanced devotion to certain kinds of pleasure at the expense of wholeness.

Marius, who is continually caught between conflicting claims, is shown final compassion by those who have the courage to choose. Obviously, Marius is not a debauch in Nero’s mold; nevertheless, the guilty air of following one’s tendencies surrounds him, and it is not cleared away by the meek solace Marius finds in the moments before his death: “Often had he fancied of old that not to die on a dark or rainy day might itself have a little alleviating grace or favor about it. The people around his bed were praying fervently—Abi! Abi! Anima Christiana! In the moments of his extreme helplessness their mystic bread had been placed, had descended like a snow-flake from the sky, between his lips” (296). And so Marius dies accepting the physical comforts of the Eucharist, but not its spiritual meaning (it is “their” mystic bread after all). And it is with the Christians, within their “generous” community, that Marius’s salvation, and indeed, sanctification, occurs: “It was the same people who, in the gray, austere evening of that day, took up his remains, and buried them secretly, with their
accustomed prayers; but with joy also, holding his death, according to their generous view in this matter, to have been of the nature of a martyrdom; and martyrdom, as the church had always said, a kind of sacrament with plenary grace” (296-7).

3.6. The Pleasures of Decline

In Guide to Kulcher, Pound asserts his own debt to Walter Pater: “In fact he is not dull in the least. He is adolescent reading and very good bait.”²⁸ (160). Unlike Eliot’s dismissal of him—those untidy lives, one suspects—Pound sees Pater as a spur to both creation and criticism: “Every critic however anti-paterine ought to want to accomplish something of the sort that Pater indubitably did with his Renaissance. Pater made his limited circle of readers want to know more of a period” (207). Nevertheless, even Pound does not endorse Pater as a model for modernist poetry. He later claimed that Eliot had “modernized himself.” But Pound’s early poetry that attempts to connect the troubadours with the re-emergence of Hellenism— a thoroughly “Paterine” notion— was something he himself had to overcome. He modernized himself as well and later called his first book of poetry “a box of stale cream puffs.” In the process of redefining what it would mean to be modern, both Eliot and Pound were also indebted to the untidy lives that Pater seemed to authorize. Pound’s aestheticism repositioned the role of art by “competently continuing”— perhaps re-writing— Arnold’s idea of culture. Culture becomes a dialectic engagement of self and world. Yet the world, reduced to a stream of impressions, can only be known through the work of the artist who has broken through the habitualized perception of philistine routine, and it can only be experienced by the cultivated consciousness of the “Conclusion.” This, for him, is precisely what the Greeks
discovered. The survival of this Greek manner—Arnold’s “spontaneity of consciousness”—shows its relevance for the modern world. As early as the “Coleridge” essay, Pater asserted: "Still, wherever a speculative instinct has been united with extreme inwardness of temperament [. . .] there the old Greek conception, like some seed floating in the air, has taken root and sprung up anew” (15). Pater’s reading of Western history depends upon its periodic re-emergence, most spectacularly in the Renaissance. Yet this conception depends on little more than a humanist understanding of culture that masks the problem of the isolation of individual consciousness he develops in his “Conclusion.” In *The Renaissance*, he develops what he sees as the logical consequence of the modern—“the relative”—spirit. Ever the “analogist,” though he is, the repositioning of culture by anthropology would throw his scheme into open crisis because it redefined the problem of cultural continuity and the position of the self among others.

Pater’s self needs more than imprisonment, as *Marius* makes clear, and this is found in communal acts that are at their core aesthetic. If in *Marius* Christianity is saved from it own Hebraistic origins by a Hellenism that becomes a conduit for the survival of spontaneity, it does so only by embedding itself in the ritual elements of the Church: the aesthetics of Christianity. In this reading, Christianity would only later fall prey to the narrow Hebraists who would demand Arnold’s “strictness of conscience.” Yet works of art can survive such misinterpretation, Pater holds, and serve as a stimulus for rebirth.

Pater’s position may remind us of one of his contemporaries who also saw the modern world as one of decline, and for much the same reason: priestcraft. Friedrich Nietzsche comes to a similar reading of modernity, though with a very different solution
to the problem of living in it. Most importantly, Nietzsche’s Hellenism was of a very
different kind. He would hardly interpret the carnage of the Roman amphitheater in the
same way Pater’s Marius does. Nevertheless, both share the task of reading the
possibilities for consciousness in a decadent modernity: decadent because it had turned
away from the wisdom of the Greeks. Of course, all depends upon the answer to the
question, which Greeks? For writers of a younger generation like Oscar Wilde, the
answer began with Pater’s and ended with Nietzsche’s. It is to those untidy lives that we
now turn.

1 “The Place of Pater” in The Eighteen-Eighties: Essays by the Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature.

2 The critical tradition that emerged under the influence of Eliot through the nineteen fifties and sixties
follows his assessment of aestheticism and the latter decadence as a minor literature, redeemed only by W.
B. Yeats and his development beyond the “Celtic twilight” and romanticism. See, for example, Graham
Hough’s The Last Romantics and Ruth Z. Temple’s “Truth in Labeling: Pre-Raphaelitism, Aestheticism,

3 See the following: Frank Moliterno’s Dialectics of the Spirit in Pater and Joyce. Greensboro: ELT Press,
1998. Also see Perry Meisel’s The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater. New Haven and


5 McGrath, F. C. The Sensible Spirit: Walter Pater and the Modernist Paradigm. Tampa: University of


8 Tylor, E. B. Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion,

9 Pater would remove the “Conclusion” but restore it after subtle revision. All quotations are from the

10 Marius as restatement of the conclusion examples

11 This kind of misappropriation of evolution as a “developmental concept” that “explains” human
consciousness and culture will become extremely important in understanding the transition from literary
Decadence, through Symbolism, to modernism. See Tom Gibbons’s study of Havelock Ellis, Arthur


18 The awkward neologism “enstrangement” comes from the attempts by English speaking critics of Russian Futurism to render Viktor Shklovsky’s term “ostraniene”: a term that refers to the way literary "devices" operate to make the familiar world “strange” while alienating us from our habitual responses to the world. For further discussion, see Ben Sher’s introduction to Shklovsky’s Theory of Prose. Elmwood Park, Ill: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990.

19 Wilde’s comment is quoted from Dowling 87


24 As Iser notes, “Although Pater’s arrangement of history and tradition is not to be compared to that found in “The Waste Land” or Ulysses, it does already foreshadow the upheavals in literary technique that were later to be wrought by Eliot and Joyce” (44).

25 Pater’s Imaginary Portraits have been seen as

26 The early drafts of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” contain a section entitled “Prufrock’s Pervigilium” whose lines would be cancelled in the final version. This indicates not only Eliot’s interest in Latin literature, but significantly, his engagement with previous literary works much less remote. Pater’s famous representation of the composition of the “Pervigilium Veneris” is a presence in Eliot’s draft. See Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917. Ed Christopher Ricks. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996. Ricks links Pater’s Marius specifically to the poem. See pages 177 to 190.

CHAPTER 4

OSCAR WILDE AND THE WEAPON OF HELLENISM

4.1 The Case of Nietzsche

“What is the sign of every literary decadence?” Nietzsche asks in The Case of Wagner. “That life no longer dwells in the whole. The word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and obscures the meaning of the page, the page gains life at the expense of the whole—the whole is no longer a whole.”

Nietzsche’s definition, borrowed from Paul Bourget, is also a fair description of Nietzsche’s own style, which he recognized himself. In the preface to the Wagner essay, he tells us, “Well, then! I am, no less than Wagner, a child of this time; that is, a decadent: but I comprehend this, I resisted it” (155). Nietzsche’s effort to make Wagner into a symbol of decadent modernity asserts two modes of decadence: the self-conscious and the reflective. Ironically, Wagner’s strength, for Nietzsche, rests on his unconscious representation of the age: “He had the naïveté of decadence: this was his superiority. He believed in it, he did not stop before any of the logical implications of decadence” (186).

Yet, the superiority of naïveté must be understood against the problem of self-consciousness and resistance to the decadence of one’s own time and one’s relation to the past. Of course, the “superiority” he assigns to Wagner is ironic; to be a child of one’s time is in some sense to be a victim of it. Whatever the case of Wagner shows, the
decadent writer possesses precisely the double consciousness that Nietzsche claims for himself. And this is most clearly seen in the gap between the highly cultivated consciousness of the decadent self and the decadence of the culture to which that self responds.

In contrast to Nietzsche’s analysis of cultural pathology and commitment to the future, Walter Pater’s aestheticism, as we have seen, moves from a self condemned to its own flickering impressions to one that yearns to establish some connection, however transitory, with other selves. Yet, this sensibility is not quite Wagner’s naivete. The ambiguous ending of Marius suggests the instability, or even the defeat, that threatens such an attempt. At the heart of Pater’s work lies a tragic vision: the tragedy of a self conscious of its own mortality as well as the inevitable passing away of cultural forms in the relentless processes of history. The anthropological concept of survivals offers, for him, the promise of an escape from the prison of both self and history more significant than the humanist understanding of culture can offer on its own. Works of art become not simply objects of contemplation, and consolation, in the midst of mutability. Rather, for him they offer access—an authentic connection—to past modes of experience, and in doing so, the artwork becomes more than an opportunity for conciliatory sensations. It establishes the possibility of historical consciousness itself, and while this prospect may be no less tragic than Pater’s earlier conception in his “Conclusion,” it releases the prisoner self to register the present moment as part of a past, and it opens that moment to the future. Nietzsche, Pater’s contemporary, had he known of him, would have certainly
seen him as no less a child of his times than Wagner. Yet, between Pater’s longing for, and Nietzsche’s resistance to, the present lies the problem of the decadent self, and it is this problem that literary decadence passes on to the modernists.

The connection between English modernism and decadence has more often been asserted than analyzed, when asserted at all. Moderns from Arthur Symons through T. S. Eliot sought to erase their relationship to the nineties. Most persistently critics have seen Decadence as a literature of transition from Victorian romantic values to those of modernism proper. Of course, the links such arguments establish depend upon how each critic defines modernism. Murray G. H. Pittock in The Spectrum of Decadence discusses the ideological distinctions between aestheticism, decadence, and symbolism: terms he believes are often conflated. For him, “Aestheticism was a forerunner of the showiness of Decadence, but in a less accentuated or ‘immoral’ form. Wilde on his showy American tour was an Aesthete; Wilde on trial was a Decadent; Wilde as a writer was, in many respects, a Symbolist.”

Yet, Pittock’s distinctions constantly threaten to collapse. He says, “[Symbolism] and Decadence shared, in their differing modes of expression what was fundamentally the same approach […] The route that Symbolists and Decadents traveled was one which deliberately attempted to reject rational and logical thought processes, due to the associations of these with the dominant anti-art and anti-mystic values of their society” (3). He asserts that the distinction between the two lies in seeing one as a consequence of the other: “The point is that Decadence has various symptoms, but the underlying ‘disease’ is a consistent one, that of Symbolist thought” (9). The effect of Pittock’s argument is to displace the cultural diagnosis explicit in the
idea of decadence with the psychological need for mystical escape. As a result, both
decadence and symbolism are safely restricted to the problems of “literary ideology.”
The spectrum of Decadence, for him, issues from an implied critique of Victorian society
based upon the withdrawal of art from that order. Pittock’s intent to investigate the
ideological underpinnings of fin de siecle art comes short because his study overlooks the
dialectical relationship between the Decadent artist’s aristocratic gesture and that which
legitimates it. Most importantly, Pittock’s spectrum is unable to account for the origins
of modernism given the latter’s own investment in Symbolist aesthetics.

Other studies pursue a more theoretically complex reading of the period, but again
the tendency is to see decadence as a self-contained problem of literary language. In The
Decadent Dilemma, R. K. R. Thornton argues, “Decadent literature is a literature of
failure: of a failure to provide a literary synthesis for the disintegration of life; of an
expression of the disintegration in elegant cadences; of a fleeing into an artificial world or
an ideal world to escape from the consciousness and the consequences of that
disintegration; of a somewhat indulgent melancholy at the contemplation of that failure;
and of a wistfully gay self-mockery at the beauty and vanity of the attempt to escape that
failure.”\(^3\) For Thornton, these writers faced the dilemma of being caught between an
unbearable reality and an artificial paradise of their imaginations. His project is attentive
to the “decadence” of late classical civilization and the emerging scientific discourse of
“degeneration” understood by these writers to be the legitimating authority of their art.
Yet his description of the relationship between the art of the nineties and modernism
tends to be trapped in the belief that decadence was a problem to be “solved” by the
symbolist aesthetics. He states, “When symbolism solved that dilemma and could
demonstrate that the real and the ideal were not separate, but united in the symbol,
decadence was at an end. The opposites of self and soul, mind and body, impression and
dream, were one and the same” (200). Hence, he implies that modernism, as heir to this
“symbolist solution,” never needed to confront the cultural anxieties of the turn of the
century; and again, those anxieties are read largely as literary ones.

Linda Dowling, in *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*, offers
an argument for seeing decadence more than a succès de scandal, seeking to overturn this
“older view” mired in “rumor or gossip, a truth doomed to exhaust itself in the mere
telling […]” (ix). For her, decadence emerges from a “Victorian linguistic crisis”
brought on by the development of Neogrammarian philology which “raised the specter of
autonomous language—language as a system blindly obeying impersonal phonological
rules in isolation from any world of human values and experience—that was to eat
corrosively away at the hidden foundations of a high Victorian ideal of Civilization […]”
(xiii). Her direct interest is to show the breakup of romantic linguistic and literary values
most notably represented by Coleridge’s idea of the lingua communis, grounded in
Herder’s concept of the Volkstimme, or the living speech of a people. This, she asserts,
is what is increasingly undercut by the investigations of Bopp and Grimm. Hence, she
usefully registers the impact of German philology on English thought. Predictably, given
Dowling’s poststructural commitments, this analysis has a tendency to erase the very
“cultural crisis” it seeks to expose. For her, “Decadence emerges […] as a counterpoetics
of disruption and parody and stylistic derangement, a critique not so much of
Wordsworthian nature as of the metaphysics involved in any sentimental notion of a simple world of grass and trees and flowers. The world as it then survives in Decadent writing is by contrast a belated world, a place of hesitations and contrarieties and exhaustions” (xi). The style of decadence that emerges from the “linguistic crisis” is thus “an attempt to save something from the wreck by turning to literary advantage what had otherwise appeared as one of the incidentally bleak implications of the new linguistic science: the idea that written language, the literary tongue of the great English writers, was simply another dead language in relation to living speech” and that they sought to “bestow a belated and paradoxical vitality on a literary language that linguistic science had declared to be dead” (xv). Dowling’s prodigious scholarship and pithy argument never fails to fascinate, yet her position tends, as she says of Coleridge, to equate “language and civilization itself,” and to overstate the claims of linguistic autonomy made by the Neogrammarians: a projection perhaps of the poststructural interest in Saussure onto nineteenth-century thought. Of course, anachronism and teleological narrative haunt all attempts at cultural history. However useful Dowling’s insights are, her project tends to make decadence a matter of “style” and to restrict culture and literature to a problematic of language.

David Weir’s Decadence and the Making of Modernism is the most recent comprehensive attempt to define the relationship between both terms.5 His study overcomes the narrowness of the Anglo-American critical tradition by following the path charted by Renaldo Poggioli and Matei Calinescu. Weir’s discussion confronts the polysemy of “decadence” by asserting that the term’s instability is part of its meaning.
Indeed, this instability is, for him, precisely what the decadence bequeaths to modernism itself. Decadence is what he terms a “dynamic of transition”: “An interference of mimesis and poesis in the late nineteenth century makes up a large part of this dynamic. Dynamics implies movement, and by introducing a more pronounced element of poesis into the novel, decadent writers move away from mimesis as an aesthetic base” (15).

Weir usefully identifies this dynamic with the emergence of Ortega’s concept of “dehumanization” in the modern arts. Yet he also reads Ortega as a critic bound up with the ideology of decadence precisely because he is a modernist critic as much as he is a critic of modernism. Hence for Weir, Ortega’s elitism registers a defining feature of modernism: “Decadence and dehumanization, it seems, are both part of the vast movement from romanticism to modernism that transforms ‘the folk’ into ‘the masses’” (16). Hence both decadence and modernism share this essential anti-democratic ideology.

One can hardly reject this insight, as far as it goes. However, Weir does not consider, in this instance, whether or not Ortega and other moderns were simply acknowledging, often unhappily, that “the folk” had already been transformed into “the masses” by forces much more powerful than art and criticism. In short, Weir’s useful analysis of decadence is not always matched with an equally critical account of modernism. Weir’s argument, like the others noted above, misses why notions like “folk” and “masses” become such contested terms in decadence and modernism. Instead, the modernism that decadence makes is one that is bound up with the late twentieth-century reading of it from the perspective of cultural populism, as his extended treatment of Hollywood amply demonstrates. Though he represents this trajectory as a “decline of
decadence,” his study seems to suggest that decadence is much more consequential for the emergence of popular culture than for the development of high modernism. Weir, in fact, devotes only a single chapter to a consideration of canonical moderns: in this case, Joyce and Gide. Here, Weir’s purpose is to show two writer’s assuming opposite “responses” to decadent aesthetics: Joyce’s continuation and transformation of it, and Gide’s final break with it. Yet, the consequences of this dual response remain obscure, because his understanding of modernism tends to accept the oversimplified reading of modernism’s relation to mass culture.

This focus upon culture, whether high or popular, indicates the extent to which this institutional category bequeathed by modernism shapes critical understanding, and for good reason. We must return to Nietzsche to see why. Among the many charges he makes in his struggle to resist the decadence of Bayreuth, Nietzsche sees Wagner as the representative of an emerging mass culture: “Wagner represents a great corruption of music. He has guessed that it is a means to excite weary nerves—and with that he has made music sick […] Only sick music makes money today: our big theaters subsist on Wagner” (166). Wagner’s decadence lies in reflecting the psychological degeneration of philistine society. His “naivete” makes him more of a symptom than a cause of cultural decline: an interesting “case.” In pandering to petty nationalism and sentimental Christianity, Wagner had destroyed the possibilities for a music of the future. In manipulating the taste of his time, he submitted to the temptation that brought about the decline of Greek drama: “Wagner is no dramatist: don’t be imposed upon! He loved the word ‘drama’—that’s all; he always loved pretty words […] For one thing, he was not
enough of a psychologist for drama; instinctively, he avoided psychological motivation—how? By always putting idiosyncrasy in its place.—Very modern, isn’t it? Very Parisian. Very decadent” (175). As a result, “The theater is a form of demolatry in matters of taste; the theater is a revolt of the masses, a plebiscite against good taste.—This is precisely what is proved by the case of Wagner: he won the crowd, he corrupted taste, he spoiled even our taste for opera!—“ (183).

Nietzsche’s condemnation of Wagner’s dramatic sense highlights the reconceived Hellenism at the center of his critique of modernity. This in turn brings forth Nietzsche’s great contribution to classical philology: the conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Walter Kaufmann has rightly noted that these two concepts are among the most misunderstood of Nietzsche’s ideas. Most often, the Dionysian is read as a positive ideal in opposition to Apollonian repression of the creative life-force. “In The Birth of Tragedy,” Kaufmann insists, “Nietzsche did not extol one at the expense of the other; but if he favors one of the two gods, it is Apollo. His thesis is that it took both to make possible the birth of tragedy, and he emphasizes the Dionysian only because he feels that the Apollonian genius of the Greeks cannot be understood apart from it” (128). If Nietzsche would later identify himself with Dionysus, this is because, Kaufmann argues, Dionysus is no longer interpreted as a force in conflict with Apollo, but with Christianity. Dionysus becomes, in the later writings, a symbol of Hellenic overcoming of the passions as opposed to Christianity’s, or rather Paul’s, surrender to them. But in this early work, Dionysus represents the need to break through the Schopenhauerian veil of maya and the principle of individuation of the Apollonian art impulse. Dionysus is the great barbaric
contribution to Greek civilization. The veil of *maya*, of necessity, of convention, of social barriers—all illusions of the *principium individuationis*—are torn aside. Members of the community are reconciled with their neighbors; they are fused and become one. The “mysterious primordial unity’ behind *maya* emerges and is celebrated: humanity feels itself part of a “higher community.” In attaining this feeling of godlike power, Nietzsche asserts, the human being “is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: in these paroxysms of intoxication the artistic power of all nature reveals itself to the highest gratification of the primordial unity” (37). In tragedy, therefore, the Greek polis discovers itself to be a culture. The Dionysian joins hands with the Apollonian in the creation of tragedy that becomes, actually, an affirmation of joy that undoes the tragic “folk wisdom” of Silenus: that the best for man is never to have been born. Hence the Apollonian artist depends upon the Dionysian expression of the fundamental pain, suffering, and horror of existence united with ecstatic pleasure in order to achieve the vision of life affirming beauty. It represents a struggle of the Hellenic “will” best expressed in the Olympian gods: “It was in order to be able to live that the Greeks had to create these gods from a most profound need. Perhaps we may picture the process to ourselves somewhat as follows: out of the original Titanic divine order of terror, the Olympian divine order of joy gradually evolved through the Apollonian impulse toward beauty […]” (42-3). The Apollonian is a victory of illusion that produces the profound naïveté of Greek art. The naïve in classical Greek culture is not, as had been assumed, an expression of a simple more primitive way of life, but the result of a sophisticated struggle: “Where we encounter the ‘naïve’ in art, we should recognize the highest effect
of Apollonian culture—which always must first overthrow an empire of Titans and slay monsters, and which must have triumphed over an abysmal and terrifying view of the world and the keenest susceptibility to suffering through recourse to the most forceful and pleasurable illusions” (43). Through the mirroring of beauty—a discovery of human beauty by projecting it on the divine Olympians—the Hellenic will overcomes its talent for suffering. The earliest surviving Greek poetry—Homer’s—already reveals this naivete, this triumph of joy.

Yet this naïve manner is worlds away from what Nietzsche will charge Wagner with. Wagner’s naivete is not born out of struggle, but a surrender to the decadence of his time. In *The Gay Science*, some ten years later, Nietzsche’s fundamental understanding of the Greeks has been transformed into a critical weapon against his own time. In 1887, in the Preface to the second edition of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche calls for an art that will transcend the taste of decadent modernity. “How the theatrical scream of passion now hurts our ears,” he complains, “how strange to our taste the whole romantic uproar and tumult of the senses have become, which the educated mob loves, and all its aspirations after the elevated, inflated, and exaggerated!” (37). The sickness of an over-cultivated society can only be cured by an art that rejects spiritual elevation and romantic longing of the “educated mob”: a telling epithet that indicates the belatedness of the modern mind grafted to the idea of the masses. “No,” he tells us, “if we convalescents still need art, it is another kind of art—a mocking, light, fleeting, divinely untroubled, divinely artificial art that, like a pure flame, licks into unclouded skies. Above all, an art for artists, for artists only!” (37). While Nietzsche’s name is often
associated with Dionysian ecstasy, this misapprehension is due to the way in which Nietzsche’s terms shift in his later career. Instead, this new art must, in his view, recover the meaning of the Apollonian victory achieved by the Greeks: “Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial—out of profundity. And is not this precisely what we are again coming back to, we daredevils of the spirit who have climbed the highest and most dangerous peak of present thought and looked around up their—we who have looked down from there? Are we not, precisely in this respect, Greeks? Adorers of forms, of tones, of words? And therefore—artists?” (38).

Nietzsche’s hope for a future art—for indeed a new culture—depends upon the survival of the Hellenic will in the midst of modern degradation. By pursuing the naivete of the Homeric artist, the profundity of the surface, the illusion of illusion, the modern “daredevil of the spirit” overcomes the belatedness of the modern world. It is here that we can locate Nietzsche’s idea of himself as one who resisted his own decadence. In The Gay Science, he writes: “A Kind of Atavism.—I prefer to understand the rare human beings of an age as suddenly emerging late ghosts of past cultures and their powers—as atavisms of a people and its mores: that way one can really understand a little about them. Now they seem strange, rare, extraordinary; and whoever feels these powers in himself must nurse, defend, honor, and cultivate them against another world that resists them, until he becomes either a great human being or a mad and eccentric one—or perishes early” (84). The painful self-admission of the final statement suggests the costs of such
alienation. And Nietzsche had begun the process of rejection—of self-alienation—even as he wrote *The Birth of Tragedy*: a rejection of the academic traditions of his own training. The subtitle of the work had once read “out of the Spirit of Music.” Nietzsche’s later editions would read “or Hellenism and Pessimism.” Ironically, what would become Nietzsche’s most substantial contribution to classical philology comes at a point where he was ready to abandon academic life. And slowly, the rejection would engender a reconceived understanding of the Dionysian: one that would undercut the vision of a new culture—of the desire for wholeness and primordial unity—that grounded his early vision.

In 1872, Nietzsche wrote a letter to Erwin Rohde that expressed his developing sense of the Greeks. Complaining that scholars had painted a false picture, an Arcadian sweetness, of the world of Homer, he states: “That an uncanny, wild struggle—emerging out of a darker, gloomier, more savage time—preceded him, and that Homer stands as a conqueror at the end of this desolate period—that is among my surest convictions. The Greeks are older than we think. You can talk about spring only if you put winter first. This world of purity and pristine beauty did not simply drop down from heaven.”8 The seed of the argument in the *Birth of Tragedy* is already present: Homer had wrenched an Apollonian victory over the Dionysian “savagery” that preceded him. If scholarly opinion had made a fetish of Greek rationalism, they had contributed to the decadence of modern civilization. Nietzsche’s philhellenism would take a different track. In an unpublished early work, *Wir Philologen*, he asserts: “Our relationship to classical antiquity is the real reason, the essential reason, for the sterility of modern culture: this whole modern concept of culture is something we get from the Hellenized Romans.
We must distinguish within the phenomenon of antiquity itself: when we get to know its really productive period, we also condemn the whole epoch of Alexandrian-Roman culture. And yet we condemn our whole attitude toward antiquity and our entire Philology at the same time! Nietzsche places the blame for the decline of modern culture squarely on the shoulders of institutional concepts that have shaped the discourse of “Western culture” in his century. Yet a Hellenism rightly conceived offers the potential of renewal. Nietzsche certainly must have thought of the Birth of Tragedy as such an intervention. Yet, even in Wir Philologen, he senses the “untimely” nature of such a project: “‘Enlightenment’ and Alexandrian culture is the matter—in the best of cases!—that philologists want. Not Hellenism” (33). Nietzsche’s assertion that ideas within academic disciplines had shaped—perhaps caused—the decadence of the modern world might seem to exult the influence of such institutions. This is especially so because of the way in which expert and lay audiences had been fractured, as we have noted. And philology represented one of the most expert of disciplines in the nineteenth century. Further, it might be read as embittered resentment against a profession that refused to give his ideas the hearing they deserved, and of course, “ressentiment” is barely concealed in his argument. Yet, “ressentiment,” as Nietzsche himself knew, always carries with it a truth. As I have argued, academic institutions had come to play an increasing role in the production of art quite simply because the writers of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century were increasingly formed by them. Early on, this relation of institutional authority to literary production was cast in the rhetoric of rejection and resentment combined with the practice of selective appropriation of that
authority. In order to see how literary decadence helped to make modernism, we need to turn to Oxford once again: this time to the career of Oscar Wilde.

4.2 Oscar Wilde and the Changing Fortunes of Philhellenism

Oscar Wilde left Dublin University for Magdalene College, Oxford, in 1874, arriving at an institution starting to feel the effects of Jowett’s “Greats” curriculum. He distinguished himself as a genius in classical languages, especially Greek, winning a first-class in Classical Moderations in 1876, an examination greatly feared by students. Wilde’s earliest published poetry dates from this time, but also his earliest surviving student essay: “The Rise of Historical Criticism.” Its burden is to argue for the emergence of modern historical consciousness from Greek thought. He asserts, “The study of Greek, it has been well said, implies the birth of criticism, comparison and research” (1148). Hence modern scientific historicism, based upon the comparative method, is the direct successor of Greek historical rationalism. Yet, the grounds of this claim lie not on the ones that Matthew Arnold had asserted some twenty years previous in his inaugural lecture “On the Modern Element in Literature” (1858). Arnold had asserted the modernity of Greek writers like Thucydides on the basis of a periodic re-emergence of the critical spirit brought about by the achievement of a complex, advanced, stage of civilization. For him, this spirit develops when the elements of barbarism have been subdued in a society. Hence he can assert the “modernity” of Thucydides as well as the “barbarity” of Sir Walter Raleigh’s writings on astrology in the midst of the Renaissance. Wilde, on the other hand, argues on the basis of an organic theory of cultural development: “No attitude of historical criticism is more important than
the means by which the ancients attained to the philosophy of history. The principle of heredity can be exemplified in literature as well as in organic life: Aristotle, Plato and Polybius are the lineal ancestors of Fichte and Hegel, of Vico and Cousin, of Montesquieu and Tocqueville” (1131). Wilde’s description sits uneasily between scientific notions of biological heredity and the heredity “exemplified in literature.” What has recently entered the academic “ether” is, of course, the Tylorian “whole way of life”: a scientific concept of culture that threatened an institutional realignment that could subsume humanistic culture. Yet, Wilde maintains the primacy of the humanistic ideal by making the organic concept of society a product of a specifically humanistic critical spirit. The principle of lineage itself depends upon the Greek discovery of the idea of culture, born of historical criticism: “[…] I mean the conception of a society as a sort of organism whose parts are indissolubly connected with one another and all affected when one member is in any way agitated. This conception of the organic nature of society appears first in Plato and Aristotle, who apply it to cities. Polybius, as his wont is, expands it to be a general characteristic of all history” (1138). Hence, Wilde’s retrenchment serves to mask the influence of scientific concepts and protect the centrality of humanistic culture. As a student essay, much of its rhetoric seems to judiciously credit the received opinion of his professors, and thus it evidences the precarious nature—the opportunity as well as threat—the culture thesis represented for late nineteenth century humanists.

Yet, interestingly, the essay also demonstrates the emerging decadent consciousness of Wilde. He has been reading Walter Pater: “Splendid thus in death, like
winter sunsets, the Greek religion passed away into the horror of night. For the
Cimmerian darkness was at hand, and when the schools of Athens were closed and the
statue of Athena broken, the Greek spirit passed from the gods and the history of its own
land to the subtleties of defining the doctrine of the Trinity and mystical attempts to bring
Plato into harmony with Christ and to reconcile Gethsemane and the Sermon on the
Mount with the Athenian prison and the discussion of the woods of Colonus. The Greek
spirit slept for wellnigh a thousand years. When it woke again, like Antaeus it had
gathered strength from the earth where it lay, like Apollo it had lost none of its divinity
through its long servitude” (1145). Wilde’s philhellenism dwells upon the Paternian
transitoriness that creates the charm of decay. Yet, the long night of Hellenism brought
on by the victory of Christianity had not, in his view, weakened the Greek spirit. With
the fading of the Christian faith, Greek vitality promises to awake from its sleep
reinvigorated. Hence he ends up by agreeing with Arnold’s conclusion in a fashion. The
modern and the Greek mind are essentially one: “The course of the study of the spirit of
historical criticism has not been a profitless investigation into modes and forms of
thought now antiquated and of no account. The only spirit which is entirely removed
from us is mediaeval; the Greek spirit is essentially modern” (1148). Importantly,
Wilde’s Hellenism is set against the morality of the middle ages, and with the retreat of
that morality, the Hellenic manner resurfaces. However, it is not yet positioned as a
response to the decadence of the modern world. Decay, in this reading, lies in the
Christian past.
Such hopes motivate early poems like “Santa Decca” where the speaker proclaims, “The Gods are dead: no longer do we bring/ To grey-eyed Pallas crowns of olive leaves!” (1-2, 716). The sonnet catalogues the vanishing deities in stock late-romantic cliches. And it reads this loss in terms that look back, not only to Arnold, but to the German romantics like Heine and Hölderin: “Great Pan is dead, and Mary’s son is King” (8). Yet this effulgence of nostalgia does not end in despair:

And yet—perchance in this sea-trancèd isle,
Chewing the bitter fruit of memory,
Some God lies hidden in the asphodel.
Ah Love! if such there be, then it were well
For us to fly his anger: nay, but see,
The leaves are stirring: let us watch awhile. (9-14)

No ignorant armies clash by night in Wilde’s sonnet because history is not a record of loss. The grating naivete of this piece of juvenilia not withstanding, it registers a conflict between critical intellect and poetic need latent in the “Rise of Historical Criticism.” Wilde would move beyond such an innocent interpretation of Greek significance largely because he comes to define his Hellenism against modernity itself. The basic conflict of Christianity versus Hellas is maintained in his mature work, but he will find that Hebraism has its own logic of survival. Nevertheless, Wilde the decadent would struggle to hold on to his naïve Hellenism even as he exploited the literary possibilities inherent in the emerging picture of a savage and archaic Hellas. Both allowed him to engage in his own brand of épater le bourgeois: his developing recognition of his homoerotic longings legitimized by Greek civilized sensibility and his glittering ironies directed at the “savagery” of Victorian society.
Wilde’s decadence depends upon the rejection of the interpretation of culture that his university essay expresses. And in Wilde’s progressive reaction to the culture thesis, we can see how decadence represents an attempt to protect the privileged status of art. This becomes evident in the essays that date from the late eighteen-eighties and early nineties as he undertakes a rewriting of the aestheticism of Pater: a rewriting that is a radicalization of the aestheticist sensibility. The essays published in the 1891 collection *Intentions* allow us to see a subtle shift in Wilde’s aesthetic positions in terms of his attitudes toward academic paradigms. In “The Truth of Masks” (1885), Wilde registers his emerging rejection of the dominant forms of historical knowledge. David Weir states that the essay “anticipates the idea of the persona taken up later by several modernist poets” (69). Yet, this description is misleading. Wilde’s essay is devoted to the controversy over the accuracy of costume in the production of Shakespeare’s plays. He mounts a defense of Roman rather than Elizabethan dress in Mrs.Langtry’s production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, taking Lord Lytton to task for asserting that “archaeology is entirely out of place” in these productions and is simply “one of the stupidest pedantries of an age of prigs” (1060). Wilde, instead, defends the “archaeological” accuracy of costume, but on the grounds of purely aesthetic effect. While he finds that “in an archaeological novel the use of strange and obsolete terms seems to hide the reality beneath the learning,” in an oblique remark directed at the kind of novel Pater had written, in drama, Wilde finds the method valid: “And this use of archaeology in shows, so far from being a bit of priggish pedantry, is in every way legitimate and beautiful. For the stage is not merely the meeting-place of all the arts, but is also the return of art to life”
This claim seems to be in striking contrast with his later dictum: that art and life are separate realms. However, Wilde’s position does not quite amount to a defense of the human sciences. Instead, the value of archaeology lies in its aesthetic potential rather than the realism it may cast over a performance, or the positive knowledge it might offer the mind. Art, for him, vindicates historical knowledge: “And indeed archaeology is only really delightful when transfused into some form of art. I have no desire to underrate the services of laborious scholars, but I feel that the use Keats made of Lemprière’s Dictionary is of far more value to us than Professor Max Müller’s treatment of the same mythology as a disease of language […] Art, and art only, can make archaeology beautiful; and the theatric art can use it most directly and most vividly, for it can combine in one exquisite presentation the illusion of actual life with the wonder of the unreal world” (1068). At this point in his thinking, Wilde still feels the need to offer his due to the prestige of historical science even while he playfully inverts its institutional claims. Though the historical accuracy toward which the scholar aims is prosaic in its own terms, it allows dramatic art make use of that accuracy for the “conversion of fact into effect” (1073). “Archaeological accuracy,” he tells us, “is merely a condition of illusionist stage effect” (1074).

Five years later, even this ironic relation of art to scholarship would seem threatening to Wilde. In “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde’s developing idea of decadence responds, in part, to the historicist and anthropological concept of culture that suggests art is simply a reflection of the various forces that operate in the society. Cast as a dialogue between Cyril and Vivian, with the latter as Wilde’s mouthpiece, it offers a critique of
representational art. Yet, most critics read the essay simply in terms of Wilde’s reversal of the art/life dyad. Yet what is not understood is the way in which the rejection of academic paradigms plays a central role in the argument. This is understandable given the way in which Wilde figures his oppositions, at this point in his thinking, as a distinction between not only art and life, but culture and nature. Vivian, having dismissed the joys of nature, describes to Cyril the article that he is writing as a protest against the valorization of nature at the expense of the artifice of culture: a reversal of romantic values. “The popular cry of our time is ‘Let us return to Life and Nature; they will recreate Art for us, and send the red blood coursing through her veins […] But alas! We are mistaken in our amiable and well-meaning efforts. Nature is always behind the age” (997). Cyril, unable to grasp this last statement, asks for an explanation. “Well, perhaps that is rather cryptic” Vivian replies. “What I mean is this. If we take Nature to mean natural simple instinct as opposed to self-conscious culture, the work produced under this influence is always old-fashioned, antiquated, and out of date. One touch of Nature will destroy any work of art. If, on the other hand, we regard Nature as the collection of phenomena external to man, people only discover in her what they bring to her” (977). This, of course, expresses a familiar Wildean theme. “Nature” is experienced only through our prior cultural categories. Wordsworth, Vivian tells Cyril, went to the Lake District but “found in the stones the sermons he had already hidden there” (977-78).

But the dialogue, and Vivian’s essay, is not simply devoted to asserting this ironic reversal. Rather it is a defense of lying, and as such, it becomes a protest against the entire idea of truth, and particularly the notion of truth founded upon scientific
objectivity. Hence an assault upon classical scholarship, philology, historicism, and anthropology runs throughout the piece. Far from seeing the Greek historians as the origin of “historical criticism,” they are the model for the creation of life-affirming fictions: “But it was in the works of Herodotus, who, in spite of the shallow and ungenerous attempts of modern sciolists [sic] to verify his history, may justly be called the ‘Father of Lies’” (980). The ancients as it turns out do define the modern mind, but not because they developed the critical practice of historiography: the anticipation of historicism in his student essay. Rather, the modern academic mind is destructive for art because it depends upon the elucidation the truth that is inimical to the function of the artist as a teller of beautiful lies. The academic mind cannot lie: “Who he was who first, without ever having gone out to the rude chase, told the wandering cavemen at sunset how he had dragged the Megatherium from the purple darkness of its jasper cave, or slain the Mammoth in single combat and brought back its gilded tusks, we cannot tell, and not one of our modern anthropologists, for all their much-boasted science, has had the ordinary courage to tell us” (981).

Wilde’s defense of lying is based upon a radicalization of the humanistic ideal of culture and self-cultivation. Art, in his view, is not to be understood in relation to some complex whole in which it is embedded and to which it responds. “Art never expresses anything but itself” Vivian tells Cyril. “It has an independent life, just as Thought has, and develops purely on its own lines. It is not necessarily realistic in an age of realism, nor spiritual in an age of faith. So far from being the creation of its time, it is usually in
direct opposition to it, and the only history that it preserves for us is the history of its own progress” (991). Safely enclosed within its own art world, humanistic cultivation is protected from the scientific outlook.

When Wilde turns to questions of politics and society, his aesthetic humanism creates a utopia of the individual that bears more than a passing resemblance to the political fascinations of the moderns. In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (1890), Wilde offers a defenses of socialism that seems to be its negation. This work strangely affirms a principle of collectivism on the grounds of radical egoism. “The chief advantage,” he asserts, “that would result from the establishment of Socialism is, undoubtedly, the fact that Socialism would relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others which, in the present condition of things, presses so hardly upon almost everybody. In fact, scarcely any one at all escapes” (1079). Given that the concept of “socialism” for writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could refer to bewildering range of seemingly incoherent ideas held by various groups—from anti-vivisection leagues and Rosecurian mystics to actual political revolutionaries—we need not hold Wilde completely irresponsible for not offering a penetrating critique of political economy. Socialism was the approved political catch-phrase for advanced artists of the day. Nevertheless, the grounds of his defense of socialism must rank as one of the most un-socialist—indeed anti-socialist—apologetics ever published: so much so that one is tempted to suspect decadent parody. Yet, an ironic reading will not do in this case. The issues he links to socialism are ones too dear to his heart. “Under the new conditions,” he predicts, “Individualism will be far freer, far finer, and far more intensified than it is
now. I am not talking of the great imaginatively realised Individualism of such poets as I have mentioned, but of the great actual Individualism latent and potential in mankind generally” (1083). Socialism will offer, in Wilde’s view, the conditions for a more significant form of equality for the populace by relieving the masses from the necessity to labor for existence. As a result, people will be able to devote their energies to self-cultivation: a privilege formerly reserved for the elite artist. Wilde is careful not to confuse this positive effect with the conscious articulation of socialist aims.

Nevertheless, a socialist society will provide the benefits of humanistic culture to all in spite of its aims. The result, in his vision, is the realization of high culture as general culture: the harmonious whole way of life attained previously by the most advanced citizens of the Greek polis or the wealthy elite of the renaissance city. He tells us, “The new Individualism, for whose service Socialism, whether it wills it or not, is working, will be perfect harmony. It will be what the Greeks sought for, but could not, except in Thought, realise completely because they had slaves, and fed them; it will be what the renaissance sought for, but could not realise completely except in Art, because they had slaves, and starved them. It will be complete, and through it each man will attain to his perfection. The new Individualism is the new Hellenism” (1104). Like Nietzsche’s Greek in Dionysian ecstasy, the soul of man under socialism will make his life a work of art. Freed from the bondage of exploitation, both exploiter and exploited will attain to an authentic humanity. Yet the gap between such utopian pronouncements and Wilde’s fictional exploration of the theme of self-cultivation indicates the way in which the defensive hermeticism of decadent art still feels the need for some authority to legitimize
its withdrawal. Pater’s appropriation of the rhetoric of l’art pour l’art had led him to
defend aestheticism, first for the sake of a multiplied consciousness, for the sake of life
itself, and then for its potential to create a sensus communis. Wilde’s appropriation of
l’art pour l’art represents a crisis-ridden reaction to the fading of art’s privileged
institutional role inherited from the romantics—a quasi-religious one—and reinterpreted
by him in terms of the “New Hellenism.” Yet, the institutional authority of the Hellenism
Wilde relied upon and had become so central to the idea of literature in the nineteenth
century was progressively harder to maintain. This all the more so because the authority
of that Hellenism was central not only to Wilde’s decadence, but also to literary ideology
of his middle-class readership: the basis upon which he could make something like
socialism seem unthreatening and attractive to them is also the weapon he uses to
castigate them. The awkwardness of this tension can be best seen in A Picture of Dorian
Gray.

4.3 Dorian Gray and the Failure of the Aesthetic Moment

The novel first appeared in Lippincott’s in serial form in summer of 1890. Wilde
revised it for publication the following year, adding several chapters that fleshed out the
Sybil and James Vane thread of the tale. Though a number of critics have regarded these
additions as less than happy, the logic of them is wholly consistent with—even vital to—
the thematic structure of the novel. Wilde’s novel is usually interpreted in light of his
aestheticist dictum: life imitates art. Indeed, the plot itself is as seemingly moralistic as
its incidents are immoral. In a review of the book in National Observer, Charles Whibley
noted what he saw as its conventional moral outlook despite its atmosphere of sin and transgression. Wilde’s characteristic reply that this is “the only error in the book” has deflected the attention of subsequent critics away from the kind of moral Wilde has in mind. True, Dorian does pay the price for his wickedness when he becomes what he has made of the portrait. In this, Dorian follows the trajectory of failure so common in decadent writing. Huysman’s Des Esseintes fails in his project of living an absolutely artificial life in *A rébours* as much as Dorian’s attempt to live for pleasurable sensations does. But Dorian’s sin is not against Christianity, but against Hellenism.

To read the novel through the categories of Christian ethics obscures the way in which Wilde’s book works within the dialectic of civilization and savagery that emerges as a central topos of modernism. Wilde’s story plays on anxieties inherent in the humanistic, Apollonian classicism that threatens to be progressively unhinged with the transformation of the culture idea. The flippancy of the Wildean manner masks the seriousness of his intervention in this dialectic. If “All art is quite useless,” then its uselessness finds its ideal in an interpretation of Greek art: “All art is at once surface and symbol” (17). Wilde warns his readers that “Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril,” and “Those who read the symbol do so at their peril” (17). The place where symbol and surface come together is in the portrait itself.

Basil Hallward expresses his obsession with the young Dorian to Lord Henry early in the book: “‘He is all my art to me now,’ said the painter gravely. ‘I sometimes think that there are only two eras of any importance in the world’s history. The first is the appearance of a new medium for art, and the second is the appearance of a new
personality for art also. What the invention of oil-painting was to the Venetians, the face of Antinoüs was to late Greek sculpture, and the face of Dorian will some day be to me [. . . .] Unconsciously he defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek’’”

(24). Hallward’s homoerotic obsession with Dorian is cast in the language of Oxford hellenism that suggests an ideal that is almost chaste. Basil’s “sin” is that of idolatry. Dorian, as his name suggests, is the embodiment of Doric purity and Apollonian clarity. This Arnoldian Hellenism equates beauty with “spontaneity of consciousness”; yet as Wilde well knew, the Greeks were not all sweetness and light. Just as the splendor of the Italian renaissance painters masks the cruelty of the Borgias, so the Doric purity of the classical ideal sheltered from view a dark primitive truth. Wilde, like Nietzsche, understood the ritualism and savagery of archaic Greek society only hinted at in Attic tragedy and only dimly glimpsed in the Homeric epics. To read the surface and the symbol of Dorian’s portrait is to be in peril, as Basil Hallward—that representative of civilized artistic commitment—discovers too late, in true Aeschylean fashion.

Wilde’s characterization of Lord Henry sets aesthetic values as the essential Hellenic quality in opposition to intellect itself. Basil sees in Dorian an expression of his own soul. As such, the young man is the impossible embodiment of the Platonic ideal. Basil’s fascination with Dorian lies in the way the youth functions as an avatar of beauty itself, not the copy but the thing itself. The ideal within Basil is made real in Dorian himself, the painter’s achievement lying in his recognition of, and sympathetic identification with, that beauty.
Lord Henry, whose Hellenism is no less strong than Basil’s own, celebrates Dorian’s beauty without recourse to platonic metaphysics. Yet, ironically, his panegyric to Dorian’s looks is devoted to the portrait, not the young man himself. Early in the novel, as Basil confesses his identification with Dorian, Lord Henry demurs: “and really, I can’t see any resemblance between you, with your rugged strong face and your coal black hair, and this young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose leaves. Why, my dear Basil, he is a Narcissus, and you—well, of course you have an intellectual expression, and all that. But beauty, real beauty, ends where an intellectual expression begins. Intellect is in itself a mode of exaggeration, and destroys the harmony of a face” (24-25). Basil Hallward and Lord Henry figure forth the conflict at the heart of Oxford Hellenism and the late nineteenth-century attempt to make the Greeks speak to the present. If Lord Henry is a representative of the aesthetic reading of the Hellenes, the Paternian consciousness exponentially inflated to awareness of pure surface in the service of pure experience, then Hallward reads them through idealism, if not quite in terms of Jowett’s moral earnestness, at least as a spiritual dualism in which the physical is a sign of a prior spiritual truth.

Wilde’s novel has been persistently interpreted autobiographically, something he himself encouraged not only in his philosophy of art-and-life, but in his self-advertisement. His famous remark—“Lord Henry is what the world thinks me, Basil is what I am, and Dorian what I wish to be . . . in another age perhaps”—aptly suggests the kind of conflict within him. Most critics have seen this conflict as one between the intellectual and moral integrity of the artist, the seductive influence of the cynical
hedonist, and the fusion of both in Dorian’s beauty and unrestrained passion for experience. Yet, the novel—and perhaps Wilde’s life—suggests the ultimate failure of such a synthesis. If the decadent novel most often portrays the failure of unfettered experience to produce the power, freedom, or transcendence the characters seek, Dorian Gray inscribes this failure in the form of Aeschylean tragedy. Just as the Chorus of the Agamemnon in the Orestia prophecies, “We suffer, suffer into truth,” so Basil Hallward predicts, “Your rank and wealth, Harry; my brains, such as they are—my art, whatever it may be worth; Dorian Gray’s good looks—we/ shall all suffer for what the gods have given us, suffer terribly” (25-6).

Basil finds that his passion for Dorian’s beauty—figured as a “chaste” Oxfordian passion—has both enabled him to create his best work, yet also placed him in the awkward position of not being able to display it: “…every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself. The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul” (27). That secret is of course the erotic identification he has with his subject. However, the secret also marks the ambivalence Basil feels toward the function of art itself. The expressivist mode of romantic art—the demand that it reflect the artist’s personal vision of the world—runs afoul of the aestheticist sense that art should express, not the artist, but the beauty inherent in the work itself. As Basil tells Lord Henry, “An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men
treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty” (34). Basil’s invocation of this “abstract sense” indicates his desire for a type of Baudelairian modernity: that beauty that resides in the modern itself. “Some day,” he says, “I will show the world what it really is; and for that reason the world will never see my portrait of Dorian Gray” (34).

The corrupt and urbane Lord Henry rejects Basil’s project. For him, the modern world is that which must be transcended through art. What is eternal is not beauty; rather, it is intellect. Against the weight of modern historical consciousness, Henry sets the tragic transitory experience of beauty: a romantic sensibility elevated exponentially to the Paternian flux. “It is a sad thing to think of,” he says, “but there is no doubt that Genius lasts longer than Beauty. That accounts for the fact that we all take such pains to over-educate ourselves. In the wild struggle for existence, we want to have something that endures, and so we fill our minds with rubbish and facts, in the silly hope of keeping our place. The thoroughly well-informed man—that is the modern ideal. And the mind of the thoroughly well-informed man is a dreadful thing. It is like a bric-à-brac shop, all monsters and dust, with everything priced above its proper value” (34). For Lord Henry, the over-cultivated intellect and the Darwinian struggle of philistine modern life combine in an oppressive belatedness. The only response to such a condition lies in a rejection of the purposiveness of intellect. The self must become a work of art itself: a finely tuned vehicle of pleasurable sensations. This self must obey its own inner laws of development. Yet this paideia is not all that it seems. When Dorian enters the painter’s studio “with the air of a young Greek martyr” for his daily sitting, Basil warns him that
Lord Henry is a bad influence. Intrigued, Dorian asks Henry if it is true. “There is no such thing as a good influence, Mr. Gray,” he replies. “All influence is immoral—immoral from the scientific point of view [. . .] Because to influence a person is to give him one’s own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone else’s music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him. The aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for. People are afraid of themselves nowadays. They have forgotten the highest of all duties, the duty that one owes to one’s self”(41).

Yet influence is precisely what Lord Henry has in mind. Indeed, the novel’s opening scene sets up a struggle between Basil Hallward and the corrupt aristocrat for possession of Dorian. The fascinating nature of Lord Henry’s glib cynicism and aristocratic over-refinement makes this agony a one-sided affair.

In particular, Lord Henry’s vision of a complete Hellenism as a compensation for the ugliness of modern life becomes irresistible for Dorian. He tells the young man, “I believe that if one man were to live out his life fully and completely, were to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream—I believe that the world would gain such a fresh impulse of joy that we would forget all the maladies of medievalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal—to something finer, richer, than the Hellenic ideal, it may be. But the bravest man among us is afraid of himself. The mutilation of the savage has its tragic survival in the self-denial that mars our lives. We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in our
mind, and poisons us” (41). Hence Wilde creates in Lord Henry Wotton a representation of decadent Hellenism that draws its strength from a Nietzschean rejection of moral constraint. Yet, what drives Lord Henry’s relationship with Dorian is his homoerotic attraction to the young man—a civilized “Greek” response to modern savage mutilation of the impulses of the self—and his desire to usurp the role of Hallward in Dorian’s life.

Lord Henry is driven to learn more about Dorian and seeks out his uncle, Lord Fermor, who tells him the story of Dorian’s lineage: how Dorian’s father was murdered by an outraged aristocrat whose daughter had eloped with him. “There was an ugly story about it, “ Lord Fermor informs him. They say that Kelso got some rascally adventurer, some Belgian brute, to insult his son-in-law in public; paid him, sir, to do it, paid him; and that fellow spitted his man as if he had been a pigeon. The thing was hushed up, but, egad, Kelso ate his chop alone at the club for some time afterwards” (57). Wilde’s satire here is, of course, directed at the barbaric indifference to human suffering of the upper class. Yet, Lord Henry’s response is hardly more sympathetic. He can only see Dorian through the lens of romantic art: “So that was the story of Dorian Gray’s parentage. Crudely as it had been told to him, it had yet stirred him by its suggestion of a strange, almost modern romance. A beautiful woman risking everything for a mad passion. A few weeks of happiness cut short by a hideous, treacherous crime. Months of voiceless agony, and then a child born in pain. The mother snatched away by death, the boy left to solitude and the tyranny of an old and loveless man” (59-60). Dorian’s life story—the melodrama of it—spurs Lord Henry’s erotic imagination. This is figured in terms of the romantic Hellenism that dominates the first half of the novel. It is this that animates his
musings on how Basil’s portrait had re-awakened a slumbering idea: “The new manner in art, the fresh mode of looking at life, suggested so strangely by the merely visible presence of one who was unconscious of it all; the silent spirit that dwelt in dim woodland, and walked unseen in open field, suddenly showing herself, Dryad-like and not afraid, because in his soul who sought for her there had been wakened that wonderful vision to which alone are wonderful things revealed; the mere shapes and patterns of some other and more perfect form whose shadow they made real: how strange it all was! He remembered something like it in history. Was it not Plato, that artist in thought, who first analysed it? Was it not Buonarroti who had carved it in the coloured marbles of a sonnet-sequence? But in our own century it was strange [. . . .]” (61).

Lord Henry’s tutelage of Dorian leads the youth first into the most conventional of pleasures: his infatuation with the actress Sybil Vane. Yet, Dorian experiences this attraction to her in precisely the way Lord Henry has imagined Dorian: as a character in a book. For Dorian, she becomes synonymous with the characters she plays on stage, and it is these with whom he becomes attached. She becomes Shakespeare’s Juliet for him: “Harry, imagine a girl, hardly seventeen years of age, with a little flower-like face, a small Greek head with plaited coils of dark brown hair, eyes that were violet wells of passion, lips that were like the petals of a rose. She was the loveliest thing I had ever seen in my life” (75). Yet, the youth’s response to her is worlds away from the aristocratic superiority of Wotton. When Dorian insists that Lord Henry accompany him to the theater, he describes her effect upon the east end audience: “‘These common, rough people, with their course faces and brutal gestures, become quite different when
she is on the stage. They all sit silently and watch her. They weep and laugh as she wills them to do. She makes them as responsive as a violin. She spiritualizes them, and one feels that they are of the same flesh and blood as one’s self.” Lord Henry replies, “‘The same flesh and blood as one’s self! Oh, I hope not!’ exclaimed Lord Henry, who was scanning the occupants of the gallery through his opera-glasses” (110). Luckily, from Lord Henry’s point of view, Sibyl’s performance is dreadful, and Dorian’s class sympathy short-lived. She has brought life into the realm of art; her love for Dorian destroys her ability to represent it on stage, and Lord Henry leaves the humiliated Dorian to watch the balance of the performance alone.

Thus far, the novel plays out the consequences of Wilde’s reversal of art and life that informs our usual view of it. Yet, the stakes of the narrative subtly shift on precisely the question of culture. Lord Henry’s “New Hedonism,” however much it asserts the authority of Greek paideia, is based upon power over Dorian rather than the idea of self development. He muses, “To a large extent the lad was his own creation. He had made him premature. That was something” (83). Lord Henry uses Dorian as the medium of his own “art,” and this highlights the contrast between his meaning and Basil Hallward’s. The three of them discuss the nature of Dorian’s impending marriage to Sybil in the artist’s studio. In reply to Lord Henry’s cynical attitude toward it, Basil replies, “‘To spiritualize one’s age—that is something worth doing. If this girl can give a soul to those who have lived without one, if she can create a sense of beauty in people whose lives have been sordid and ugly, if she can strip them of their selfishness and lend them tears for sorrows that are not their own, she is worthy of all your adoration, worthy of the
adoration of the world. This marriage is quite right. I did not think so at first, but I admit it now. The gods made Sibyl Vane for you. Without her you would have been incomplete” (110). Both Basil’s affirmation and Lord Henry’s dismissal of Sibyl’s saving power are based on the same premises: that art is to be seen in terms of the moral life and that it is a means of intellectual cultivation, either as spiritual and moral enrichment that has a social purpose, or negatively as an elitist and hedonistic enrichment of the self. Yet the novel does not remain locked in these terms of debate.

The shift in cultural discourse occurs as Dorian rejects Sybil on the basis of her ruined art. Upon jilting her, Dorian leaves her dressing room and wanders aimlessly about the East End: “Where he went he hardly knew. He remembered wandering through dimly lit streets, past gaunt black-shadowed archways and evil-looking houses. Women with hoarse voices and harsh laughter had called after him. Drunkards had reeled by cursing, and chattering to themselves like monstrous apes. He had seen grotesque children huddled upon doorsteps, and heard shrieks and oaths from gloomy courts” (117). The working class Londoners are a savage menace, and the narrator speaks in the conventional language of degeneration when describing them. Yet, Wilde establishes an ironic distance from this discourse. Having wandered all night, Dorian greets the dawn, and is confronted not by the savagery of the working class but by an act of charity: “A white-smocked carter offered him some cherries. He thanked him, and wondered why he refused to accept any money for them, and began to eat them listlessly” (117). Dorian’s wonder is telling. Lord Henry’s tutelage has won out over Basil’s. And increasingly,
Lord Henry’s language has recourse to the science of race and degeneration as he tries to stiffen Dorian’s resolve to transcend moral constraint.

Having noticed for the first time the changes in the portrait, Dorian resolves to make amends for his cruelty. In a final consideration of Basil’s moral point of view, Dorian muses: “Was there some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms that shaped themselves into form and colour on the canvas, and the Soul that was within him? . . . .

One thing, however, he felt that it had done for him. It had made him conscious of how unjust, how cruel, he had been to Sibyl Vane. It was not too late to make reparation for that. She could still be his wife. His unreal and selfish love would yield to / some high influence, would be transformed into some nobler passion, and the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him would be a guide to him through life, would be to him what holiness was to some, and conscience to others, and the fear of God to us all. There were opiates for remorse, drugs that could lull the moral sense to sleep. But here was a visible symbol of the degradation of sin. Here was an ever-present sign of the ruin men brought upon their souls” (124-25). Horrified, Dorian writes a letter to Sybil in hopes of obtaining forgiveness. Yet, his remorse is motivated by fear rather than sympathy. The Wildean narrator, reverting to decadent showmanship, observes, “When we blame ourselves we feel that no one has the right to blame us. It is the confession, not the priest, that gives us absolution. When Dorian had finished the letter, he felt he had been forgiven” (125). But forgiveness will take another form for him. When Lord Henry arrives at the moment when Dorian finds out about the suicide of Sybil, he tells him: “‘Good resolutions are useless attempts to interfere with scientific laws. Their origin is
pure vanity. Their result is absolutely nil. They give us, now and then, some of those luxurious sterile emotions that have a certain charm for the weak. That is all that can be said for them. They are simply cheques that men draw on a bank where they have no account’” (129). Dorian can once again reflect upon his life in terms of art. “‘It seems to me to be simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play’, he tells Henry. “It has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part, but by which I have not been wounded’” (130). Yet, Greek tragedy represents a truth into which Dorian will come to be initiated. The moment of remorse—his moment of weakness—vanishes, and after Lord Henry leaves, Dorian reflects upon the advantages of having the portrait pay for his own sins: “Not one blossom of his loveliness would ever fade. Not one pulse of his life would ever weaken. Like the gods of the Greeks, he would be strong, and fleet, and joyous” (136). In his newfound confidence in his hedonistic ethic, Dorian commits the conventional sin of Greek tragedy: hubris.

When Basil attempts to console what he supposes to be the grieving Dorian, he finds instead a Dorian full of stoic resignation. Dorian tells the artist, “‘To become the spectator of one’s own life, as Harry says, is to escape the suffering of life. I know you are surprised at my talking like this. You have not realized how I have developed’” (140). Dorian’s development, it turns out, is not toward the Hellenic ideal but the Alexandrian Roman one. This represents a key shift toward the discourse of decadence. Rome rather than Greece will increasingly become central to the novel’s imagery and allusion. As Dorian drifts towards a debased Hellenism, Basil develops on his own trajectory: from a naïve Hellenism to a modernism based upon an authentic (in Wilde’s terms) relation to
the past. He confesses to Dorian that, “‘I was dominated, soul, brain, and power by you. I worshiped you. I grew jealous of everyone to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself’” (144). Yet the experience of painting Dorian’s portrait has sent Basil in a new direction. Previously, he tells him, “‘I had drawn you as Paris in dainty armour, and as Adonis with huntsman’s cloak and polished boar-spear. Crowned with heavy lotus-blossoms you had sat on the prow of Adrian’s barge, gazing across the green turbid Nile. You had leant over the still pool of some Greek woodland, and seen in the water’s silent silver the marvel / of your own face’” (145). Yet, he continues, one “fatal day” Basil “determined to paint a wonderful portrait of as you actually are, not in the costume of dead ages, but in your own dress and in your own time. Whether it was the Realism of the method, or the mere wonder of your personality, thus directly presented to me without mist or veil, I cannot tell. But I know that as I worked at it, every flake and film of colour seemed to me to reveal my secret. I grew afraid that others would know of my idolatry’” (145). But this experience only leads Basil to reject not only his earlier romantic thematic assumptions, but also the idolatry inherent in the expressivist theory of art that undergirds romanticism as a whole. He has modernized himself. He tells Dorian, “‘Art is always more abstract than we fancy. Form and colour tell us of form and colour—that is all. It often seems to me that art conceals the artist far more completely than it ever reveals him’” (145).

As Basil retreats from Dorian’s life, the young man pursues the course sanctioned, in his mind, by Lord Henry. Yet, Dorian becomes a very different character than the suave aristocrat. As a number of critics have argued, Dorian does not pursue Lord
Henry’s theories in the manner of the master himself. Lord Henry Wotton rarely moves beyond theoretical speculation and contemplation. These are what constitute his primary pleasures. In strange complementarily with Basil’s new aesthetic, his enjoyments are abstract and impersonal. In a sense, he never confuses art, in his special meaning, and life. It is Dorian who seeks to make his dreams a reality, and this drives him far from the new Hedonism that Henry promotes. Wotton is a connoisseur of aesthetic distance. He gives Dorian a fatal book—Huysman’s *A rébours* we suppose—not as a manual for the conduct of life, but as an experience in its own right: “It was a novel without a plot, and with only one character, being, indeed, simply the psychological study of a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own, and to sum up, as it were, in himself the various moods through which the world-spirit had ever passed, loving for their mere artificiality those renunciations that men have unwisely called virtue, as much as those natural rebellions that wise men still call sin” (156). The narrative language, always unstable, foregrounds moral categories even as it puts them into question. Dorian models himself on the Des Esseintes-like character, engaging in his own confusion of art and life.

As a result, the Alexandrine gains the upper hand in Dorian’s life. He becomes increasingly notorious as a dandy, and he does so on the conscious model, not of Greece but of Rome. Becoming something of a model himself for the younger generation, he “found, indeed, a subtle pleasure in the thought that he might really become to the London of his own day what to imperial Neronian Rome the author of the ‘Satyricon’
once had been, yet in his inmost heart he desired something more than a mere \textit{arbiter elegantiarum}, to be consulted on the wearing of a jewel, or the knotting of a necktie, or the conduct of a cane. He sought to elaborate some new scheme of life that would have its reasoned philosophy and its ordered principles, and find in the spiritualizing of the senses its highest realization” (161). Yet, his quest for sensation leads him ever onward as he dabbles in a catalogue of nineties obsessions: the Catholic church with its “daily sacrifice, more awful really than all the sacrifices of the antique world, [which] stirred him as much by its superb rejection of the evidence of the senses as by the primitive simplicity of its elements and the eternal pathos of the human tragedy that it sought to symbolize” (163-64). He becomes “for a season […] inclined to the materialistic doctrines of the \textit{Darwinismus} movement in Germany, and found a curious pleasure in tracing the thoughts and passions of men to some pearly cell in the brain, or some white nerve in the body, delighting in the absolute dependence of the spirit on certain physical conditions, morbid or healthy, normal or diseased” (164). Yet most significantly, Dorian seeks solace in the exotic. He delights in “barbaric” and “savage” music, hiring Gypsies, Tunisians and “Negroes” to minister to his craving for novelty: “The harsh intervals and shrill discords of barbaric music stirred him at times when Schubert’s grace, and Chopin’s beautiful sorrows, and the mighty harmonies of Beethoven himself, fell unheeded on his ear. He collected together from all parts of the world the strangest instruments that could be found, either in tombs of dead nations or among the few savage tribes that have survived contact with Western civilizations, and loved to touch and try them” (165-66). Of course, this “cultural diversity,” as it were, is figured in the
narrative as a threat to Hellenism both in terms of its orientalism and its recognition of 
the relativistic potential of the anthropological imagination. These interests are signs, 
from the book’s perspective, of Dorian’s decline, and they foreshadow his ultimate 
savagery: a savagery recorded only by the relentlessly changing portrait. His decadence 
becomes degeneration as he falls into the ethnographic imagination.

Dorian’s atavistic transformation is complete as he murders Basil Hallward. On 
his way to the Continent, Basil runs into Dorian in the streets by chance. Basil requests 
to see the portrait and Dorian perversely agrees. Upon confronting the monstrous image, 
Basil never reproaches Dorian. He begs him to pray. This infuriates Dorian: “The mad 
passions of a hunted animal stirred within him, and he loathed the man who was seated at 
the table, more than in his whole life he had ever loathed anything. He glanced wildly 
around.” (192). After the murder, he seeks distraction in a hashish den in Docklands, 
populated by Malays, half-castes, and dissipated Westerners; “The coarse brawl, the 
loathsome den, the crude violence of disordered life, the very vileness of thief and 
outcast, were more vivid, in their intense actuality of impression, than all the gracious 
shapes of Art, the dreamy shadows of Song. They were what he needed for 
forgetfulness” (222). But such forgetfulness flees in Dorian’s encounter with Sybil’s 
brother, James, who, rather melodramatically, is seeking revenge twenty years after his 
sister’s death. The accidental death of James Vane in a hunting accident—he is stalking 
Dorian—seems to clear the way for Dorian’s perfect crime. He has disposed of Basil’s 
body (through blackmail) and can look forward to a life of pleasure-seeking. The fates 
have saved him.
However, it is the portrait itself that becomes Dorian’s intolerable burden. Hidden in what had been his childhood schoolroom, it is the embodiment of Dorian’s actual paideia contrasted with his former scene of instruction and the promise of an ideal paideia he might have pursued. The portrait is not a symbol of Dorian’s conscience, in Judeo-Christian terms, as much as it is visible evidence of his failure to live up to the Greek ideal. “There was purification in punishment. Not ‘Forgive us our sins,’ but ‘Smite us for our iniquities’ should be the prayer of a man to a most just God,” the narrator states before Dorian plunges the knife into the painting (260). Wilde’s narrator invites us to pass from New Testament forgiveness to Old Testament retribution. Yet this return of Hebraic language is deceptive. The logic of the picture undercuts such a straight moral reading. It was, Basil asserts, an attempt to make the Hellenic ideal possible for the modern world; Dorian’s life debases that ideal quite literally. As much as he destroys his life and those around him, he also destroys the painting in the process. Dorian’s death restores the portrait, and that death is a penance for a sin against art itself. Importantly, that sin is essentially the sin of Greek tragedy rather than that of the Judeo-Christian code. Greek hybris brings with it nemesis.

4.4 The Radicalization of Decay

Wilde’s own hybris famously brought its own nemesis down upon him. Yet, the fate of this “untidy life” can deflect our attention away from the fact that however much Wilde’s life has become central to the notion of decadence and the yellow nineties, his art
resists the principle feature so often ascribed to decadence. Nietzsche’s evocation of fragmentation as the distinguishing feature of the decadent artwork consciously echoes the definition of Paul Bourget, who asserted in an essay on Baudelaire in *Nouvelle revue*—“Théory de la décadence”—that “A style of decadence is one in which the unity of the book is decomposed to give place to the independence of the phrase, and the phrase to give place to the independence of the word” (30). Yet, Wilde’s work, while pursuing decadent themes, is devoted to the more Parnassian ideal of formal perfection. His “New Hellenism” is caught between the formal beauty he attributes to Greek art and the rhetoric of decadence cast as degeneration of society. Bourget makes the analogy specific: “Just as an organism degenerates if the energy of its individual cells—instead of being directed towards the functioning of the whole—becomes independent, so the ‘social organism’ becomes ‘decadent’ when the individual life becomes exaggerated beneath the influence of well-being and heredity” (29). Wilde’s struggle for an authentic individualism, in these terms, would herald social disintegration rather than the *paideia* of the masses that his utopian socialism envisions. In the end, Wilde, like Nietzsche, offers resistance to his own decadence and with the same goal: the cure of a sick civilization. Yet his version of the authority of art represents that last attempt to secure its legitimacy in terms of romantic Hellenism. This failure only underscores the developing crisis of the institution of literature as it confronts the way in which its own grounds are undercut by anthropological concepts of culture. The authority of the arts could no longer be simply based upon individualism and the cult of genius in which humanistic Hellenism placed its faith. Even as Wilde faced his public humiliation, other writers were struggling
to discover new grounds of authority. In so doing, they would not so much abandon old
topoi like Hellenism as struggle to re-legitimize them. That search for yet “new
Hellenisms” would lead to a fin-de-siècle discourse based upon a peculiar mix of
mysticism and evolutionary “science” that foregrounds the concept of race in relation to
consciousness and character. The biological metaphors at the heart of the culture idea
become reified, and aesthetic decadence becomes the “stigmata,” as Max Nordau argued,
of a larger Western “degeneration.” If general social decadence had become identified
with fragmentation, subjectivism, and hyper-individualism, then what was needed was a
way to imagine a basis—metaphysical, spiritual or supra-individual—upon which the arts
could assert their authority.

Wilde’s version of Pater’s aesthetic culture attempts to make it a means of
polemically engaging the dominant culture by furthering the spectacle of that culture’s
own decadence. Like Nietzsche’s assertion of a vital Dionysian ecstasy as the
fundamental Greek experience, Wilde rejected the Apollonian reading of academic
humanism. Yet that ecstasy, as Nietzsche’s work suggests, is not only a means of
rejecting stultifying academic categories, but of escaping from the idea of history itself.
As A Picture of Dorian Gray suggests, Wilde would pursue the earlier Nietzschean task
of seeking some balance between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. His own tragedy
would convince most that he was a devotee of the latter. But to make Wilde’s concept of
the aesthetic synonymous with symbolist escapism is to misunderstand the nature of his
practice. What Wilde establishes for modernism is not merely the concept of a decadent
culture, but the inauguration of the idea of aggressive polemical engagement with society
that becomes so important for the early avant-garde. Culture becomes a space in which the artist dramatizes its encrustation by artificial prior valuations and opens up the possibility of transforming it by appeal to its origins. Art cannot achieve its cultural task by becoming entrapped within official culture. The Paternian self who creates aesthetic experience and finds its connection to others through the shared experience of ritual is enacted by Wilde in both his literature and his life. Yet, his disgrace would encourage younger writers like Arthur Symons to hold fast to the earlier Paternian moment of aestheticism. Symons would confront the problem of a decadent culture by recourse to a Schopenhauerian withdrawal from life. If for Pater, the aesthetic pursued for its own sake led to imprisonment within the self, Symons will find this to be a mode of freedom: a freedom from the category of culture itself. Like the late Nietzsche, Symons symbolism entertains the dream of being beyond all cultural valuations.


9 *Afterwords*, p. 32-34. All quotations from Nietzsche’s *Wir Philologen* are from this text. The essay is otherwise unavailable in English.

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12 For instance, David Weir states that “‘The Decay of Lying’ presents a strong critique of the naturalist-realist tradition as Wilde calls for a return to ‘imaginative power’ [. . .] that would elevate artistic prose over slavish documentation [. . .]” (69).

13 See, Pittock, Spectrum of Decadence.


CHAPTER 5

THE “TURN OF THE SOUL”: ARTHUR SYMONS AND REMY DE GOURMONT

5.1 Erasing Decadence: Effacing Culture

English literary history assures us that the Decadence of the yellow nineties was superceded by Symbolism, that “something more serious,” which in T. S. Eliot’s view, had been “in preparation” in France, finally breaking forth upon advanced Anglophone literature. Of course, there is some justice in such a view, especially in England. Edmund Wilson, whose Axel’s Castle would set the pattern for the critical reception of modernism in the mid-twentieth century, identifies Symbolism—or perhaps the more modest “symbolism”—as indicative of “certain tendencies in contemporary literature.” For Wilson, symbolism denotes a particular aesthetic method that seeks to register states of modern consciousness in indefinite language. “Every feeling or sensation we have,” he tells us, “every moment of consciousness, is different from every other; and it is, in consequence, impossible to render our sensations as we actually experience them through the conventional and universal language of ordinary literature” (21). For Wilson, “it is the poet’s task to find, to invent, the special language which will alone be capable of expressing his personality and feelings. Such a language must make use of symbols: what is so special, so fleeting and so vague cannot be conveyed by direct statement or description, but only by a succession of words, of images, which will serve to suggest it
to the reader” (21). Hardly a formalist critic avant la lettre, Wilson’s account nevertheless reads the Symbolist inheritance in terms of a problematic at the heart of literary language as such. Symbolism, through a Paternian deformation of style, seeks to discover an authentic mode of expressing the self and registering its consciousness of the ephemeral: what Charles Baudelaire saw as the modern itself. What must surprise is Wilson’s uncomfortable silence concerning the mystical or transcendental interests, not only of the Symbolists themselves, but also of writers he treats like W. B. Yeats: for Wilson, the mystical becomes simply mythic material out of which Yeats’ poems are made. It is, of course, unfair to charge Wilson in a 1931 study with some gross critical sin. After all, part of his burden in the book is to champion these new writers by placing them within a comprehensible framework. Nevertheless, as a massively influential work in the development of modernist studies, Axel’s Castle remains a tacit presence in later attempts to see modernist practice in terms of an earlier Symbolist poetics based primarily upon linguistic innovation.

Because formal innovation is the most obvious feature of modernism, it is hardly surprising that Wilson’s understanding of modern literature as a continuation of Symbolism has become part of the narrative of modernism. Wilson’s stress on the inadequacy of “the conventional and universal language of ordinary literature” has remained central to any description of the form of modernist writing. In Early Modernism, Christopher Butler describes this in terms of a “withdrawal from consensual languages” in the arts as the nineteenth century turned to the twentieth. Arguing against a “formalist view of modernism has been dominant for too long,” Butler sees it as a
consequence of “a Postmodern point of view, which attempts to define the Modernist strain by exclusive reference to one or other of those elements in the language of art which it subjected to examination” (14).³ Instead, the modern artist is motivated, for Butler, by the adoption of a new “conceptual scheme” which requires new modes of expression. Hence, modernism is not simply a self-referential exploration of the nature of its medium. He concludes “the artist is sustained in making formal discoveries by the expectation that they may be significant in relation to a particular content” (15). Yet the content that early modernism expresses is, for Butler, not far from Wilson’s: new ideas about consciousness and the self that make ordinary language inadequate as a means of representing experience. “It is this shift towards a defence of particular ideas about subjectivity,” Butler argues, “that motivates artistic change. What makes a work of art Modernist is not just the loyalty of its maker to the aesthetic of an evolutionary or disruptive tradition (though that is very important) but its participation in the migration of innovatory techniques and their associated ideas” (16). Butler rightly sees that modernism has been read retrospectively in terms of pure form, while the makers of modernism were not initially obsessed with the self-referential art. His identification of concepts of subjectivity as the “idea” with which early modernism deals, while not groundbreaking, is nevertheless just, as far as it goes. Subjectivity is indeed the central problem. Yet this problem needs to be seen in terms that go beyond the merely experiential, however important this is. To say, with Wilson that the modernist seeks a “special language which will alone be capable of expressing his personality and feelings” risks being unable to distinguish it from its enemy twin, romanticism. While Butler’s
insistence upon the modernist work as, in essence, “conceptual” avoids this problem, his narrowing of the artistic problem of subjectivity to the representation of experience occludes the cultural dynamic that frames the problem as one that the turn-of-the-century artist must confront.

That dynamic was intimately tied to the idea of decadence, no matter how extensively modernist studies has tried to write it out of the narrative of modern art. As noted in the last chapter, the semantic instability of—indeed the uncertain boundary between—both decadence and symbolism is suggestive of the way in which the idea of the modern self was being patterned. Both are two poles of a dilemma for artistic consciousness born of an attempt to extend and resist romanticism. As positive science problematizes traditional religion and progressively undercuts nature as a spiritual source, the artwork, as we have seen, takes on the burden of being the site of transfiguration. But this raises questions of its own. The meaning of such spiritual art becomes radically open. It might point to some cosmic truth, or to some profound vital force within consciousness itself, or both. Equally, it might simply constitute the search itself. Symbolism oriented itself to this search. Decadence then, can be seen as working from the problem of the social. In a society staffed by the servants of commerce and administered by dreary bureaucracies, civic humanism seems an embarrassment. Romantic alienation becomes exacerbated into a lacerated self. On one hand, the anti-naturalism of both decadence and symbolism marks the impossibility of finding in
despiritualized nature what Charles Taylor has called “epiphanies of being.” On the other hand, symbolism and decadence are both complements of one another, and both bequeath their dilemma to modernism.

Thus, as humanistic culture increasingly yields its authority to what was seen to be the all-conquering positive sciences, literary discourse enters a period of extreme instability. The terrain of this instability needs to be understood if we are to grasp fully the situation, especially in the Anglo-American context, the early modernists confronted and the kinds of intervention strategies they developed to meet it. The impulse to the transcendent noted above clearly issues, in part, from Paternian sensibility. Yet, it is misleading to see this as simply a reaction against materialist and scientific ascendancy.

The oddity of the fin-de-siècle literary discourse lies in its various attempts to legitimize religion, transcendental ideas, and subjective or even esoteric spiritualism through scientific ideas, more or less well understood. These spiritual and loosely scientific strands need to be considered separately in order to grasp their interaction, and more importantly, why the transcendental symbol cannot avoid the problem of decadence. And it is necessary to consider the French literary scene to grasp the special sense that symbolism was to take on in Britain.

A major source for mystical conceptions of the aesthetic in French Symbolism is easily identified. Arthur Schopenhauer’s failure to successfully oppose Hegelianism in mid-century was vindicated in a fashion, not so much by philosophers as by artists and intellectuals who gravitated to his subjectivist aesthetics. Schopenhauer provided a language that explicitly connected consciousness and the experience of art to mystical
transcendence that could be borrowed without necessarily subscribing to his pessimistic world-view, though that had its attractions as well in an age of anxiety over decadence and degeneration. Since the idea of the modern self was increasingly being read in terms of trauma, Schopenhauer’s assertion of the aesthetic as transfiguration offered a means of reinscribing the centrality of art without the embarrassing pieties of civic humanism. One might turn earnest anxiety over the decadence of European civilization into a sophisticated pleasure of watching it with a jaundiced eye. Schopenhauer’s belief that the mind has access to noumena as an expression of Will indicates that the path to knowing the Absolute—for him, a loathsome “Hegelian” word that he avoids—comes through the self. Most importantly, Schopenhauer avoids another Hegelianism by avoiding the word “culture.” True to his Platonic influences, he deals with the social under the aegis of the State. Schopenhauer’s theory of the world-as-will, as blind urge and striving, means that such a culture is simply another form of Maya, an illusion. In the absence of humanistic legitimacy, art regains its redemptive role by alleviating the burden of suffering consciousness enmeshed in the appalling impersonal relentlessness of the will to be.

Schopenhauer insists “that aesthetic pleasure in the beautiful consists, to a large extent, in the fact that, when we enter the state of pure contemplation, we are raised for the moment above all willing, above all desires and cares; we are, so to speak, rid of ourselves” (390). In short, Schopenhauer provides the means by which to justify, philosophically, the tradition of aesthetic sensibility discussed previously, even for those who did not hold his pessimistic world-view. But this is not Pater’s historically minded sensibility: a defeat of time in the interest of the present moment. Nor is it Wilde’s
paidaia of the senses that directs irony against both society and self. Schopenhauer’s problem is not so much Paternian time as it is Being itself: the will as a blind urge for existence. His famous claim for music as the greatest expression of pure will aside, all such aesthetic contemplation allows us pleasure because the will has been objectified. Within it, we feel ourselves beyond its grasp, if only for the moment. We are released temporarily from our participation in will, to which we are tragically doomed. Yet, for him, art can never constitute the complete abnegation that allows our anguish to be stilled. True wisdom, for Schopenhauer, lies in complete renunciation of will, and art can only offers us a glimpse of this state of nirvana. Nevertheless, Schopenhauer’s influence allows others to link aesthetics with the highest human experience, now defined in terms of pure consciousness of reality. Increasingly, art and metaphysics are conjoined, not simply for the aesthetcian, but for the artist. The interplay of consciousness and the ground of Being gradually threaten to subsume the social dimension of art.

If Schopenhauer refused to call this ground “the Absolute,” he equally refused to use the Hegelian term “culture.” Institutional forms and custom stand in stark opposition to his version of suffering consciousness. Consciousness manifests itself subjectively as “disposition,” and this self overleaps the problem of other selves since they are simply part of the problem confronting worldhood. “Dogmas,” he asserts, “can of course have a powerful influence on conduct, on outward actions, and so can custom and example […] But disposition is not altered in this way” (368). The ethical self is built, not through received tradition, some paidaia of character, but through realization of our tragic ontological situation. “Genuine goodness of disposition,” he tells us, “disinterested
virtue, and pure nobleness of mind, therefore, do not come from abstract knowledge. But it is a direct and intuitive knowledge that, just because it is not abstract, cannot be communicated, but must dawn on each of us” (369-70). Ethical knowledge comes to philosophical consciousness through some type of revelation. Such immediate non-inferential cognition points toward the aims of the Symbolists. Schopenhauer’s version of sensibility creates the opening for a version of mysticism they would variously exploit. Yet it also represents an attempt to elutriate modernity of its sediments of culture and history.

As such, Schopenhauer represents an intensification of one pole of modernity’s trajectory. His philosophical position reaches the core of modernity’s desire for “modernism”: a realization of ideas implicit in the enlightenment “moderns” against the “ancients.” Antoine Compagnon argues that modernity dreams of overcoming time and history in the name of the present so that it “connects only with eternity” (16). Yet, we must remember the extent to which the development of literary modernism both engages and resists such a fantasy. The Symbolist poem offers us a “staged” impression that renders a particular “mood.” The phenomenal world exists as a stimulus for poetic consciousness that seeks to represent the noumenal. The impression registers the “present” moment as an act of consciousness. It seeks what Baudelaire called the “eternal” in its passionate attention to the “transitory.” But it cannot avoid the reality of the moment. The claims made for the importance of linguistic innovation by Bourget and Nietzsche rest, obviously, upon more than the question of style. Clearly, for both the modernists and their predecessors, the centrality of language lies in its ontological status.
as that which connects—or fails to connect—consciousness and world. Couched in this way, the foregrounding of the problem language-as-such promises a means of overleaping the problem of culture and history in favor of articulating some disclosure of the Absolute to wounded consciousness.

Notwithstanding this metaphysical impulse, symbolism cannot evade the cultural problematic that Decadence announces. Whether or not we label Baudelaire a decadent or a symbolist, one cannot escape the sense of a “cultural sublime,” the play of imagination upon the experience of beauty and terror, turning the private moment into a symbol of the collective experience. In the seminal essay, “Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Allan Poe,” Baudelaire writes, “That sun which, a few a hours ago, was crushing everything beneath the weight of its vertical white light will soon be flooding the occidental horizon with varied colors. In the tricks of this dying sun, certain poetic minds will find new joys; they will discover dazzling colonnades, cascades of molten metal, a paradise of fire, a sad splendor, a rapture of regret, all the magic of dreams, all the memories of opium. And the sunset will then appear to them as the marvelous allegory of a soul charged with life, going down beyond the horizon with a magnificent wealth of thoughts and dreams.”6 As much as this passage expresses the melancholia of the extinction of consciousness, the “sad splendor” of a “soul charged with life” that must inevitably dip below the horizon of existence, it is clearly dependent upon the rhetoric of a more general civilizational collapse that brings the idea of decay, both personal and social—in both the immediate and the historical sense—into a correspondence. Indeed, the famous “Correspondances” sonnet that describes Nature as “un temple où de vivants
piliers/ Laissent parfois sortir de confuse paroles” also suggests the impossibility of bringing into consciousness that “Qui chantent les transports de l’esprit et des sens.”\(^7\)

Even nature’s temple must be placed in a semantic field where “messages” must be cast as a nostalgia for the sacred, for the worship of the gods. In other words, Baudelaire requires some historical, social, density that can allow the symbol to do its work. To say, as Wilson does, that “the symbols of the Symbolist school are usually chosen arbitrarily by the poet to stand for special ideas of his own,” cannot fully capture the way in which Symbolism stages its struggle with tradition on one hand, and private vision on the other. Symbolism marks key moments in the emergence of English modernism because its attempt to transcend Decadence leads to an apotheosis of aesthetic consciousness more complete than any imagined by Walter Pater. The wit, parody, and self-display of Decadence is abandoned in a hunger for the Absolute. In short, Symbolism bequeaths to early modernism the desire to overleap the problem of culture and history altogether. Such desires are not so easily fulfilled.

5.2 The Vital Sciences

The reception of Schopenhauer made steady progress in England since the first English language publication of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* in 1883.\(^8\) Here, we are not concerned so much with the theory of the great French practitioners of symbolism as with the reception of their ideas in the English-speaking world. Arthur Symons would encounter symbolism with the phrases of Pater’s *Renaissance* in his mind, with the Wilde debacle still fresh, and with a desire to combat English parochialism. Most importantly,
he found in symbolism a means of confronting a society where questions of decadence and culture were deeply rooted in the antipodes of religion and science. If cultural decay were a reality, then Symons would see in French symbolism and impressionism the possibility of a redux, if not for “society,” then for the modern self. Following Schopenhauer, history, tradition, and culture are an intolerable burden. In its ideal form, the poem would record an unmediated confrontation between self and world.9

This mystical turn, however, was hardly confined to the boulevards of the French capital or the pages of English literary journals. Despite its avant-garde pretensions, English Symbolism was part of a more general institutional turn toward idealism. The epicenter of this idealist tendency in England, as we have seen in the Platonism of William Jowett and the Hegelianism of T. H. Green, was Oxford. As Tom Gibbons observes, “[t]he tone for the late-nineteenth-century revival of transcendentalism in England was set by the universities, and especially by the University of Oxford, where the old orthodoxy of native empiricism finally yielded to the new orthodoxy of German metaphysical idealism […]” (12). The significance of religious issues lies, as we have seen, in the fear of the disappearance of that which sets finite limits to human conduct. Indeed, it was precisely on these grounds that Matthew Arnold had proposed culture as a foil to anarchy. If aestheticism and decadence marked the crisis of moral authority for humanistic constructions of culture, then they dealt a blow to the Arnoldian role for culture as a functional equivalent of religion. Yet, the serious interest in ritual in ecclesiastical circles at the turn of the century was not only a continuation of Newman’s search for spiritual legitimacy of the Church of England, but a repositioning of the
ultimate grounds of faith itself. The aesthetics of worship filled the breach between faith and the rational will. As such, it participated in the general climate of mysticism and transcendence as a response to scientific rationalism. As Gibbons says, “In 1899 W. R. Inge, later to be Dean of St. Paul”, published his influential Bampton lectures on Christian Mysticism. In the same year appeared The Symbolist Movement in Literature, in which Arthur Symons made public his own conversion to mysticism” (13).

This tendency toward metaphysical conception in the university had been, as we have seen, allied with historicism. Yet, in the new context of the fin-de-siècle, such historicist concepts were interpreted in the wake of evolutionary biology, which provided a rich source of metaphors to imagine a scientific link between race and culture. If, as we have seen, historical concepts of development had been previously linked with culture as development, then both would be rhymed with concepts of evolution drawn from biology. Most importantly, this appropriation of evolutionary thought was, strangely, a key source of authority for the mystical and idealist turn.

In one of the few studies of this aspect of the turn of the century, Gibbons argues that evolutionary ideas provided the means of re-legitimitizing spiritual claims. He focuses primarily upon Havelock Ellis, Arthur Symons, and A. R. Orage. Arguing that the period can, with careful qualification, be called the Age of Evolutionism, Gibbons defines it as follows: “By ‘evolutionism’ is meant the highly questionable employment of biological theories of natural selection, which Darwin himself never stated in any clear or final form, in realms of thought unconnected with biology” (4). This is based upon a rejection of mechanistic world-views of the mid-nineteenth century. The turn to
biological language gave new life to late romanticism and its aesthetics while seeming to
ground itself in scientific authority. Spencer’s concept of a single “law of evolution” is
one spectacular example of this trend, but it is found in many places: “Other and later
evolutionists achieved similar results by boldly hypostatizing such supposed cosmic
evolutionary processes into a single, all-pervading, all-controlling evolutionary will, life
force, or élan vital. The notion that the universe was pervaded by this all-powerful and
purposive evolutionary force gave a new and powerful impetus to a variety of religious
philosophies based upon the doctrine that God is immanent in or permeates the whole of
creation, and such venerable pantheistic religious philosophies as Brahmanism and Neo-
Platonism now received the apparent support of the most up-to-date scientific thought’ (5).

This alliance between science and mysticism would reposition value terms drawn
from humanism. What authorizes the evolutionary imagination is the way in which it
interacts with the biological metaphor at the heart of the culture idea itself. If, as Mary
Douglas asserts, institutional transformations depend upon making the new structure of
thought seem natural rather than contrived, dependent upon a prior source of authority,
then we can see why the appropriation of evolutionary thought by artists and critics that
Gibbons identifies subtly shifts culture’s center of gravity from humanism toward
ethnology. Gibbons himself implies this dependence when he asserts that the new
biologism is not new ideology: “The Age of Evolutionism was not the age of a new
ideology, broadly speaking, but of old ideologies rehabilitated” (6). Yet, the exploitation
of biological ideas represents more of an intervention than he portrays. It does indeed
mark an ideological shift, even as it appropriates and repositions older ideologies, as such
shifts always do. To bring humanistic culture under the purview of biology is to mount a challenge to a central faith of the humanist enterprise: faith in the rational will. Yet it also allows for the rehabilitation of humanistic values in new forms. The “wholeness” at the center of Hellenism takes on a new association with psychic health. Just as Schopenhauer’s philosophy can be construed as a means to overcome the belatedness of modernity, biological vitalism can be appropriated as means of diagnosing the ills of a decadent modern civilization. Most importantly, vitalism would transpose romantic subjectivity into the egoism of early modernism. A redefinition of culture in anthropological terms would remain latent in this discourse, only to be brought to full consciousness and exploited by the high moderns. Instead, fin de siècle mysticism would be grounded in the idea of a mystical or religious instinct. The essence of mysticism lies in the discovery that the self is identical with the Absolute. Havelock Ellis—art critic, psychologist and champion of eugenics—offers a clear example of this mode of thought. Speaking of “the mystical element” he says: “We are compelled to regard it—after the sexual passion which is the very life of the race itself—as man’s strongest and most persistent instinct. So long as it is saved from fanaticism by a strenuous devotion to science, by a perpetual resistance to the moral structure of society, it will always remain an integral portion of the whole man in his first developments.”

Within such invocations of Hellenic wholeness lurks the latent idea of organic community, despite appeals to egoistic expressivism. This equation of wholeness with health repositions the humanistic concept of wholeness away from the development of character and consciousness to the dark realms of heredity, instinct, and the unconscious
springs of life. Culture indicates “the moral structure of society” that Ellis seeks to resist. Yet, the concept of decadence becomes awkwardly positioned between “culture” as overwrought artifice of such a structure and the idea of it as social organism subject to degeneration. Implicit in this is the notion that organic culture is choked by the mechanistic structures of the social. The Hellenic “spontaneity of consciousness” becomes allied with one of the persistent fantasies of early modernism: regeneration requires going backward. As A. R. Orage would argue in the pages of The New Age, modern life is marked by an evolution towards complexity and intensification of life that actually reduces human experience. Our task, he says, is to work backward toward “the mouths of the streams of life […]” (Gibbons 6).

This struggle for wholeness through a return to origins allies the nostalgia for Hellenism to the release of instincts and the expression of ego. But Ellis cannot erase the problem of social life. He meets this challenge by turning the idea of decadence on its head. In Affirmations, Ellis sees Nietzsche’s Dionysus as that which frees us from moral decadence. As Gibbons notes, his essay on Huysmans “discusses four types of decadence: social, artistic, moral and religious” (57). Gibbons argues that Ellis is bound to Bourget’s definition of decadence and sees it in terms of individualism. Nevertheless, for Ellis, “individualism ultimately benefits the community as a whole” (57). Most importantly, artistic decadence must not be confused with moral decadence. Instead, Ellis reserves his criticism for religious decadence. Though Ellis finds that supernatural mysticism is at odds with healthy paganism, he argues for transcendent relationship to the real: a confrontation with the mystery of Being. This paganism, Ellis asserts, is far from
decadent: “Pagan art and its clear serenity, science, rationalism, the bright, rough vigour of the sun and the sea, the adorable mystery of common life and commonplace human love … make up the spirit in any age we call ‘classic.’ Thus what we call classic corresponds on the spiritual side to the love of natural things, and what we call decadent to the research for things which seem to lie beyond nature” (qtd. 58). Ellis is probably best remembered for his tireless support of Galton’s eugenics movement. His call for a new “race” of men of genius who will combat the ugliness of modern life prefigures some of the more disturbing political fantasies of a number of modernists. Nevertheless, Ellis’s configuration of Hellenism as an originary relationship to the real is something he would share with his close friend, Arthur Symons, who would play a pivotal role in the development of modernism as an interpreter of Symbolism.

5.3 The Turn of the Soul

Arthur Symons, transferring the center of gravity in modern literature from decadence to symbolism, believed that the future lay in deepening rather than ameliorating the disjunction between art and life. The poetry he discovered in France, through the offices of Rémy de Gourmont, would heighten his sense of the incommensurability of art and life. Life, for him, does not imitate art, as Wilde asserted with such esprit; instead, art transcends life. Having originally written an article after his first trip to Paris entitled “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” his second trip (and the association of “decadence” with Wilde’s disaster) inspired him to collect his appreciations of various French poets that became The Symbolist Movement in
Literature. This shift of emphasis seems to have been motivated in part by his commitment to Schopenhauer’s aesthetics. Certainly by 1896 he had reason to distance himself from decadence. “It pleased some young men in various countries to call themselves Decadents,” Symons declares, “with all the thrill of unsatisfied virtue masquerading as uncomprehended vice. As a matter of fact, the term is in its place only when applied to style; to that ingenious deformation of the language, in Mallarmé for instance, which can be compared with what we are accustomed to call the Greek and Latin of the Decadence. No doubt perversity of form and perversity of matter are often found together, and, among the lesser men specially, experiment was carried far, not only in the direction of style” (6-7). Instead he finds that the major literary current of his time is “symbolism”; yet this redefinition is more of an intervention than we might suppose. Of course, symbolism is a movement distinct from “decadence”: indeed, this is one of our inheritances from modernism. Yet, as we have seen, the distinction between decadence and symbolism would have been difficult to understand in Paris of the 1880s. As Matthew Sturgis notes, “The word allowed—and provided—a whole range of conflicting interpretations. In the autumn of 1886 Jean Moréas’ ‘Symboliste’ manifesto in the literary supplement of Le Figaro was rebuffed by Alfred Valette’s in Le Scapin. René Ghil (in a magazine called, unhelpfully, La Décadence) claimed to be the spokesman for the new ‘école symbolique,’ only to be contradicted by Paul Adam in the first issue of Le Symboliste. Confusion reigned as the platitudes and invective flew” (41).

Symons’ appropriation of symbolism in place of decadence is, of course, strategic. On one hand, the debacle of Wilde’s conviction had made the term
“decadence” untenable in Britain. On the other, he was aware of the semantic instability of both terms in their French context, and this fact created an opportunity to recast the terrain of advanced modern literature. Not only does he jettison decadence; he defines symbolism as a radicalization of a Parisian decadence with which Wilde entertained both his own mind and the British public but never completely embraced in his aesthetics. For Symons, symbolism indicates a simple rearrangement of traditional aesthetic practices now become self-aware: “What distinguishes the Symbolism of our day from the Symbolism of the past is that it has now become conscious of itself [. . .]. The forces which mould the thought of men change, or men’s resistance to them slackens; with the change of men’s thought comes a change of literature, alike in its inmost essence and in its outward form: after the world has starved its soul long enough in the contemplation and the re-arrangement of material things, comes the turn of the soul; and with it comes the literature of which I write in this volume, a literature in which the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world no longer a dream” (3–4). Hence, Symons describes symbolism in terms of a metaphysical dualism. Art is not simply the hyper-romantic need to present states of consciousness, but above all present states of consciousness without pose. If decadence was, in Symons’ view, simply a pursuit of the middle-class desire to “bewilder the middle-classes,” symbolism is a new earnestness (7). It pursues absolute artistic freedom in the defense of the purity of art: “In attaining this liberty, it accepts a heavier burden; for in speaking to us so intimately, so solemnly, as only religion had hitherto spoken to us, it becomes itself a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual” (9). Symons’ linking of art and ritual is,
on one level, an invocation of Pater’s “solution” to the culture question in *Marius*.

Indeed, Symons’ formulation of religious sensibility gained through art is as attenuated as Pater’s own: to attain the effects of religion without the belief. Yet, he defends this “sacred” role for art on the most anti-Paternian grounds. Pater’s “Conclusion” appealed to a heightening of sensation.

In the “Conclusion” to *The Symbolist Movement*, Symons appeals to Pater’s sense of our mortality, the “awful brevity” of life, but rather than burning with the hard gem-like flame of the senses, he counsels in the opposite direction: “Our only chance, in this world, of a complete happiness, lies in the measure of our success in shutting the eyes of the mind, and deadening its sense of hearing, and dulling the keenness of its apprehension of the unknown. Knowing so much less than nothing, for we are entrapped in smiling and many-coloured appearances, our life may seem to be but a little space of leisure, in which it will be the necessary business of each of us to speculate on what is so rapidly becoming the past and so rapidly becoming the future, that scarcely existing present which is after all our only possession” (324). On one level, this position defines the familiar mysticism that we associate with French symbolism. Yet crucially, Symons registers the way in which literary theory had utterly enclosed art within the ego. “Well, the doctrine of Mysticism,” Symons tells us, “with which all this symbolical literature has so much to do, of which it is all so much the expression, presents us, not with a guide for conduct, not with a plan for our happiness, not with an explanation of any mystery, but with a theory of life which makes us familiar with mystery, and which seems to harmonise those instincts which make for religion, passion, and art, freeing us at once of
“a great bondage” (327-28). Art becomes a scene of convalescence, a Baudelarian hospital, attractive because it relieves us of what Schopenhauer termed the will.

Symons authorizes this experience in terms of Neo-Platonic metaphysics—he cites Plotinus—and this in turn entraps him in a dualistic position: the self is caught between the shadows of this world and the ideal embodied in art. In place of the Wildean romantic Hellenism, Symons offers Alexandrian luxury and world-weariness. The ancients represent not a rejuvenation of society but a release from it: “[…] it is at least with a certain relief that we turn to an ancient doctrine, so much the more likely to be true because it has so much the air of a dream. On this theory alone does all life become worth living, all art worth making, all worship worth offering” (328-29). Art, in this formula, is not an engagement with culture, but a Schopenhauerian escape from it. And if only those who are burdened by culture know what it means to want to escape from these things, the world thus divided between shadow and beautiful dream is in one sense an imprisonment more desperate than any imagined by Walter Pater. The new symbolism, in Symons’ view, may have become conscious of the symbol, but it is conscious of little else. Yet the corollary of this dualism is that the world becomes open to the play of signification.

Symons’ first book of verse—Days and Nights (1889)—pursued a Browningesque exploration of decadent consciousness. But as symbolism comes to replace decadence in his aesthetic thinking, Symons purges his poetry of deliberate confession in favor of recording fleeting impressions that avoid direct moral comment.
Silhouettes (1892) is the first collection of these impressionistic miniatures, of which the first poem in the volume offers a fair sample:

    The sea lies quieted beneath
    The after-sunset flush
    That leaves upon the heaped grey clouds
    The grape’s faint purple blush.

    Pale, from a little space in heaven
    Of delicate ivory
    The sickle-moon and one gold star
    Look down upon the sea.

Symons’ practice is, at this point, hard to square with his understanding of symbolism as practiced in France. If symbolism—at least in the mold of Mallarmé—most often works to erase the object that is the occasion of the poet’s impressions in favor of the mystery of vague mood, Symons leaves no doubt as to the setting: he works toward poetic description of the sea “After Sunset.” His poems, as the idea of a silhouette implies, attempt a precision of outline rather than the vagaries of a symbolic personal language or cosmic mysticism. Likewise, the most well-known poem from the collection—“Pastel”—places poetic interest in fixing a fleeting perception:

    The light of our cigarettes
    Went and came in the gloom:
    It was dark in the little room.

    Dark, and then, in the dark,
    Sudden, a flash, a glow
    And a hand and a ring I know.

    And then, through the dark, a flush
    Ruddy and vague, the grace—
    A rose—of her lyric face.
As in most of his urban poems, Symons strives to create a suitable modern atmosphere by capturing a passing moment of eroticism (the poem is widely understood as recording a post-coital scene with a music hall actress or a prostitute), and in this, he is trying to follow his models in Baudelaire and Laforgue. Yet what is lacking in Symons is the sense of decadent cynicism, and most importantly, self-irony of a poet like Laforgue. Like “After Sunset,” “Pastel” is devoted to accurate presentation of perception.

It is tempting to follow the critical line that sees in Symons a precursor of imagism. Perhaps the tendency to self-effacement in favor of direct presentation of the object—the Paternian “privileged moment”—points to this reading. As we shall see, Pound’s “intellectual and emotional complex in time” does indeed find its source, in part in Pater’s aestheticism filtered through Symons. Yet, to see Symons’ poetry as the source of imagism depends upon a misreading of imagism itself. Though certain of the imagists would pursue ut pictura poesis of the kind that Symons practices, though without his metrical regularity and end-rhyme, Imagism in Pound’s sense is not resigned to pictorialism.

In the end, Symons’ severing of decadence from symbolism is an attempt to evade the cultural problematic that the idea of Decadence foregrounds. Symons, unlike Wilde, never offers aesthetic experience as a cure for Victorian materialism. Instead, his work seems silent on the value of the modern world. He offers a retreat into dream, into consciousness, not so much in the spirit of defeat that plagues the decadent self, but as an egoistic severing of the self from the world. While one might see Symons as prefiguring the subjectivism of early modernism and as a conduit for the concept of artistic purity, his
rejection of the problematic that Wilde’s work finds it impossible to ignore—the relation of art to life—makes Symons’ poetry and criticism less central to subsequent developments than is often supposed. T. S. Eliot, it is true, paid homage to Symons. Yet, in recording his debt to Symons’ Symbolist Movement, he finds that the book has no “permanent value” in itself, yet nevertheless “has led to results of permanent importance” for readers like Eliot (SW5). The problem, in his view, lies in the way something is “unfulfilled in Mr. Symons’ charming verse that overflows into his critical prose” (SW7). For Eliot, Symons’ impressionism leads to prose that is romantic creation rather than criticism; Symons’ work becomes an act of personal expression. For Eliot, the “perfect critic” is indeed the literary artist, but one who is able to interfuse the cultivated sensibility of a Symons with Aristotelian analytical rigor, and he tells us, “Of all the modern critics, perhaps Rémy de Gourmont had most of the general intelligence of Aristotle” (SW13). While the significance of Eliot’s assertion that the “two directions of sensibility are complementary” and that therefore “it is to be expected that the critic and the creative artist should frequently be the same person” must wait (SW16), Eliot’s admiration for Gourmont suggests the importance of the French critic’s refusal to avoid the culture question.

Though Symons knew Gourmont personally, his particular formulation of impressionism and symbolism willfully ignores the cultural problematic that decadence marks. The promise of Schopenhauer’s aesthetic lies in the dream of escaping the burden of culture and history. Symons represents one side of the tension in modernism between experience of transcendence through immediacy of perception, and the weight of culture
and history that seem to encumber it. As Art Berman argues, “Modernism is, then, the aesthetics of a transcendental realism—although this apothegmatic term binds irreconcilables. Here is the source of the central tenet of the modernist theory of poetry and art: the union of irreconcilables is a principle aesthetic goal” (23). This tension first becomes visible in the complementary relationship between decadence and symbolism. It would be Rémy de Gourmont who would bring these tensions into modernist consciousness as paradox.

5.4 Rémy de Gourmont and a World in Pieces

In “Stéphane Mallarmé and the Idea of Decadence,” published in 1898, Rémy de Gourmont displays his deeper understanding of the literary stakes than Symons does in his treatment of decadent consciousness. Most importantly, he distinguishes between a state of decadence in actual society and the situation of literature in such a society. “Just as the political history of the Romans has furnished us with the conception of historical decadence,” he argues, “so the history of their literature has furnished us with the conception of literary decadence—the two faces of a single idea; for it has been easy to indicate the coincidence of the two movements, and to inculcate the belief that there was a necessary connection between the two” (140-41). Yet, the relation between social and political decadence and literary creativity turns out to be, for him, a more complex affair. The identification of historical decadence represents a rejection of a “primitive” way of thinking. It is a diagnosis that depends upon a mature recognition of the process of decay and death. “Savages,” he tells us, “find it very difficult to admit the possibility of natural
death. For them, every death is a murder. They have not the slightest sense of law; they live in the domain of the accidental. It has been agreed to call this state of mind inferior, and it is inferior, though the notion of rigid law is just as false and as dangerous as its negation” (141). Gourmont concludes, “The idea of decadence is, then, merely the idea of natural death” (142). Civilization is read, on one hand, in familiar enlightenment terms as the defeat of superstition and error by human reason and a Kant-like maturity in the face of truth. Yet, on the other hand, this is also figured as a decline: civilization and the idea of decadence become one. In what appears to be the equally familiar topos of decadence, he identifies rigid law as the dangerous counterpart to savage lawlessness, and this, in turn, hints at the source of decay: the over-articulation of civilization. Yet the artist is not disabled by this overwrought condition. Rather, “It would, perhaps, be nearer the truth to say that political decadence is the condition most favourable for intellectual flowering” (142). One would expect this to be asserted in terms of an over-abundance of literary tradition. Gourmont’s argument seems to follow the traditional reading of decadent culture. “In the last analysis,” he says, “the idea of decadence is identical with the idea of imitation” (145), and this well-worn formulation follows the logic of the Roman model.

But this is precisely what Gourmont avoids. He asserts, “Yet, in the case of Mallarmé and of a literary group, the idea of decadence has been assimilated to its exact opposite—the idea of innovation.” (145). Innovation is the direct result of social and political decay because it allows a challenge to be mounted against received dogmas and habitual responses to experience. It is as though the cultivated artist regains the freedom
of the savage who lives “without the slightest sense of law”; yet, artists never really
descend to this “inferior state” of mind because they struggle against the pre-given
standards of an over-ripe culture, which they have assimilated. Decadence of society
must be distinguished from the decay of art. The charge of decadence toward writers is
merely the assertion of dogma by a decadent institution of literature: “Such judgments
have made a particular impression upon men of one generation because, doubtless, we
ourselves were involved and foolishly flouted by ‘right-minded’ critics; they were,
however, merely the clumsy and decrepit modern version of those decrees with which the
mandarins of every age have sought to curse and to crush the new serpents breaking their
shell under the ironical eye of their old mother. Diabolical intelligence laughs at
exorcisms, and the University has been no more able than the Church to disinfect it with
its holy water. In the past a man rose up—buckler of the faith—against heresies and
novelties. He was a Jesuit. To-day it is too often the Professor who arises as champion
of the rules” (145-46). Gourmont’s identification of the university as the modern enemy
registers the extent to which it had usurped the site of cultural authority from religion.
This is all the more striking in that earlier formations of literary decadence had
interpreted its enemy in moralistic and ecclesiastical terms. As we have seen, Pater
withdrew the “Conclusion” to the Renaissance after a sermon was preached against it by
the Bishop of Oxford, and he revised its language when he restored it; his Marius was an
attempt to reposition his ideas in a more nuanced form. Wilde’s public persona was
devoted to the titillating spectacle of moral transgression while Dorian Gray charts the
trajectory of its main character in relentlessly, if not always traditional, moral terms. The
fascination that the decadents focused upon religion—most notably the Catholic Church—suggests the way in which decadent art saw itself in dialectical relation to spiritual authority that responds to the attractive anti-modernism and ritual of the Church and its embodiment of the principle of beauty, decadence, and transgression at once. For Gourmont, it is the university that represents the new locus of authority, and its charms are few. It, and the critical apparatus it supports, controls the national discourse, and what is needed to confront it is a critique of language itself.

Gourmont undertakes this critique of language in “The Dissociation of Ideas,” which appeared in 1899. Gourmont’s concept of “dissociation”—a concept that would have a profound impact upon Ezra Pound—suggests the way in which fragmentation of tradition and the need for imaginative freedom combine for the authentic artistic consciousness: “It is a question either of inventing new relations between old ideas, old images, or of separating old ideas, old images united by tradition, of considering them one by one, free to work them over and arrange an infinite number of new couples which a fresh operation will disunite once more, and so on till new ties, always fragile and doubtful, are formed” (3). The world must be re-imagined in life-giving terms, and of course, Nietzschean perspectivism lies behind his assertions. Like Nietzsche, Gourmont sees prior historical determinations as an intolerable burden. “A great many commonplaces have an historic origin,” Gourmont observes. “Having seen with its own eyes the death-struggle of Byzantium, Europe coupled these two ideas, Byzantium-Decadence, which became a commonplace, an incontestable truth for all men who read and write, and thus necessary for all the rest—for those who cannot verify the truths
offered them. From Byzantium, this association of ideas was extended to the whole Roman Empire, which is now, for sage and respectful historians, nothing but a succession of decadences” (8). Hence “Decadence” becomes an institution of academic discourse that covers over its own participation in, and perpetuation of, a decadent modernity.

Literary decadence fails, for Gourmont, precisely because it is unable to make significant intellectual dissociations. Rather, the Decadent artist seeks to create dissociations with “moral commonplaces” while ignoring the duplicity of language in creating new associations largely based upon what has been rejected. For Gourmont, the decadence of civilization lies in the over-articulation of collectively held ideas that in turn spur a reaction in terms of increased individualism. “The state of dissociation reached by moral commonplaces seems to bear a rather close relation to the degree of intellectual civilization,” he tells us. In a turn away from his Nietzschean influences, he finds a culture of radical individualism is simply that which perpetuates social decadence. “Here, too,” he continues, “it is a question of a sort of struggle, carried on, not by individuals, but by peoples formed into nations, against palpable facts which, while augmenting the intensity of the individual life, diminish, for that very reason, as experience proves, the intensity of collective life and energy” (11). Such a society, Gourmont asserts, enervates itself in a downward spiral of action and reaction as the social order embraces an individualism that is inimical to the idea of collective life itself. In rebelling against philistine modernity, decadent artists merely invert the values they reject. “There is no doubt,” he continues, “that a man can derive from immorality itself—from his refusal to subscribe to the prejudices inscribed in the decalogue—a great personal benefit; but a
collectivity of individuals too strong, too mutually independent, makes but a mediocre people. We have, in such cases, the spectacle of the social instinct entering the lists against the individual instinct, and of societies professing, as such, a morality that each of its intelligent members, followed by a very large part of the herd, deems vain, outworn or tyrannical” (11-12). A culture becomes truly decadent when it reads the cultural as conventional or artificial.

The moral commonplaces of such a society can no longer animate. What is needed, Gourmont insists, is authentic dissociations that foster real innovations. Yet, this is harder to accomplish than one might suppose. “A truth is dead,” he observes, “when it has been shown that the relations between the elements are habitual, and not necessary; and, as the death of a truth is a great benefit for mankind, this dissociation would have been very important if it had been definitive, if it had remained stable” (18). The problem, Gourmont insists, is that habitual thought patterns are more deeply embedded that we might think. “Unfortunately,” he asserts, “after the effort to attain the pure idea, the old mental habits resumed their sway […] Association of ideas occurred again in the very same form as before, though one of the elements had now been turned inside out, like an old glove. For honour had been substituted dishonour, with all the adventitious idea belonging to the old element transformed into cowardice, deceitfulness, lack of discipline, falseness, duplicity, wickedness, etc. This new association of ideas may have destructive value, but it offers no intellectual interest” (18-19). In a diagnosis that prefigures that of the modernists, Gourmont locates the source of this habitualization of thought in the most fundamental medium of culture: language itself. In “Glory and the
Idea of Immortality” (1900), he puts the problem succinctly: “The human mind is so complex, and things are so tangled up in each other that, in order to explain a blade of grass, the entire universe would have to be taken to pieces; and in no language is there a single authentic word upon which a lucid intelligence could not construct a psychological treatise, a history of the world, a novel, a poem, a drama, according to the day and the temperature. The definition is a sack of compressed flour contained in a thimble” (37). In thematizing the problem of subjectivity, the decadent becomes oblivious to the problematic of language.

As a sort of grand old sage whose articles appeared in the pages of “little magazines,” Gourmont became more influential for English modernism than he was for his French contemporaries. His analysis offered the moderns the outline of a critique of language and a way of re-imagining the role of the writer’s function and relationship to culture in terms of innovation as opposed to tradition. In describing the cul-de-sac of decadence, he helped focus attention upon the problem of language: the relation between words and things becomes not simply a philosophical problem, but a socio-cultural one. When Ezra Pound tells us, “When words cease to cling close to things, kingdoms fall, empires wane and diminish,” Gourmont lies behind the assertion (Seiburth 79).

“Language is thus a great cause of deception,” Gourmont insists. “It evolves in abstraction, while life evolves in complete concrete reality. Between speech and things designated by speech, there is the same distance as between a landscape and the description of a landscape. And it must still further be borne in mind that landscapes which we depict are known to us, most often, only through words which are, in turn,
reflections of anterior words. Yet we understand each other. It is a miracle which I have no intention of analyzing at present” (27). This is, of course, precisely what the early moderns set out to analyze and the opening gambit of this analysis would be called imagism.

If Symons had come to see decadence as a dead end, his symbolist solution is read by Gourmont as equally unpromising. If Pater’s attempt to unify the problem of culture and aesthetics had fallen asunder in the decadence of Wilde and the symbolism of Symons, Gourmont proposes to reunite them, but in a dialectically transformed manner. While the problematic of history cannot be evaded, neither can, in his estimation, the problem of subjectivity. A new culture can arise, for Gourmont, only through, paradoxically enough, the dissociation of concepts and habitual categories. This requires an engagement with the general currents of European history, but in a Nietzschean critical spirit. If, as we have seen, the culture idea depends upon the unconscious basis of habit and custom, the aestheticist critique, from Pater on, struggles with the need to work against culture. Yet, as Gourmont perceives, the culture idea is necessary if the decadence of European civilization is to be overcome. For Gourmont, what is needed is a critique of language itself. Such a critique is not simply dissociation in the name of fragmentation, but the means by which a new culture—a new whole—will come into being. While Ezra Pound would be the twentieth century modernist most directly influenced by Gourmont, it is T. E. Hulme who would most clearly initiate a modernist critique of language.

1 While England experienced these movements successively, the ideas of Symbolism and Decadence grew somewhat symbiotically in France. As I note, the distinctions between them were hard to disentangle, and remain so. Nevertheless, the Wilde debacle gave Arthur Symons the opportunity to create the illusion that Symbolism was a sort of successor to Decadence, an intellectually driven “movement.” In so doing, he
created the distinctive version of literary history that still shapes the Anglophone understanding. For this reason, I have dealt with Decadence first.


5 Of this state of nirvana, Schopenhauer states, “From this we can infer how blessed must be the life of a man whose will is silenced not for a few moments, as in the enjoyment of the beautiful, but for ever, indeed completely extinguished, except for the last glimmering spark that maintains the body and is extinguished with it” (390).

6 Quoted in Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. (3-4), from “Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Allen Poe” translated by Ellis Hanson. Hanson says that this passage strikes a “discordant note of spirituality” (4).


8 Despite Nietzsche’s debt, the “discovery” of Schopenhauer, not only in England, but in Europe at large, was largely stimulated by Wagner enthusiasts. Indeed, it coincided with Nietzsche’s own “Wagnerian” period. Walter Pater seems to have been aware of Schopenhauer, and Pater’s claim that “all art aspires to the condition of music” seems to confirm this acquaintance. Yet, Pater was much too suspicious of “system” and too eclectic a thinker to develop a specifically Schopenhauerian defense of “aesthetic sensibility” on the philosopher’s own pessimistic grounds. In this, Pater seems to represent the pattern: one takes from Schopenhauer what one needs, his aesthetics in particular, as did Nietzsche himself.

9 This ideal is passed on to the early Imagists, most notably to writers of the Amy Lowell circle such as Hilda Doolittle. Yet the secondary status of the Lowell Imagists indicates the danger of making method an end in itself. Even H.D. invokes nostalgic Hellenism as the basis of her poetry, however many miniatures on sea-flowers she composed. Symbolist and Imagist theories become “techniques” for the high moderns rather than programmatic aesthetic principles. The drive to the purity of immediate perception is only one movement in developing modernist practice: a necessary one whose complement is the recognition that such a practice risks an intensification of romantic solipsism despite a refusal to directly thematize the self. The shift from Symbolism to modernism cannot merely be cast as turn from subjective impression to objective presentation.

10 The demise of the Oxford Movement as a driving force in English religious debate did not mean the end of the High Church party. Gibbons also identifies a consequence of this revival that will become important for the later modernist: the rejuvenation of the faded Oxford Movement. As Gibbons notes, “[a]mong T. H. Green’s most enthusiastic followers at Oxford were the young high-church clergymen such as Charles Gore and Henry Scott-Holland who were to produce in 1889 the extremely influential *Lux Mundi: Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation*. Although its attempt to reconcile Christianity with science dismayed the older members of the Oxford Movement, this important collection of essays marks a further strengthening of the anglo-catholic faction within the Church of England, which had steadily been gaining ground at the expense of the low-church party” (12). This was the year in which the last church prosecutions of ritualist occurred, and ritualism is not beside the point. If the Oxford of Newman was embroiled in controversy over authority within religion, the Oxford of Jowett and Green became entangled with the problem of the authority of religion itself.
The rise of Anglo-Catholicism in the Anglican Church, which would shape the aesthetic and social thought of T. S. Eliot, has, Gibbons argues, two sources. First, the rise of Higher Criticism “led to an increasing emphasis on the mystical and sacramental aspects of Christianity” (12). “Secondly,” he argues, “such important studies in comparative religion as Sir James Fraser’s *The Golden Bough* (1890) led to a renewed emphasis on the Eucharist as the central act of Christian worship” (12).

11 Though Darwinism had been something of a public scandal throughout the last half of the Victorian period, it is important to remember that his theories only received serious scientific consideration at the end of the century, culminating in the rediscovery of Gregor Mendel’s work in 1900. Nevertheless, evolutionary thought of various types dominated the late nineteenth century. Darwin’s theory of natural selection was one of many evolutionary schemes.


13 While concepts like Hippolyte Taine’s interaction of *race*, *milieu*, and *moment* as the forces that shape the production of art and literature were common currency among nineteenth-century critics, most importantly for Arnold whose borrowing of this concept was filtered through Saint-Beuve, such formulae resist undercutting the conscious rational will that structured the bourgeois faith in aspirational culture.

14 From Views and Reviews 3-4. Quoted in Gibbons, 43.


16 Sturgis, Matthew. *Passionate Attention*.

17 Symons himself claimed that the poem arose out of an encounter with a woman in a dark corner of a Paris museum.

18 As Hugh Kenner rightly notes in this regard that “the problem of what to do with one’s word picture unless ‘interpret’ it, remained unsolved” (PE180). Calling Symons’ poetry a “domestication of symbolism,” he observes, “What was a technical discipline in France has become a pictorial discipline, easier to comprehend and much easier to do” (PE 183). Kenner continues, “It was the post-Symbolists of the 1890’s who brought pictorial images into short poems: theirs was the dead end we are frequently told Imagism was. Imagism on the other hand made possible the Cantos and Paterson, long works that with the work of T. S. Eliot are the Symbolist heritage in English. The minor poets of Symons’s generation brought the necessary elements into English verse, but lacked the intellectual energy to break, as could Imagism, into some realm beyond the mood or the impression” (PE186).


CHAPTER 6

T. E. HULME AND THE MAKING OF MODERNIST PARADIGMS

6.1 A Declining Reputation

The theoretical positions of T. E. Hulme would seem to bear no relation, unless one of rejection, to the aestheticist moods of a Pater, Wilde, or Symons. Hulme’s reputation, despite his sparse poetic output, lies in his role as an aesthetic philosopher and theorist of the “classicist” version of modernism, and arguably, as the instigator of imagism. His interest in literature was eclipsed in his short career by his championing of abstract painting and sculpture, and his reputation as a maker of modernism emerged fully only after his death in the Great War. That reputation, first engendered by the tributes of Pound and Eliot, only strengthened as modernism began to win its place in institutional discourse.

Yet, it is precisely because Hulme seems to embody the rejection of the Victorian inheritance that he can be usefully contrasted with the writers thus far discussed. In insisting upon the importance of the inheritance from the nineteenth-century of the culture problem for an enlarged grasp of modernism, I have been attempting to show how institutional categories that made the new aesthetics have also shaped our reception of it, often in ways less conscious than those of the moderns themselves. As I noted in the Introduction, “modernism” began to cohere as a critical concept only in the nineteen-
twenties in Anglo-American criticism. At precisely this time, Hulme began to take on an almost mythic significance as the theorist of modernism. The five short poems Ezra Pound appended to *Ripostes* as “The Complete Poetical Works” became, and perhaps remain, textbook examples of proto-Imagism. His version of the Romanticism/Classicism distinction was read as a source for the positions of Pound, Eliot and Lewis, and his ideas on the poetic image were amalgamated to the doctrine of imagism itself. A comprehensive history of the critical reception of modernism has yet to be written, and this is not the place to pursue one. Yet, in as much as Hulme’s ideas played a significant role in the later construction of modernist paradigms, it is worth briefly noting the course of his reputation because of the way his ideas have been assimilated to Pound’s imagism and Eliot’s classicism. Only in 1924 did Herbert Read publish *Speculations*, bringing together into a single volume the essays and notes published in various journals either by Hulme or by others after his death, together with unpublished material.¹ By 1931, with the publication of Glenn Hughes’ *Imagism and the Imagists*, Hulme’s role as the “germ,” if not the originator of the doctrine became established.² With the publication of Hughes’s gathering of Hulme’s notes as *Further Speculations* in 1955, and Alun Jones’ 1960 biographical study, *The Life and Opinions of T. E Hulme*, his reputation reached its zenith.³

Hulme’s significance for the development of modernism, however, became increasingly controversial. His early reputation as a radical innovator, the “real” source of Pound’s imagism, increasingly came to be challenged by the view that he was a derivative thinker who simply functioned as a journalistic popularizer of philosophers like Henri Bergson. By 1969, with the publication of Herbert Schneidau’s *Ezra Pound:*
the *Image and the Real*, Hulme was in eclipse. Schneidau’s judgment sums up the fate of Hulme’s reputation: “Hulme was not a serious or original thinker, nor even a literary critic. And he certainly was not a poet, although it is true that he wrote more and better poems than those in the ‘Complete Poetical Works.’ He now appears to have been a vehicle for a variety of reactionary thought along the lines of Charles Maurras and the *Action Française* group […]” (42).  

When critics have not followed Schneidau’s view of Hulme’s positions as both derivative and inconsistent, they have tended to impose a false homogeneity upon them, as Michael Levenson argues, by assimilating them to his “classicist” position. Since my interest lies, not in the construction of a particular paradigm that would unify the literary doctrines of the moderns, but in the underlying institutional forces that motivate the forging of modernism, I have little stake in determining whether or not imagism finds its source in Hulme or Pound. Levenson rightly locates Hulme’s significance and interest in the way in which he registers the concepts that shaped its doctrine. It is Hulme’s role as “an intellectual site, a place where intellectual currents converged” (39), Levenson argues, that makes him particularly significant for viewing the way in which the justification for the image developed from a “radical literary individualism” long before it was justified on the basis of objective or authoritarian grounds (46). Instead, “he turns out to be interesting just insofar as he is derivative, just insofar as he submitted himself to a range of influences not previously conjoined” (39). Though those conjunctions were more widespread than Levenson suggests, he convincingly demonstrates that Hulme’s brief career underwent a dramatic shift between the years 1908—1914 as he absorbed the successive influences of Bergson, Lasserre, Husserl, and Worringer. On this basis, he
argues that the modernists originally justified their aesthetic theories on the basis of radical and anarchic individualism. For Levenson, Hulme moves rapidly through a succession of positions: from an early “egoism” that coincides with his enthusiasm for Henri Bergson, through a rejection of romanticism in favor of classicism and an anti-democratic fascination with L’Action Française, to his later “antihumanist” position. In methodically demonstrating this realignment of Hulme’s thought, Levenson’s account is suggestive for my purposes in that he shows how a quintessentially modernist doctrine like “the image” can be defended on radically opposed grounds. Though Levenson’s sensitivity to these shifts is valuable, his argument leaves the motivation for this repositioning unclear. What lies behind such frenetic realignment? Hulme’s interest lies not only in the intellectual influences he brings to bear upon the developing concept of modernism, but also in the way he responds to the fact that art was being repositioned.

The institutional shift in intellectual concepts that I have been pursuing is registered more obliquely in Hulme’s case than in that of other modernists. More than any other modern, Hulme came to contest not only Victorian constructions of humanism but the way art was being redefined as part of the complex whole of culture. Hulme is conventionally seen as thinker whose interests were specifically philosophical. Hulme, in this view, develops his aesthetics out of a philosophical concern for the nature of consciousness and language, and this project is decisively shaped by his attraction to reactionary politics born of his hatred of positivism. On one level, this view is understandable. In seeking to confront the abyss between consciousness and world opened up by materialism and positive science, Hulme favored philosophical language, and his early enthusiasm for Bergson underwrites his critique of language and theory of
the image. Yet, Hulme is forced to move beyond philosophy in the technical sense. The theological and aesthetic humanism of the previous generation would come to be seen by him as not only a failed attempt at a negation of positivism, but as complicit in its ascendancy. Nevertheless, the early Hulme confronts the same problematic by translating what can only be termed a spiritual crisis into the philosophical language of consciousness without clear political interests. Hulme would come to see the inadequacy of doctrinaire philosophy in confronting not only the nature of art but in grasping the cultural situation of Europe. In identifying his own spiritual crisis with that of the West, Hulme argues for a modernism that struggles to establish its aesthetic positions in pre-rational terms. His philosophical interests led Hulme to resist the culture concept more insistently than the other moderns I discuss. For this reason, he offers an excellent view of the forces that were shaping literary modernism. Hulme came to recognize the reactionary potential of the culture idea as he came to identify his, and Europe’s, enemies as first romanticism and then humanism itself. Philosophical analysis, he discovered, could not provide the theoretical leverage to mount such an assault. Coming to this recognition in 1911, Hulme would write in “A Tory philosophy,” “It can be put more academically in Renan’s phrase, ‘Philosophies and theories of politics are nothing in the last resort, when they are analysed out, but the affirmation of a temperament’; or in Nietzsche’s more theatrical manner, ‘Philosophy is autobiography.’” Hulme’s personal crisis would drive his thought through the problem of consciousness to the problem of culture. A brief look at Hulme’s background is not beside the point.

Little is known of that life, and much of what is known has become embedded in modernist mythology. His biographer, Alun Jones, has collected the available facts and
the reminiscences of his acquaintances and friends like Herbert Read. He was born 16
September, 1883, into a prominent Straffordshire family of means. In 1900, he was
awarded a County Council scholarship, and in 1901, he was elected to an Exhibition in
mathematics at St. John’s College, Cambridge. Admitted in February, 1902, Hulme
pursued a degree in mathematics. An indolent student, his interest in philosophy began to
occlude his other studies, and it seems clear that he intended an academic career,
whatever purposes his father may have had in mind. Yet Hulme would never complete
his degree. In a famous and mysterious incident that has passed into the Hulme myth, he
was “sent down” from university for some sort of escapade on Boat Race night. The
student body gave him “the longest mock funeral ever seen in the town.”

The humiliation and fury of his father over this expulsion led to a breach between
Hulme and his family. Only the intervention of his aunt, Alice Pattinson, smoothed things
over, and it was determined that he would enter University College, London, to study
biology and physics. As Jones records, when Hulme objected that he wanted to study
philosophy, his father was incensed: “‘What’s the use of that?’ his father retorted. “No
use at all—in Straffordshire,’” he replied (22). Hulme’s father intended that his son
should take a degree and then stand for the Civil Service Examination. Hulme’s growing
hatred of the pragmatic professional and of positivist science, one surmises, coalesced
with his revulsion toward the narrow Straffordshire pretensions of his father. Between
1904 and 1906, Hulme made no progress toward a degree at University College. He
maintained an apartment in London, but surreptitiously attended lectures at Cambridge as
an “unofficial” student.
Telling his aunt that he’d rather live on bread and cheese than enter the Civil Service, he abruptly left England, worked his way to Canada on a cargo ship, and lived for eight months as a drifter doing odd jobs. Here he would encounter a spiritual crisis that would have a great impact on his later thought. In particular, he seems to have been overwhelmed by the vastness of the prairies of western Canada that suggested the insignificance of human life in the cosmos. As Hulme would recollect, “Speaking of personal matters, the first time I ever felt the necessity or inevitableness of verse, was in the desire to reproduce the peculiar quality of feeling which is induced by the flat spaces and wide horizons of the virgin prairie of western Canada.” As Levenson notes, “[...] Hulme passed his early intellectual life preoccupied with the growth of science and its moral and religious consequences” (40). Hulme, in struggling with this familiar Victorian anxiety, would later write, “the word ‘value’ has clearly no meaning [in materialist science]. There can not be any good or bad in such a turmoil of atoms.”

His attempt to confront this abyss would lie behind his philosophical enthusiasms and his claims for art.

Hulme’s trajectory of reaction needs to be viewed in the context of his entanglement within the legacy of decadence/symbolism. If, as we have seen, aestheticism sought an art that would transfigure the aesthetic in terms of the sacred, this project had reached a crisis with the failure of decadence. Writing in 1915, Max Weber sensed the way in which the dialectic relationship between art and religion was in the process of taking a new turn. Weber’s analysis centers upon the way in which art begins to curve inward and develop according to its own logic: “The sublimation of the religious ethic and the quest for salvation, on the one hand, and the evolution of the inherent logic
of art, on the other, have tended to form an increasingly tense relationship” (341). Art in the modern period can maintain, or periodically restore, a symbiotic relationship with the sacred only “as long and as often as the conscious interest of the recipient of art is naively attached to the content and not to the form as such” (341). The art/religion dyad succumbs to Weber’s theme of “disenchantment” of the modern world. Art’s need to legitimate itself in terms of the spiritual is not abandoned; it is presented as an alternative “quest for salvation.” If once art and religion could meet on the grounds of a unity of the ethical and the aesthetic, Weber argues that “[t]he development of intellectualism and the rationalization of life changed this situation. For under these conditions, art becomes a cosmos of more and more consciously grasped independent values which exist in their own right. Art takes over the function of a this-worldly salvation, no matter how this may be interpreted. It provides a salvation from the routines of everyday life, and especially from the increasing pressures of theoretical and practical rationalism” (342). Thus art and literature become not simply a rejection of bourgeois life, an Arnoldian “criticism of life,” but a transcendence of it for the cultivated consciousness. “With this claim to a redemptory function,” Weber observes “art begins to compete directly with religion” (342). In explicating Weber’s concept, Peter Bürger observes, “[…] the institution of art/literature in a fully developed bourgeois society may be considered as a functional equivalent of the institution of religion.”12 He cautions, however, “that a functional equivalence does not require the identity of its agents. In other words: we must not conclude from the functional equivalence of the institutions that art is ‘nothing else’ than a substitute for religion” (18). It is this problematic that early moderns like Hulme struggle to overcome. On the one hand, art must be true to its own internal logic;
it must establish its legitimacy somehow out of its own nature. On the other hand, it must operate at a level of experience that neither conflates art and religion, nor struggles to overcome religion. This project is problematic on both counts in the truest sense of the word. The authority of art and its relation to the sacred would have to be posited on the basis of some deeper level. The evolution of Hulme’s positions, reflects a trajectory that other moderns, most clearly T. S. Eliot, also follow, and Hulme’s search for the legitimacy of the aesthetic would lead him, in his rejection of humanistic culture, to the relativistic culture idea of anthropology. Yet in engaging this concept, Hulme translates the problem of value and meaning from the art/religion dyad, first into classicism/romanticism, and then into humanism/primitivism. Just as Rémy de Gourmont’s “dissociation” thematizes language as the medium that links consciousness and society, Hulme’s position on language is increasingly forced to confront the social basis, not only of language, but art and literature as well.

Levenson’s view of Hulme as a measure of the trajectory of early modernism indicates that literary theory was responding to a tectonic shift in intellectual life rather than simply rejecting Victorian literary values. In The Matrix of Modernism, Sanford Schwartz argues that “[a]t the turn of the century, the human sciences were undergoing a global shift from the developmental (or ‘before-after’) paradigms of the nineteenth century to the structural (or ‘surface-depth’) paradigms of the twentieth” (5).13 While Schwartz notes in passing the work of Sir James Fraser and Sigmund Freud as transitional figures who undermine the notion of progress and place Western civilization on “common foundations” with non-Western societies, his reading of modernism issues from an insistence on a philosophical context for its development. Schwartz usefully
connects this transformation to the inversion of the relation between experience and abstraction in philosophers like Henri Bergson who had a decisive influence on Hulme. “At the turn of the century,” Schwartz observes “many philosophers believed that they were forging a fundamentally new theory of knowledge. Announcing a major ‘inversion of Platonism’ in Western philosophy, they claimed that reality lies in immediate flux of sensory appearances and not in a rational order beyond it. Our conceptual systems, they argued, are not copies of eternal forms underlying the sensory flux; they are instrumental constructs that overlie an experiential stream irreducible to rational formulation” (12). According to Schwartz, this can be seen especially in the work of Bergson whose durée réelle describes the vital psychic forces of lived experience as distinct from the convenient mental constructs of the intellect. Bergson seeks to recall us to sensory appearances in order to destroy the illusion of taking the mechanistic constructions of the mind for reality itself: a mistake that structures our habituated response to the world. However much Hulme came to these ideas through Bergson, the shift itself needs to be looked in term wider than the philosophical framework Schwartz identifies. In the early twentieth century, the anthropological idea of culture was being transformed along the lines that Schwartz attributes to philosophy by thinkers as different as Franz Boas and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. The positivist project of Tylor’s anthropology would be thrown into crisis. The new anthropology offered a theoretical leverage to break through Western assumptions. Schwartz’s philosophical shift is itself a response to these new possibilities. As George Marcus and Michael Fischer observe, “Twentieth-century social and cultural anthropolgy has promised its still largely Western readership enlightenment on two fronts” (1).14 Not only has it rescued our knowledge of “distinct cultural forms” from
Westernization, but “[i]n using portraits of other cultural patterns to reflect self-critically on our own ways, anthropology disrupts common sense and makes us reexamine our taken-for-granted assumptions” (1). The undermining of positivism throughout the human sciences predictably led to a contestation that would open up a new way of thinking for art and literature.

Bergson’s language provides Hulme with a way of talking about those features of consciousness that lie beyond, or perhaps undergird, the intellect. His early theoretical arguments focus upon the “flux of experience,” upon a stream that is “irreducible to rational formulation.” However, this framework will entrap Hulme in an unproductive metaphysical dualism. Increasingly throughout his short career, Hulme will find that some idea of culture is inescapable. It is precisely in his most radical “antihumanist” phase that some means of theorizing the re-rational basis of collective life will become indispensable to him. His attempt to eradicate the organic, paradoxically, leads him back to the most organic of metaphors. As Schwartz observes, “Bergson and James, like the romantics before them, employ organic metaphors to rescue human nature from the spectre of scientific determinism” (26). Hulme’s primary interest, for present purposes, lies here. Furthermore, Hulme’s struggle to develop an intellectual position that evades reductive positivism mirrors his personal struggle with the repositioning of intellectual and cultural authority.

6.2 The Need for Legitimacy

Having been sent down from Cambridge, Hulme would be thrust into the shrinking space of higher journalism fighting a rear-guard action against the ascendant
Hulme went to France where he heard lectures by Henri Bergson and made his acquaintance. He returned to England in 1908, quickly insinuated himself into the London cultural elite by becoming the secretary of the Poet’s Club and making the acquaintance of A. R. Orage. It is a measure of the constricting sphere of the man-of-letters role that Orage’s journal, *The New Age*, could not pay contributors. Hulme was never really able, in any significant way, to supplement his income with his writing.

It is during this period that Hulme began to turn his attention to poetry and the concept of the image. In “A Lecture on Modern Poetry” (1909) delivered to The Poet’s Club, he states that “[t]he latter stages in the decay of an art form are very interesting and worth study because they are peculiarly applicable to the state of poetry at the present day. They resemble the latter stages in the decay of religion when the spirit has gone and there is a meaningless reverence for formalities and ritual. The carcass is dead, and all the flies are upon it. Imitative poetry springs up like weeds, and women whimper and whine of you and I alas, and roses, roses all the way. It becomes the expression of sentimentality rather than virile thought.” 

The outlines of Hulme’s later assault on romanticism are clearly visible, but are not yet fully identified with a crisis brought on by modernity itself. Instead, the decadence of poetry lies in its outworn tropes and hackneyed sentimentality. Decadence is, in essence, a failure of the imagination. Nevertheless, the modern mind, in the form of Bergson’s metaphysics, has created the conditions of aesthetic renewal.

This impending rebirth, at this point in Hulme’s thinking, is predicated upon the decay of the Greek experience of the world and the way it shaped their art. Rather than
holding up Greece as exemplar for a new Hellenism, a new youth of art, Hulme predicates his understanding of the modern on the radical historicity of Greek culture. He presents this in terms of differing responses to the Bergsonian flux. “The ancients,” he states, “were perfectly aware of the fluidity of the world and of its impermanence; there was the Greek theory that the whole world was a flux” (70). Hence the Hericlitean recognition of ontological mutability bears superficial resemblance to the “modern spirit.” However, the Greeks, in consciously formulating a metaphysics of becoming, were unconsciously repelled by it. “But while they recognize it,” Hulme argues, “they feared it and endeavoured to evade it, to construct things of permanence which would stand fast in this universal flux which frightened them. They had the disease, the passion, for immortality. They wished to construct things which would be proud boasts that they, men, were immortal. We see it in a thousand different forms. Materially in the pyramids, spiritually in the dogmas of religion and in the hypostatized ideas of Plato. Living in a dynamic world they wished to create a static fixity where their souls might rest” (70-71). Hulme’s invocation of the Hellenic experience, at this point in his thinking, emphasizes the inadequacy of ancient models as a guide to the present. While Hulme’s terms have a superficial resemblance to his later positions under the influence of Worringer, the view he offers here is exactly the opposite of the one he will come to. The Hellenic mind hungers for the absolute: it is static, not vital and organic. The Greeks, in recognizing a world of becoming, held fast to appearances. In achieving a victory over the flux, the Greeks become exemplars for a European tradition that has forgotten this dread. A nostalgia for classicism is precisely what he rejects.
The superiority of the moderns is attributed to their psychic comfort with the flux of existence and their rejection of the therapeutic role of art. Instead, the modern poet will seek to register the experience of this flux and do justice to “reality” thus conceived. Hulme asserts, “Now the whole trend of the modern spirit is away from that; philosophers no longer believe in absolute truth. We no longer believe in perfection, either in verse or in thought, we frankly acknowledge the relative” (71). This appeal to the familiar Victorian invocation of the “modern spirit” suggests the extent to which Hulme’s thinking at this point is still confined by nineteenth-century categories. Indeed, in an assertion that would not be out of place for the Decadents, he tells us that “[w]e are no longer concerned that stanzas shall be shaped and polished like gems, but rather that some vague mood shall be communicated. In all the arts, we seek for the maximum of individual and personal expression, rather than for the attainment of any absolute beauty” (71-72). This is essentially a justification of decadent/symbolist poetics, despite Hulme’s intentions. “We can’t escape from the spirit of our times” he proclaims. As a result, Hulme finds, “What has found expression in painting as Impressionism will soon find expression in poetry as free verse. The vision of a London street at midnight, with its long rows of light, has produced several attempts at reproduction in verse […]” (72). Such a statement seems more like a prescription for the poetry of Arthur Symons than the “classical” verse based upon the image.

In propounding his theory of the image itself, Hulme encounters a problem that will be characteristic of his thinking. On one hand, he justifies the new poetry of images on the basis of historicity and flux. On the other hand, he wants to offer an absolute definition of poetry. In an awkward shift of terms, Hulme abandons the problem of the
modern spirit, offering an abstract definition of poetry rather than a historically conditioned one: “The direct language is poetry, it is direct because it deals in images. The indirect language is prose, because it uses images that have died and become figures of speech” (74). Hulme’s solution is to define poetry in strictly functional terms: a perpetual revolution of the word. From this, Hulme concludes that poetry has the function of revivifying language itself: a familiar position, not only from Gourmont, but from the aesthetic positions of Pater as well. “One might say that images are born in poetry,” he asserts. “They are used in prose, and finally die a long, lingering death in journalists’ English. Now this process is very rapid, so that the poet must continually be creating new images, and his sincerity may be measured by the number of his images” (75). Like Pater’s appeal for passionate attending to sensation, Hulme asserts the claims of immediate experience as “sincerity.” Yet, unlike Pater, the barrier to this aesthetic apprehension lies not simply in ourselves, our propensity to become habituated, but in a society which cultivates us for its own rationalist needs, and most importantly, this problematic is reduced to one of language itself. In this, Hulme’s argument most resembles Gourmont’s, that reads the decadence of a civilization in terms of its inability to create real dissociations that are not simply re-associations in disguise. Nevertheless, what interests here is the way in which Hulme struggles to assert the primacy of consciousness over culture and its coercive dominion over the self. In this, Hulme moves beyond Gourmont’s formulation of the problem of decadence. Gourmont argued that an excess of individual egoism “makes but a mediocre people” and that true dissociation in art served the interests of defeating the habitual and destructive associations of a decadent
Hulme’s culture is simply a negativity to be overcome by a poetry devoted to visual images that “hand over” sensations in the interests of rendering “mood” directly to consciousness.

Levenson attributes Hulme’s early impressionism to the direct influence of Henri Bergson, but this formulation of his development is too neat. Vitalism is also the means by which Hulme begins to break from aestheticist assumptions, paradoxically, by following out their individualist and egoist implications. About the time that he abandoned the Poet’s Club to form his own “group”—the short-lived “forgotten school of 1909” that Pound memorialized—Hulme sought to establish his intellectual legitimacy by re-establishing his academic career rather than leaving matters to the vicissitudes of literary London. Gaining re-admittance to Cambridge, Hulme began to translate Bergson—much to the horror of Bertram Russell—while he continued to straddle the world of academe and the more informal world of the “salon” he hosted in Frith Street, Soho. Writing contributions in The New Age and other little magazines, he made himself into the spokesman and interpreter of Bergson. In “Bergson’s Theory of Art,” written sometime between 1909 and 1912, he proclaims, “Now the extraordinary importance of Bergson for any theory of art is that, starting with a different aim altogether, seeking merely to give an account of reality, he arrives at certain conclusions as being true, and these conclusions are the very things which we had to suppose in order to give an account of art.” Characteristically, Hulme demands that aesthetics be dependent upon a theory of reality, and he seeks to abstract such an account from Bergson’s Vitalism. The
aestheticist positions of Pater and Symons, by contrast, begin with the experience of art itself as a means of overcoming the materialist world: for Pater it calls us to the lived moment, and for Symons it provides a compensatory dream.

Such a comparison may seem unfair, given that Hulme is developing a specifically philosophical aesthetics. However the value Hulme attributes to Bergson’s theory suggests the threat he perceives from such an aestheticist mode: “The advantage of this is that it removes your account of art from the merely literary level, from the level at which it is a more or less successful attempt to describe what you feel about the matter, and enables you to state it as an account of actual reality” (146). In rejecting the art/life dyad that animated the rhetoric of Pater and the wit of Wilde, Hulme insists that an “account of art’ must be “an account of reality.” He identifies what are to him two crucial insights of Bergson’s theory. The first lies in “(1) the conception of reality as a flux of interpenetrated elements unseizable by the intellect […]” (146). The second Bergsonian insight lies in “(2) his account of the part played in the development of the ordinary characteristics of the mind by its orientation toward action” (146-47). The importance Hulme attributes to this second point is not so much the conclusion it leads to, but the fact that it provides a satisfactory reason, based on an analysis of consciousness itself, for the distinction between distortions of habituated experience and the role of art in breaking through convention. “This in turn enables one to give a more coherent account of the reason for what previously has only been assumed,” Hulme argues, “the fact that in ordinary perception, both of external objects and of our internal states, we never perceive things as they are, but only certain conventional types” (147). The artist alone struggles against the need for action at the expense of attending to the flux of consciousness. “The
creative activity of the artist,” Hulme asserts, “is only necessary because of the limitations placed on internal and external perception by the necessities of action. If we could break through the veil which action interposes, if we could come into direct contact with sense and consciousness, art would be useless and unnecessary. Our eyes, aided by memory, would carve out in space and fix in time the most inimitable pictures. In the centre of one’s own mind, we should hear constantly a certain music. But as this is impossible, the function of the artist is to pierce through here and there, accidentally as it were, the veil placed between us and reality by the limitations of our perception engendered by action” (147). The poet becomes one who can pierce the veil—the Schopenhauerian “Maya” one supposes—in order to put us in a more direct contact with the experience of the real. Yet this is not that impossible experience of the noumenal in Kant’s sense. Rather, we are returned to phenomena. The artist returns Bergson’s moi superficiel to the moi fondamental. What poetic language seems to accomplish for Hulme is merely the breaking of cultural habituation in the name of a heightened experience of consciousness. It is the necessity for action in life that destroys our perception of the world and deadens our sense of that life. At this point in his thinking, Hulme reads the idea of culture as the stereotyped action—the veil, the decent into “mere ritual”—that becomes the enemy of individual consciousness and the experience of life itself.

Hulme’s position may not seem far removed from Pater’s impressionism. However, his argument raises Pater’s stakes exponentially by rejecting the value of prior cultural achievements for consciousness—they become dead metaphors—Hulme’s defense of poetic innovation radicalizes the Paternian self. In part, this view of art as perpetual revolution of the senses issues from Hulme’s focus upon the problem of
individual consciousness. For this reason, Hulme’s poet looks much like Pater’s late
romantic artist. “From time to time,” Hulme states, “in a fit of absent-mindedness nature
raises up minds which are more detached from life—a natural detachment, one innate in
the structure of sense or consciousness, which at once reveals itself by a virginal manner
of seeing, hearing or thinking” (152). Such persons are nature’s accidents. While Hulme
would shudder at the Paternian reading of such “temperaments,” his claim amounts to the
humanistic concept of genius. “From time to time,” he tells us, “by happy accident, men
are born who either in one of their senses, or in their conscious life as a whole, are less
dominated by the necessities of action. Nature has forgotten to attach their faculty for
perception to their faculty for action. They do not perceive simply for the purposes of
action: they perceive just for the sake of perceiving. It is necessary to point out here that
this is taken in a profounder sense than the words are generally used” (154). This
“profounder sense” is left unspecified. The need to articulate it drives Hulme’s thought
in two directions if the new art is to be more than a sophisticated pleasure: inward toward
spiritual need and outward toward social reality.

In following Bergson toward the first, Hulme will reach his own aestheticist dead
end. In his 1909 formulation of the doctrine, the image is simply a means of expressing
the poet’s epiphanic moments: “Creation of imagery is needed to force language to
convey over this freshness of impression. The particular kind of art we are concerned
with here, at any rate, can be defined as an attempt to convey over something which
ordinary language and ordinary expression lets slip through” (163). It is important to
note that Hulme makes no claim that the image has any greater purpose than that of the
communication of emotion. The poetic image is simply offered as a more self-conscious,
and hence more sensitive, use of language than “ordinary” uses allow. The function of poetry is emotive, and its purpose is to delight: “The emotion conveyed by an art in this case, then, is the exhilaration produced by the direct and unusual communication of this fresh impression” (163). Yet this exhilaration hardly addresses the threat to consciousness posed by scientific rationalism that so preoccupied him.

In “The Philosophy of Intensive Manifolds,” Hulme proffers a “solution” to his dread of a mechanistic universe described by science. He observes that Bergson’s philosophy “is an endeavour to prove that we seem inevitably to arrive at the mechanistic theory simply because the intellect, in dealing with a certain aspect of reality, distorts it in that direction. It can deal with matter but it is absolutely incapable of understanding life” (174). Bergson’s vitalism offers a dualistic interpretation of consciousness that reserves a space for spiritual experience, in the form of intuition, beyond the mechanistic distortions of the intellect. Hence, the intellect and intuition represent two distinct modes of knowing. The intellect deals with “extensives” of the material world but is unable to grasp the nature of lived experience. This experience is an “intensive manifold” that escapes intellection and can be encountered only through intuition. Hulme’s task in the essay is to function as an interpreter of Bergson’s positions for his English audience. “I shall endeavour to show,” he states, “that intuition can be defined as the method of knowledge by which we seize an intensive manifold, a thing absolutely unseizable by the intellect” (179). Hulme has found a new task for the image. No longer confined to the expression of ego, the image becomes a mode of knowing that provides access to a reality that the intellect disfigures. “Suppose, however,” Hulme considers, “that there existed in nature certain finite things whose parts interpenetrated in such a manner that they could
not be separated or analyzed out. The intellect would then be unable to understand the nature of these things, for it persists in forming a diagram, and in a diagram each part is separated from every other part” (180). The scientific attitude dismembers the world, and in so doing, distorts life. In our lived experience, “There are no clearly outlined and separate states; in fact there are no separate states of mind at all: each state fades away into and interpenetrates the next state” (184).

Yet the question arises, what does this imply for Hulme’s doctrine of the image? In Hulme’s reading of Bergson, the modern mind is not so far removed from the Greek. If the Greeks had been repelled by the “flux” and sought to create an aesthetics of permanence, Hulme’s image, though he is not ready to admit it, does much the same.

The image becomes that which is able, “here and there,” to pierce the veil of Maya in order to intimate a transcendent or spiritual order that undergirds the flux of phenomena. However, how can such private experience offer any significance outside the self? How could art and poetry have any claim to larger meaning, and most importantly, authority? As much as his theory of the image seeks to evade these questions, Hulme will find them unavoidable.

6.3 Classicism or Anarchy

If Hulme had defined the Greek mind in terms of a rejection of the flux of experience, by 1911, he was reconsidering their significance. According to Levenson, Hulme came into contact with the Action Française group in that year, and found it immediately congenial to his thinking. Yet, it is unclear in this account why a movement that developed in a French context in the aftermath of the Dreyfus Affair would have
such resonance for Hulme (and other moderns like Eliot) unless we see how it appealed to the problems of post-Decadent culture in Britain. Levenson suggests that Hulme is radicalizing a critique of individualism begun by Arnold and continued into the next century by Irving Babbitt. No doubt, Levenson is right in one sense. Hulme’s attempt to link his theory of the image with Arnold’s problem of “doing as one likes” is an awkward struggle as long as he remains within philosophical language. Yet, as George Dangerfield chronicles in The Strange Death of Liberal England, the years 1910-1914 were a tremendous watershed in British social and political life even before the Great War demolished the old order.¹⁸ In the years when Hulme was developing his classical aesthetics, the Liberal Party was winning its pyrrhic victory over the House of Lords, only to find itself flanked on its left by the Labour Party. The labor unrest of 1911-12, culminating in a general strike, provided Hulme the kind of urgency that the Hyde Park riots did for Arnold some fifty years previous.¹⁹ Against this background, radical political thought had irresistible attractions, and the journals to which Hulme contributed like The New Age (though nominally Syndicalist) contained within its pages political articles that shared only a distrust of the liberal status quo and a concern for the fate of the arts. Hulme’s growing interest in Action Française would hardly have seemed strange alongside defenses of Sorrel’s anarchist Syndicalism of defenses of Socialism not much more politically sophisticated than Wilde’s “Soul of Man.”

The two texts that show the most marked influence of Maurras and Lasserre, “Romanticism and Classicism” and “A Tory Philosophy,” have gained the status of manifestoes of Anglo-American modernism of the Pound-Eliot wing. While Levenson rightly warns against the critical tendency to overvalue these texts by reading modernism
backwards through the filter of Hulme’s classicism, they are nevertheless important documents: not only for the obvious critique of romanticism but for the way in which Hulme runs up against the conceptual limits of philosophical discourse, and in so doing is forced to identify a different ground for intuition and sensibility.

The first point—Hulme’s well-known distinction between the romantic and the classical attitude—need not be rehearsed in great detail. The “root of all romanticism,” he tells us, lies in the idea “that man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities; and if you can so rearrange society by the destruction of oppressive order then these possibilities will have a chance and you will get Progress” (116).20 The classical attitude becomes a simple rejection of this faith in progress: “One can define the classical quite clearly as the exact opposite to this. Man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organization that anything decent can be got out of him” (116). This distinction is usually read as the basis of modernism’s reactionary tendencies, and so it is. Yet, Hulme’s distinction is something of an intervention in a longstanding debate within modernity itself: it is a translation of the ancients and moderns debate into the topos of the classic/romantic pursued by critics like Matthew Arnold and Saint-Beuve. For these latter critics, the classic/romantic distinction was a problem of style. Arnold, following his French sources, understood both terms as perennial aesthetic possibilities: there was a romantic sensibility in the ancient world no less than a classical mode in the modern one. Both terms are removed from their polemical origins in the battle of ancients and moderns of the previous century. Hulme is conscious of this tradition, and he works against it in order to reconnect the historical dimension to the problem of modern culture.
“I know quite well,” he states, “that when people think of classical and romantic in verse, the contrast at once comes into their mind between, say, Racine and Shakespeare. I don’t mean this; the dividing line that I intend is here misplaced a little from the true middle. That Racine is on the extreme classical side I agree, but if you call Shakespeare romantic, you are using a different definition to the one I give. You are thinking of the difference between classic and romantic as being merely one between restraint and exuberance” (119). In rejecting the specifically literary formulation of the problem, Hulme turns to his own fixed principle, the “religious attitude,” rather than a direct appeal to the problem of history that formed the background to the ancients/moderns controversy. Instead, the religious view is the classical view of a fixed human nature. Like St. Augustine, Hulme defends the idea of a religious instinct: “I should put it this way: That part of the fixed nature of man is belief in the Deity. This should be as fixed and true for every man as belief in the existence of matter and the objective world. It is parallel to appetite, the instinct of sex, and all the other fixed qualities” (118). Modernity, for Hulme, enforces a split between reason and faith, particularly apparent in the Reformation, that turns the exercise of reason into Rationalism and misdirects the religious instinct. “The inevitable result of such a process,” he argues, “is that the repressed instinct bursts out in some abnormal direction. So with religion. By the perverted rhetoric of Rationalism, your natural instincts are suppressed and you are converted into an agnostic. Just as in the case of the other instincts, Nature has her revenge. The instincts that find their right and proper outlet in religion must come out in some other way. You don’t believe in a God, so you begin to believe that man is a god. You don’t believe in Heaven, so you begin to believe in heaven on earth. In other words, you get romanticism” (118). Romanticism
becomes “spilt religion” because it redirects the religious impulse toward an improper object (118). “One may note here,” Hulme observes, “that the Church has always taken the classical view since the defeat of the Pelagian heresy and the adoption of the sane classical dogma of original sin” (117). Hulme’s famous defense of the doctrine of original sin, however, should not mislead us into thinking he is mounting a defense of Christianity, not even the version that Eliot would come to embody. The modern Pelagian, asserting that the human can work its way to the divine, is analogous to the classical Greek understanding of hybris. It is in this sense that the Hebraic concept of original sin becomes a defense of “classicism” by virtue of its analogy with the sin of arrogance in Hellenism.

Hulme defines the values of the new poetry in terms of this Hebraic/Hellenic ideal: “What I mean by classical in verse, then, is this. That even in the most imaginative flights there is always a holding back, a reservation. The classical poet never forgets this finiteness, this limit of man. He remembers always that he is mixed up with earth. He may jump, but he always returns back; he never flies away into the circumambient gas” (119-120). Happily, Hulme observes, romanticism has exhausted itself as an aesthetic force. Nevertheless, as a cultural force, it still shapes Western consciousness. “At the present time,” he asserts “I should say that this receptive attitude has outlasted the thing from which it was formed. But while the romantic tradition has run dry, yet the critical attitude of mind, which demands romantic qualities from verse, still survives. So that if good classical verse were to be written to-morrow very few people would be able to stand it” (126). This inhospitable atmosphere marks the end point of the logic of modernity in
its romantic guise. Yet rather than “wandering between two worlds,” modern art shows every sign of making a clean break not by offering a new art, but by responding to an old impulse.

In prophesying that “a period of hard, dry, classical verse is coming,” Hulme asserts not simply the relevance but the superiority of ancient understanding of the human situation (133). The logic of modernity leads to a crisis of culture: the inevitable decay into decadence. What should astonish—and this point cannot be stressed too much—is the claim that a crisis of civilization can only be addressed as a crisis of art. Classicism is offered not as simply a redux of Western aesthetics but of Western civilization itself. That it is not so astonishing a claim for us lies in our assumption that aesthetics is intimately related to a whole way of life that we designate by the term culture. While it is true that the Victorian sages like Arnold and Ruskin had asserted the importance of art within a larger understanding of culture, they never asserted that art is the ultimate arbiter of all cultural value. Arnold, it is true, develops a concept of disinterestedness that finds its source in Kantian aesthetics; yet his concept is offered in the spirit of making “reason and the will of God prevail,” and in this, aesthetic disinterestedness is merely analogous to rational deliberation and subservient to larger aims. Even Ruskin’s view of art history sees art as more symptomatic than ultimately constitutive of culture.

Hulme is writing, at this point, without direct appeal to the culture idea in part because he is aware of this Victorian discourse. Hulme’s classicism fines itself down to a problem of language, and in so doing, poetry becomes the lynchpin of cultural health. In a veiled allusion to Arnold, Hulme claims, “[t]here are then two things to distinguish, first the particular faculty of mind to see things as they really are, and apart from the
conventional ways in which you have been trained to see them” (133). As the final clause indicates, Hulme rejects Arnold’s disinterested exercise of reason. Language, as the medium of the intellect, becomes an obstacle to seeing things as they really are because it is always entrapped in conventional “counter language” that distorts experience. Hulme’s position is hardly radical if we assume that he stops here. As we have seen, Walter Pater comes close to making the same observation. Herbert Schneidau complains that Hulme’s position is “nothing more than the standard explanation for dead metaphor,” and he charges Hulme with offering a theory of the image that is simply based upon finding verbal analogies (46). Yet, Schneidau’s assertion applies more justly to Hulme’s 1909 formulations. His classicist phase represents rejection of his earlier positions even as he still relies upon the arguments of Bergson to justify his claims. Hulme’s problem is to reject his earlier impressionism with its solipsistic dangers while discovering a different means of being true to lived experience.

Hulme maintains the idea that aesthetic apprehension offers a way of working on the pre-conceptual basis of the self, and by implication, society. “Really,” he states “in all these matters the act of judgment is an instinct, an absolutely unstateable [sic] thing akin to the art of the tea taster” (129). Yet this intuitive dimension of consciousness is precisely what makes poetry superior to other forms of discourse. Poetry directs itself to capturing and “handing over” not only a representation of experience, but also by creating an experience of its own. Yet in doing so, poetry must struggle against the communal medium of language itself and interrupt its normative processes. “The great aim is accurate, precise and definite description,” Hulme argues. “The first thing is to recognise how extraordinarily difficult this is. It is no mere matter of carefulness; you
have to use language, and language is by its very nature a communal thing; that is, it expresses never the exact thing but a compromise—that which is common to you, me and everybody. But each man sees a little differently, and to get out clearly and exactly what he does see, he must have a terrific struggle with language, whether it be with words or the technique of other arts” (132). Poetic language can only create a compromise for an impossible language of intuition. This is not simply a theory of dead metaphor. Rather, language itself is a perpetual antagonist, and in equating “words” with the “techniques of other arts,” language becomes a metaphor for all cultural media. The artist is that being who resists being written by contemporary language. He argues that “Language has its own special nature, its own conventions and communal ideas. It is only by a concentrated effort of mind that you can hold it fixed to your own purpose” (132). In attempting to achieve these purposes, the poet discovers that language does not decay into a “communal thing” but is always already a prosaic counter language. Language, as a cultural medium, is an “algebraic” function in which “[o]ne only changes the X’s and the Y’s back into physical things at the end of the process” (134). This characteristic of language is relentless. “Poetry,” he tells us, “in one aspect at any rate, may be considered as an effort to avoid this characteristic of prose. It is not a counter language, but a visual concrete one. It is a compromise for a language of intuition which would hand over sensations bodily. It always endeavours to arrest you, and to make you continually see a physical thing, to prevent you gliding through an abstract process. It chooses fresh epithets and fresh metaphors, not so much because they are new, and we are tired of the old, but because the old cease to convey a physical thing and become abstract counters” (134-35). The image is now defended on the grounds of its attempt—its effort or
endeavor—to resist the communal experience of the world. Hulme’s position entraps him between a rejection of his earlier justification of poetry as impressionist self-expression and the need to endow the aesthetic with a social or communal power.

“Romanticism and Classicism” is an essay that admits its own failure to envision a way to bridge the gap between individual artistic consciousness and the communal ideologies it seeks to alter. Language, that “communal thing,” cannot truly “hand over sensations bodily”; the poet’s language is no less a cultural medium than the “counter language” he assails. The poet, in Hulme’s account is doomed to using the traditional resources of language. “But you must talk,” Hulme admits, “and the only language you can use in this matter is that of analogy. I have no material clay to mould to the given shape; the only thing which one has for one purpose, and which acts as a substitute for it, a kind of mental clay, are certain metaphors modified into theories of aesthetic and rhetoric” (129). Still mired in the Bergson’s framework, Hulme can only fall back on asserting that the analogical language of the poet somehow compromises for ontological deficiencies of common language: “A combination of these [metaphors], while it cannot state the essentially unstateable [sic] intuition, can yet give you a sufficient analogy to enable you to see what it was and to recognise it on condition that you yourself have been in a similar state” (129). The final proviso indicates the way in which Hulme’s philosophical language locks him in an unproductive account of the cultural distinction between the romantic and the classical with which the essay began. Bergson’s account of consciousness, with its assertion of the elan vital, is awkwardly meshed with a defense of the classical attitude. In maintaining Bergson’s dualistic opposition between intuition and intellect, Hulme is left without a means of theorizing the social dimension of art that
he wants to pursue. The realm of culture is ruled by counter language of the mechanical intellect. Hulme tells us that “[t]he intellect always analyses—when there is a synthesis it is baffled. That is why the artist’s work seems mysterious. The intellect can’t represent it. This is a necessary consequence of the particular nature of the intellect and the purposes for which it is formed. It doesn’t mean that your synthesis is ineffable, simply that it can’t be definitely stated” (139). Though Hulme is unclear about what is being synthesized, his lingering commitment to Bergson suggests an answer. For Bergson, as Hulme notes, the intellect deals with “extensive forces” while the “intensive forces” of lived experience are intuitively grasped (139). The syntheses produced by the artist are effective, in Hulme’s view, because they approximate intensive experience in the linguistic medium accessible to, though not graspable by, the extensive intellect. The awkwardness of this position leads him to abandon not only Bergson’s terms, but increasingly, the analytical language of purely philosophical discourse. The break with Bergson came when Hulme learned that the philosopher was despised by Action Française, and as Levenson notes, “Hulme was sufficiently concerned about this to make a visit to Charles Maurras” (86). But beyond his conformity with this new enthusiasm, Hulme clearly undertakes a search for some unconscious or intuitive ground upon which art can work directly.

6.4 Humanism or Nationalism

As Hulme comes into a tighter orbit of Lasserre and Maurras, he translates the Romanticism/Classicism distinction out of its aesthetic connotations into the political as such. “A Tory Philosophy” (May 1912) works to define Classicism and Romanticism as
“two temperaments” that are not subject to rational analysis.22 “If one’s theories in politics,” he states, “[…] are simply the expression of one’s fundamental prejudices, it would seem perfectly hopeless to argue with anyone about such things. But argument may have, however, one result. It is possible that, under the influence of a certain environment, that a man may adopt a theory which is not at all the expression of his own prejudices; his own may even be hidden from him. By picking out these prejudices and showing that they have a natural expression in a completely worked-out attitude in all kinds of subjects, it is quite possible to convert a man” (LAO 188). One can assume that this is precisely what Charles Maurras accomplished for Hulme himself. As much as Levenson insists that Hulme abandons Bergsonian ideas, Hulme still retains the conviction that reality is “unseizable” by the intellect. While the language of Bergson disappears, the war against instrumental reason, materialism and scientific positivism continues in the new vocabulary. The problem, for Hulme, lies in the capacity of the intellect to construct logically consistent opposing positions. The intellect cannot adjudicate between them. Instead, Hulme is thrust back upon some pre-rational basis for the understanding: “[The intellect] does not suspect that the same consistency can be found on the other side. If you can present it with the developed theory of this other side, it will then be in the most favorable position for suddenly discovering its own inner sentiments” (LAO 188). These “inner sentiments” differ from Bergsonian intuition only in that experience reveals not the vital life process itself, but the antinomies within which consciousness is entrapped. “[Man] is incapable of attaining any kind of perfection,” he argues, “because, either by nature, as the result of original sin, or the result of evolution, he encloses within him certain antinomies” (LOA 190). These antinomies remain
unspecified; however, in leaving them poised between the original sin of the “religious attitude” and the animality of evolutionary science, Hulme links the moral with the human biological condition in way that places sever limits on the will. Consciousness becomes a site of a battle between the social necessities of human life and the selfish impulses of the survival instinct. “There is a war of instincts inside him,” Hulme asserts, “and it is part of his permanent characteristics that this must always be so. The future condition of man, then, will always be one of struggle and limitation” (LOA 190).

In his own version of Arnold’s critique of “doing as one likes,” Hulme draws a Tory conclusion from this view of human nature. Inverting Arnold’s appeal to humanistic cultivation as a foil to anarchy, Hulme’s appeal looks to external authority for the same purpose: “The best results can only be got out of man as the result of a certain discipline which introduces order into this internal anarchy. That is what Aristotle meant by saying that only a god or a beast could live outside the State” (LAO 190). Of course, this is certainly not what Aristotle meant; for him, the state was the polis whose natural end was the moral perfection of its members and the vehicle of justice. Its end—both virtue and justice—is indeed achieved through discipline, but the polis is never offered as order for its own sake. Hulme, by contrast, invokes Greek authority to equate order and the good. “Nothing,” he asserts, “is bad in itself except disorder; all that is put in order in a hierarchy is good” (LAO 190). Here, he seems to ratify the reflection theories of modernism that assert the direct relation between “classical” aesthetics and political reaction. Obviously, the notion that Hulme becomes a political reactionary is not in question. Nor is the fact that Hulme draws authoritarian conclusions about the value of tradition to be questioned. Yet, in reversing his previous impressionistic aesthetics and
asserting classicism in opposition to romantic liberalism, Hulme is led to reject the notion of cultivation as self-development of human potential. In its place, he offers, at this point in his argument, not only the putatively classical concept of original sin, but the cultural concept of tradition. He argues, “Moreover, man being by nature constant, the kind of discipline which will get the best out of him, and which is necessary for him, remains much the same in every generation. The classical attitude, then, has a great respect for the past and for tradition, not from sentimental, but on purely rational grounds. It does not expect anything radically new, and does not believe in any real progress” (LAO 190). In linking liberalism with romanticism, Hulme is able to make his critique of “ordinary language” into a political weapon. Rather than seeing everyday language as simply a distortion of reality, a deceptive necessity for a world of action, it becomes a site of ideological power: “It betrays itself in certain clichés, ‘breaking down barriers,’ freedom, emancipation, and the rest of it, but above all, it betrays itself in the epithet new. One must believe that there is a new art, a new religion, even a new age” (LAO192). In order to contest this ideology, the new art will not be new at all.

Yet significantly, Hulme’s argument does not immediately move toward an embrace of tradition that his classicism promises. Instead, the idea of tradition is filtered through the idea of nation. Hulme calls for an attack by “nationalism” on “universalism,” but “not on the ground that nationalities do […]” (LAO195). Though it is “regrettable” on one level that nations “still exist,” he also finds that “it is desirable even on abstract grounds that they should” (LAO195). The reason lies in the classical conception of humanity. National cultures offer the resistance of custom and religion to the optimistic progress of romantic modernity. Like the fundamental prejudices of the individual, the
temperament of collectivities are authentic expressions of identity. Hulme’s position has previously been caught between the explication of a universal human nature and the assertion of egoistic authenticity. His position tries to avoid recourse to the culture concept but finds itself driven to some version of it. On one hand, “There is no necessary difference,” he argues, “in mental capacity between a man driving a steam engine and a man driving a wooden plough, and progress in thought is exactly of the same kind: and though man has developed more complex mental conceptions and ways of dealing with things, the capacity which uses them remains the same” (LAO197). On the other hand, he tell us that this “intellectual constancy” is also “an analogy for the case of moral constancy” (LAO198). If, as Christopher Herbert argues, the culture idea offers a way of imagining limits on unbounded human desire, Hulme perceived the reactionary potential of this concept.23 The moral constancy marked by “original sin”—“that set of qualities, instincts, and prejudices which go to make up man’s constitution as a member of society and a political unit”—means that “[a]ny plan which supposes that his ethical standard can be raised, or that he can contain a less percentage of egoism, is building on sand” (LAO198).

This constancy of human nature becomes the justification for valuing tradition. “All the pleasure that one takes in old literature,” Hulme asserts, “comes from the fact that it gives us this strange emotion of solidarity, to find that our ancestors were of like nature with ourselves” (201). What is extraordinary about this assertion is that, for a budding “anti-humanist,” Hulme offers an inverted humanistic defense of tradition. While he will not remain within this formulation of classicism, the concept of tradition will come to displace his critique of language. That critique, whether cast in terms of his
doctrine of the image or as a compromise for the intuitive, is invested in humanism in a way that Hulme gradually became conscious of. As we have seen, Max Weber describes the way art in the modern world establishes its legitimacy as a “functional equivalent” of religion. Struggling against materialism, Hulme’s own spiritual crisis leads him posit aesthetic experience as such an equivalence, even as he seeks to avoid the “split religion” of romanticism. Weber shows that art comes to offer “this-worldly salvation,” a “salvation from the routines of everyday life,” and this is how Hulme describes the image and the poet’s effort to discover a compromise, or analogical, language that can fortuitously disclose the intuitive. Whether or not Levenson overstates the case when he says the Hulme embraced the programme of reaction “as soon as he encountered it,” it is also clear that Hulme is driven to it by his search for some pre-conscious ground of human experience and social order. Such an order must avoid establishing a functional equivalence between religion and art. Rather, the religious attitude must be prior to, and constitutive of, artistic representation. It is this direction that he will pursue in his final phase. While his classicist period denies progress to human consciousness, he will find that some version of culture as historical difference is necessary in mounting a theory of the new art. What that theory must avoid, he saw, was recourse to the humanistic assumptions of his earliest writings. Wilhelm Worringer would give him an approach that he could translate into an anti-humanist justification of art on the basis of the supra-individual concept of culture.
6. 5 **Worringer and Anthropological Aesthetics**

Wilhelm Worringer’s *Abstraction and Empathy* is usually interpreted as a key document in the justification for primitivism and abstraction in art, and of course it is.\(^{24}\)

His starting point is Theodor Lipps’ contention that aesthetic experience is “objectified pleasure” and that is grounded in the mind’s ability to empathize itself “into” works of art. Worringer’s main argument—that this description can only account for Western art—leads him to search for some more fundamental basis upon which one might give an unprejudiced account of both primitive and non-Western art. Such art is not inferior, Worringer asserts, but is based upon the “urge to abstraction” rather than empathy.

Despite the widespread commonplace that Worringer is only sympathetic to the geometric art of “abstraction” and denigrates the “empathetic” art of naturalism, I hope to show that this is a misleading reading: one initiated, in part, by Hulme. Worringer’s fascination with nonrepresentational art is grounded in what he sees as a kind of “cultural imperialism” built in to the assumptions of Western aestheticians: the belief in the Hellenic tradition of representation as the standard of artistic excellence. Instead, Worringer asserts, “we have no right to stamp the value which, under these circumstances, Classicism has for us, an absolute one: we have no right to subordinate to it the whole remaining complex of artistic creation. If we do so, we are caught up in an endless chain of injustices” (125). While it is clear that his argument has the polemical purpose of attacking Eurocentric bias, Worringer’s attitudes toward Western art are more complicated than most accounts, including Hulme’s own, recognize. Worringer’s
purpose not only reevaluates primitive art and the art traditions of non-Western civilizations; most importantly, he tries to show that the narrow view of Western prejudice also distorts the nature of empathetic art itself.

Worringer asserts that art emerges in response to psychological need, and that the will to abstraction lies at the beginning of every artistic tradition: “We shall then find that the artistic volition of savage peoples, in so far as they possess any at all, then the artistic volition of certain culturally developed Oriental peoples, exhibit this abstract tendency. Thus the urge to abstraction stands at the beginning of every art and in the case of certain peoples at a high level of culture remains the dominant tendency, whereas with the Greeks and other Occidental peoples, for example, it slowly recedes, making way for the urge to empathy” (15). What interests here is the reason Worringer gives for the development of empathetic art. Far from being a triumphant emergence of a more advanced artistic practice, Worringer’s rhetoric is cast in terms of a decline of abstraction. Both art impulses are determined by the cultural suppositions about the universe. “What happened,” he argues, “was that translation into laws governing the inorganic was brought to an end and replaced by translation into laws governing the human spirit. Science emerged, and transcendental art lost ground” (134). The task for “aesthetic science” becomes that of resisting its rationalist assumptions in order to give an objective account of the artworld as it manifests itself historically and culturally. Worringer begins with the neo-Kantian psychological framework of Lipps’ aesthetics, but the way he develops his questions will not allow him to remain there. “Now what are the psychic presuppositions for the urge to abstraction?” he asks. “We must seek them in these peoples’ feeling about the world, in their psychic attitude toward the cosmos.
Whereas the precondition for the urge to empathy is a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world, the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world; in a religious respect it corresponds to a strongly transcendental tinge to all notions. We might describe this state as an immense spiritual dread of space” (15). For Worringer, the dread of space and the perception of a hostile universe are not simply primitive states. While Western societies developed in the direction of rationalism, Eastern societies moved toward a civilization that retained a suspicion of appearances and hence retained their spiritual character. For the West, “[t]he rationalistic development of mankind pressed back this instinctive fear conditioned by man’s feeling of being lost in the universe” Worringer argues. Yet, “[t]he civilised peoples of the East, whose more profound world-instinct opposed development in a rationalistic direction and who saw in the world nothing by the shimmering veil of Maya, they alone remained conscious of the unfathomable entanglement of all the phenomena of life, and all the intellectual mastery of the world-picture could not deceive them as to this. Their spiritual dread of space, their instinct for the relativity of all that is, did not stand, as with primitive peoples, before cognition, but above cognition” (16). Eastern civilization, for Worringer, had never lost the metaphysical understanding that philosophers like Schopenhauer brought back into Western understanding.

Thus both non-Western and primitive art seek to objectify the emotional need for transcendence. In as much as art, for Worringer, is a satisfaction of precognitive needs, the urge to abstraction becomes a means of escaping the world of appearances. Geometric art offers the psyche a refuge from the flux of experience, of time, and thus
offers access to timelessness: “The happiness they sought from art did not consist in the
possibility of projecting themselves into the things of the outer world, of enjoying
themselves in them, but in the possibility of taking the individual thing of the external
world out of its arbitrariness and seeming fortuitousness, of eternalising it by
approximation to abstract forms and, in this manner, of finding a point of tranquillity and
a refuge from appearances” (16). Such art is thus genuinely philosophical in that it seeks
not simply a compensation or release from becoming, but seeks to represent being itself.
Worringer argues that “[t]heir most powerful urge was, so to speak, to wrest the object of
the external world out of its natural context, out of the unending flux of being, to purify it
of all its dependence upon life, i.e. of everything necessary and irrefragable, to
approximate it to its absolute value” (17). Hence, Worringer can declare that the
experience of beauty, i.e. pleasure, is relative to the cultural attitudes, identified as
precognitive “volition,” of a particular people. “Where [non-Western peoples] were
successful in this,” he asserts, “they experienced that happiness and satisfaction which the
beauty of organic-vital form affords us; indeed, they knew no other beauty, and therefore
we may term it their beauty” (17). While Worringer speaks on behalf of an appreciation
of primitive Oriental art—an interesting and problematic conjunction in itself—his
contrasting of this “static” and “absolute” art with Western “vitalism” demonstrates the
extent to which Worringer is enmeshed in the discourse that Edward Said analyzes as
“Orientalism.”25 Orientalism develops its discursive coherence in reference to philology
and Herder’s populist understanding of culture that, as Said notes, is “permeated by an
inimical creative spirit, each accessible only to an observer who sacrificed his prejudices
to Einfühlung” (118). Nevertheless, “what mattered was not Asia so much as Asia’s use
to modern Europe” (115). If, as Said argues, the philologist becomes “a spiritual hero, a knight errant bringing back to Europe a sense of the Holy mission it had now lost,” it is clear that Worringer is doing much the same for Western aesthetics in a way that prefigures not only Hulme, but Pound and Eliot as well (115). Einfühlung, or empathy, as Worringer’s defining feature of Western art, is also the means by which the aesthetician gains access to the value of both Eastern and primitive abstraction. Herder’s identification of Einfühlung as the fundamental basis of anthropological understanding is also the basis of Worringer’s polemic. This analogy between empathy at the level of culture on one hand, and at the level of aesthetics on the other, is not spurious; it is central to Worringer’s strategy. Grasping the meaning of a culture is, for him, fundamentally an act of aesthetic apprehension. Style is not a superficial fashion, but rather the expression of the precognitive basis of a whole way of life. Worringer can claim that “[a] causal connection must therefore exist between primitive culture and the highest, purest regular art-form” because the interpretation of the category of beauty depends upon its cultural construction rather than its participation in some independent essence (17).

When Worringer turns to Western art, we might assume that he presents realism as the antipode of abstraction. Yet despite the fact that a number of critics have read him in this way, this is not quite his line of argument. In order to understand empathetic art, Worringer stresses a distinction between the idea of mimesis and “naturalism.” The error of conflating these two ideas, in his view, leads to a misidentification of the artistic will-to-empathy. The artist of the empathetic seeks an “approximation to the organic and the true to life, but not because the artist desired to depict a natural object true to life in its corporeality, not because he desired to give the illusion of a living object, but because the
feeling for the beauty of organic form that is true to life had been aroused and because the artist desired to give satisfaction to this feeling, which dominated the absolute artistic volition. It was the happiness of the organically alive, not that of truth to life, which was striven after”(27-28). The place Worringer finds this authentic empathy in art is not, as we might suppose, in the Italian Renaissance or the Dutch Old Masters, nor in the neo-Classicism of the eighteenth century or the Academic painting of the nineteenth. Despite his role in providing theoretical justification for modern abstract art, Worringer is as fatally drawn to ancient Greece as those before him. However, the significance Worringer attributes to Greek art is somewhat displaced from the position it held for the romantic Hellenist. Worringer’s theme is still the ideal of Greek balance, of harmonia, but this is connected with the Hellenic feeling for pure form rather than representation. Since the tendency to abstraction is read by him as historically and universally prior to empathy, the problem lies in how to account for this Greek miracle. The perfection of the Classical ideal is for Worringer, as it was for Winckleman and Lessing, a delight in serene form “[s]o that this sensualism on the one hand is coupled with a fresh rationalism on the other, with faith in the spirit, as long as it does not speculate, as long as it does not reach out into transcendence” (46). This final stipulation is, of course, where Worringer diverges from the traditions of romantic Hellenism. His ideal Greek stops at the surface, delighting in naturalistic form as form, in an aesthetic apprehension that differs from abstraction only in that its artistic volition demands the organic rather than the geometric. If “[t]he old art had been a joyless impulse to self-preservation,” the Classical is full of felicity towards life and the world (135). “As such a man of the earthly world”, he says, “in whom sensuousness and intellect move likewise, full of confidence, within the world-
picture and dam back all ‘dread of space’, we may imagine the pure Greek, that is to say, the ideal Greek as we think of him in the narrow margin in which he has finally shaken himself free from all the Oriental elements of his provenance, and has not yet been re-infected by Oriental-transcendental inclinations” (46).

Yet this short-lived achievement is, in Worringer’s view, predicated upon its debt to Oriental abstraction after all. Rather than an out-and-out rejection of abstraction, the art that reaches its culmination in the fifth century is the result of a struggle to synthesize and harmonize the forces that shaped the art of the archaic Hellenes. “We recall,” Worringer asserts, “that the principle of Mycenean art was that of enlivenment, of naturalism, whereas the Dipylon [geometric] style exhibits a marked abstract tendency” (71). For a brief period, the Greeks assimilated these elements into a harmonia that produced the Western ideal of Greek beauty only to find its naturalistic tendencies overpower this balance in the decadent mannerism of the Hellenistic Age. “Classical art now seems to us to embody a grand synthesis of these two elements”, Worringer argues, “with a clear preponderance of the naturalistic element, which, during the decadent period, became stronger and stranger and ended up as a complete travesty of the august beauty of Greek ornament. This balance between the Mycenean components and the Dipylon components, this balance between naturalism and abstraction, brought to maturity that altogether felicitous result which we call Classical Greek art” (71-72). Thus Greek Classicism remains sui generis. It is a brief coda to an immense effort to assimilate abstraction and naturalism.

In the spread of Hellenization throughout the Near East in the wake of Alexander’s conquests, for Worringer, Greek naturalism would both assimilate and
struggle against the Oriental culture it dominated. Rather than the happy synthesis of the Classical Age, Hellenistic culture becomes locked in a dialectic of almost Hegelian dimensions as it as its attempts to master but is instead undermined by the Eastern cultures it conquered. If Philhellenism asserted its dominance over the western Mediterranean and the emerging power of Rome, the “decadent” Hellenistic kingdoms also become a conduit for the gradual dominance of the Eastern transcendent psyche in the West. “Religious transcendence,” Worringer states, “and its configuration most familiar to us, Christianity, are of Oriental provenance. The Greek pantheon had long since been infiltrated by transcendental Oriental notion, before Christianity assisted these elements, in a new setting, to victory on the soil of Rome” (103). Of course, such a narrative, steeped as it is in nineteenth-century historicist assumptions and Orientalist discourse, is hardly ground-breaking. Yet the purposes for which it is deployed are. Worringer sees this slow ascendancy of the psychic need for transcendence as the prelude to the great art of the Middle Ages that culminates in the Gothic. Like Ruskin before him, Worringer seeks to correct the injustice of attributing incompetence to medieval artists just as he seeks to awaken an appreciation of primitive and Oriental art, and on the same grounds: “[e]very stylistic phase represents, for the humanity that created it out of its psychic needs, the goal of its volition and hence the maximum degree of perfection. What seems to us to-day a strange and extreme distortion is not the fault of insufficient ability, but the consequence of differently directed volition. Its creators could do no otherwise because they willed no otherwise” (124). Such an assertion expresses his desire for an objective account of aesthetic and cultural difference. Yet, as much as he tries to temper his polemic in the name of “aesthetic science,” Worringer presents the
Renaissance—Pater’s happy reemergence of the authentic Greek attitude—not as a rebirth, but as a decline of the Gothic. The Renaissance, far from being the recovery of the Classical Hellenic synthesis, is instead the emergence of bourgeois modernity. With the Renaissance, Worringer argues, “[t]herewith ends the long evolution that leads from the beginnings of linear ornament to the luxuriant turgescence of Late Gothic. The Renaissance, the great period of bourgeois naturalness, commences. All unnaturalness—the hallmark of all artistic creation determined by the urge to abstraction—disappears. With the Gothic, the last ‘style’ goes under. Whoever has felt, in some degree, all that is contained in this unnaturalness, despite his joy at the new possibilities of felicity created by the Renaissance, will remain conscious, with deep regret, of all the great values hallowed by an immense tradition that were lost forever with this victory of the organic, of the natural” (120-121). Modern European culture, far from being the result of the dual inheritance of Heine’s and Arnold’s Hebraism and Hellenism, is more the product of a decadence akin to the Hellenistic Age and its unbalanced triumph of naturalism.

Hence, in the post-Renaissance world—the age of “bourgeois naturalism” and individualism—art begins to lose its cultural grounding in common sensibility and attaches itself to mimesis. “The work of art,” Worringer asserts, “no longer speaks a language that is taken in and understood by those clear and constant elementary aesthetic feelings, but appeals to the feelings of aesthetic complication in us, to that quite different complex of psychic experience which changes with every individual and every age and is illimitable and inapprehensible as the shoreless ocean of individual potentialities” (31). The result is that European art has progressively lost its ability to objectify emotion—Lipps’ definition of the aesthetic with which Worringer begins—and has no capacity to
represent a unified spirituality because individualism and rationalism have undermined the idea of culture itself, and spiritual need retreats into the self. “A work of art of this kind,” he concludes “can, therefore, no longer be approached aesthetically, but only individually; so that its effect is not communicable, and hence it cannot be dealt with by aesthetic science” (31). This is so because, in Worringer’s view, the task of “aesthetic science,” if it is to be a science, lies in the identification of the cultural ground of an art. Where there is no culture—in the sense of a unified spiritual response to the world—there is only a society of individuals. In such conditions, art becomes “a luxury activity of the psyche, an activation of previously inhibited inner energies, freed from all compulsion and purpose, and the bestower of happiness. Its delight is no longer the rigid regularity of the abstract, but the mild harmony of organic being” (135).

A mild humanistic affirmation, not primitive dread nor the classical delight in form—this is the final legacy of the Renaissance Worringer identifies. And renaissance humanism is hardly beside the point. Humanism, in its slow emergence from its Christian framework, elaborates a rationalist perspective that, as Max Weber puts it, progressively turns art into a “functional equivalent” of religion that is isometric to it. Worringer approaches this problem by identifying culture with spiritual sensibility, and its decline in the West corresponds to the privileging of an individualism that separates the rational and the sensuous. Worringer suggests that this imbalance has brought Europe to a point of crisis. Philosophy has turned rationalism against itself. Quoting Schopenhauer’s Kritik der Kantischen Philosophie, Worringer predicts that “[h]aving slipped down from the pride of knowledge, man is now just as lost and helpless vis-à-vis the world-picture as primitive man, once he recognised that ‘this visible world in which
we are is the work of Maya, brought forth by magic, a transitory and in itself
unsubstantial semblance, comparable to the optical illusion and the dream, of which it is
equally false and equally true to say that it is, as that it is not’’ (18). This sense of an
impending break up of Western assumptions in crisis and failure is familiar enough as a
modernist theme. Yet Worringer’s significance lies in the way he represents the
modernist critical agenda. His argument indicates the critical turn toward aggressive
rereading, not simply of one’s immediate predecessors, but of the intellectual and artistic
traditions of humanism itself. If the Aesthetes of the previous generation could look to
the Renaissance as a touchstone, the moderns will come to contest not only humanism’s
idea of culture and humanity, but its self-understanding as the embodiment of the rebirth
of the Hellenic spirit.

Though Worringer would influence Hulme most directly, the kind of critique
offered by him would be taken up others like Pound and Eliot because they were
responding to an authoritative discourse that had already begun to undermine the
humanist assumption of the rational will. Even without the influence of psychoanalysis,
the academic triumvirate of philology, historicism, and anthropology, as we have seen,
had brought nineteenth-century humanism into crisis. Terms like “Hellenism,”
“Humanism,” and “Renaissance” take on a polemical edge unimaginable to Arnold,
Pater, or even Wilde: they are no longer value terms to which we must return nor simply
convenient weapons against philistinism. Each of the twentieth century moderns I
discuss will, in various ways, be forced to ground artistic practice in a specifically
theoretical and historical analysis that prioritizes the redefinition or refutation of such
value terms. In this analytical effort, modernism will develop a frame of reference much
broader than the “modern critical spirit” identified by Arnold or the hopes for a New Hellenism held by Pater or Wilde. Behind these terms lies “culture”: the most contested term of all. In the institutional shifts that Mary Douglas describes, reinterpretation and redefinition of existing key value terms masks the radical nature of the revaluations such shifts occasion. While the modernists will often invoke “the Greeks” and “classicism,” because of the conceptual and rhetorical authority they traditionally possess, they are Janus-faced terms that seek to appropriate that authority while looking to the anthropological culture idea to assert the centrality of art and literature within a whole way of life. Even more, such a strategy will allow the modernists to present themselves as the type of “spiritual heroes” that Said attributes to scholars of the Orient: seriously engaging the non-Western Other, if not to restore “the Holy mission” of the West, then to save it from its self-inflicted disaster.

Hulme’s encounter with Worringer is instructive because he both accepts and resists this project. One the one hand, his classicism is revealed to be too parochial to provide the kind of aesthetic analysis he wants. What gives Hulme’s development from impressionism through classicism unity is his search for a grounding of aesthetics in the nature of consciousness or experience as such, beyond the vicissitudes of history and culture. On the other hand, some theory of the pre-rational basis of both the individual and the collective will become the only means of rejecting romantic subjectivity and asserting an authentic modernism.
6.6 Culture as Antihumanism

One of Hulme’s most full statements of the significance of Worringen is “Modern Art and its Philosophy,” delivered as a lecture to the Quest Society on 22 January, 1914.26 While he admits that what he offers “is practically an abstract of Worringen’s views,” Hulme emphasizes their radical potential to develop a project for modern art. Yet, in working over Worringen’s terms, Hulme is drawn, despite his intentions, into the problem of culture as a whole way of life. Where Worringen’s theory is fundamentally dependent upon the category of culture, Hulme’s purposes in appropriating it will cause him to resist such organic concepts. Despite his polemic against Western bias, Worringen seeks to present an objective account of general aesthetic principles. His invocation of the break up of Western humanism is not so much programmatic as it is oracular. Hulme, on the other hand, uses the theory as a positive program for the new art.

Hulme attempts to present Worringen’s theory as merely a confirmation of a position that he had been coming to himself through his encounters with the work of artists like Jacob Epstein. Without unfairly charging him with being disingenuous, we might suspect that Hulme is being revisionist on at least one count. Worringen’s categories throw Hulme’s critical vocabulary into crisis. The title “Modern art and its Philosophy,” he asserts, is “perhaps misleading” because it suggests that his emphasis will be on modern art itself (75). Rather, he will pursue its “philosophy.” But this is itself misleading. Whereas the early Hulme used the term “philosophy” in a rather technical sense, it now becomes merely a set of “general considerations” that are “necessary to [art’s] proper understanding,” but which an artist might see simply as “vague literary considerations” (75). If his encounter with Maurras had subverted his
commitment to Bergson, his encounter with Worringer throws the Classic/Romantic
distinction as well as the temperament of the individual as the source of political
predisposition into crisis. Hulme’s tendency to cast the personal in terms of the
theoretical leads him to admit that “[t]he critic in explaining a new direction often
falsifies [art] by his use of a vocabulary derived from the old position. The thought or
vocabulary of one’s period is an extraordinarily difficult thing to break away from” (76).

In attempting such a break, Hulme translates Worringer’s terms in a way that
seeks to displace the problem of culture by emphasizing the psychological features of the
theory. Following Worringer, Hulme defines the Western tradition as a vital art which
“is the result of a happy pantheistic relation between man and the outside world,” while
“the tendency to abstraction […] occurs in races whose attitude to the outside world is the
exactly contrary of this” (86). “The art of a people,” Hulme asserts, “then, will run
parallel to its philosophy and general world outlook. It is a register of the nature of the
opposition between man and the world. Each race is in consequence of its situation and
class character inclined to one of the two tendencies, and its art would give you a key to its
psychology” (87-88). Though the invocation of “race” and “character” as the key to
psychology reflects a biological determinism of racialist discourse that is absent or muted
in Worringer’s language, and “situation” is suitable ambiguous, Hulme is drawn to these
terms because they allow him to dispense with consideration of general anthropological
questions: the problem of grasping the nature of art in relation to other features of
material culture, for example. His attraction to Worringer’s thesis lies in Hulme’s
insistence upon the opposition between materialism on one hand, and the spiritual and
intuitional on the other. Hulme’s move from egoism to objective classicism mirrors his
shift from an interest in poetry to the plastic arts, and this forced him to confront the materiality of the artwork. Worringer provides him with a means of accounting for the materiality of the artwork in terms of its embodiment of spiritual desire. It is in but not of the world. But further, it offers a means of accounting for the artwork in terms of a collectivity, an escape from the prison of the individual ego. In adopting this perspective, however, Hulme is thrust into a thorny nest of problems that are only latent in Worringer’s argument. What is the relation between collective “artistic volition” and the volition of the individual artist? Further, if one posits with Worringer that particular artists work within and express a collective world-picture, to what extent do they shape rather than simply register “a general world outlook”? As we have seen, Worringer can finesse these issues because he is interested in describing general aesthetic categories. Hulme is forced to confront them more directly because he is articulating a project for the new art. Developing what will be a characteristic modernist “solution,” Hulme positions the artist as both the most conscious, yet most intuitively attuned, element of a people, and his anti-humanist position would be constructed on this basis.

The outlines of this anti-humanism becomes clear in Hulme’s invocation of Hellenic art. Where Worringer preserves the prestige of Classical Greece, Hulme’s Greeks, at this point, have become archaic. The center of Greek significance lies, not in the later Classical and Hellenistic periods, but in the more primitive pre-classical phase: “In the archaic Greek sculpture, for example, the arms are bound close to the body, any division of the surface is as far as possible avoided and unavoidable divisions and articulations are given in no detail. The first gods were always pure abstractions without any resemblance to life” (89). When Hulme turns to the emergence of Classical organic
form, he is forced to confront the reasons for the change. “The Greeks,” he tells us, “left behind the intensity of these cubical forms and replaced the abstract by the organic simply because, as their attitude to the world changed, they had different intentions. Having attained a kind of optimistic rationalism they no longer felt any desire for abstraction” (90). The problem, of course, with this is that it explains nothing about the change itself. On one hand, Hulme draws on his own experience of the Canadian prairies when he notes that “The primitive springs from what we have called a kind of mental space-shyness, which is really an attitude of fear before the world […]” (92), and this places artistic “volition” in the realm of instinct. He is forced back on the unconscious basis of culture that prefigures his rejection of humanism. On one hand, artists are part of their culture, and “[i]t would have been quite possible,” Hulme argues, “for this change to come about without the artists themselves being conscious of this change of general attitude towards the world at all” (95). Yet the artist is not simply a passive reflector of collective sensibility, engaged in an unproductive symbolic act. The artist is conscious, nevertheless, in a different sense. While artists may not be conscious in a “formulated and literary fashion,” they are intuitively aware, no matter how unformulated, of the vicissitudes of the Zeitgeist. “The change of attitude,” he explains, “would have taken place, but it might only have manifested itself in a certain change of sensibility in the artist, and in so far as he expresses himself in words, in a certain change of vocabulary. The change betrays itself by changes in the epithets that a man uses, perhaps disjointedly, to express his admiration for the work he admires” (95). Artists are, as Pound would put it, “the antennae of the race.”
Hulme himself is of course responsible for just such a “change of epithets” in his appropriation of Worringer as an apology for modern art. Describing the current situation, he asserts, “Expressed generally, there seems to be a desire for austerity and bareness, a striving towards structure and away from the messiness and confusion of nature and natural things” (96). In rejecting the natural, Hulme might have taken the path of Futurism and celebrated mechanized civilization. He avoids this way of thinking, not on the grounds that Wyndham Lewis does, by interpreting Futurism as “accelerated romanticism,” but by attacking the materialist assumptions that would justify such a theory of art. “It may be said, “ Hulme asserts, “that an artist is using mechanical lines because he lives in an environment of machinery. In a landscape you would use softer and more organic lines. This seems to me to be using the materialist explanation of the origins of an art which has been generally rejected” (108). It is the spiritual terror felt by modern culture toward the world that returns it to ancient attitudes of dread and inspires the same “religious attitude” that previously grounded his theory of classicism. The proper place to identify the tendency of modern art to use mechanical form lies in its kinship with primitive antivitalism.

Hence, in his defense of a geometric art inspired by the archaic, Hulme is at pains to disassociate his position from romantic exoticism and nostalgia. Instead, he exploits Worringer’s distinctions between empathy and abstraction in the name of “tradition” rather than exoticism. Yet this is not the humanist tradition that his classicist phase asserts. Identifying what he sees as two consequences of anti-naturalistic art, Hulme asks, “[o]f which of the two elements of the new geometric art—that which it has in common with similar arts in the past, or that which is specific and peculiar to it—is an artist most
likely to be conscious at the beginning of a movement? Most obviously of those elements which are also to be found in the past. Here then you get the explanation of the fact which may have puzzled some people, that a new and modern art, something which was to culminate in a use of structural organisation akin to machinery, should have begun by what seemed like a romantic return to barbarous and primitive art, apparently inspired by a kind of nostalgia for the past” (98). Hulme’s invocation of the archaic, then, is a displacement not only of romantic Hellenism, but of the humanist idea of tradition, and on the same basis. Both are steeped in a vitalism. The authority of the past lies in its denial of a fundamental historicity implicit in humanism. In identifying humanism with the romantic faith in human potential, Hulme must reposition the permanent limitation of human nature that he formerly labeled as classicism. Instead, “tradition” indicates a rejection of Western humanism’s claim to universality. The modern artist recovers this primitive sensibility in the name of “an intenser perception of things striving towards expression, and as this intensity was fundamentally the same kind of intensity as that expressed in certain archaic arts, it quite naturally and legitimately found a foothold in these archaic yet permanent formulae. A certain archaicism then, just as it is at the beginning helpful to an artist though he may afterwards repudiate it, is an almost necessary stage in the preparation of a new movement” (99).

Hulme launches his war upon humanism just as he is putting on a uniform to fight one of a more concrete kind. “Humanism and the Religious Attitude,” dated by Levenson as being written in late 1915 or early 1916, is an inflation of his critique of vitalism to include the concept of continuity itself. “We constantly tend to think that the discontinuities in nature are only apparent, and that a fuller investigation would reveal the
underlying continuity” he observes. “This shrinking from a gap or jump in nature has developed to a degree which paralyses any objective perception, and prejudices our seeing things as they are. For an objective view of reality we must make use both of the categories of continuity and discontinuity. Our principle concern in these notes should be the re-establishment of the temper or disposition of mind which can look at a gap of chasm without shuddering” (3-4). The principle of continuity is not, as we might suppose from his earlier position, the result of the distortions of the intellect. Rather, our shudder at a gap is instinctual, and he finds that it is “necessary first of all to deal with the source of this instinctive behavior, by pointing out the arbitrary character of the principle of continuity” (4). Hulme insists upon the existence of three “real discontinuities” that undercut the humanist’s claim to an integrated vision of human reality: “(1) The inorganic world, of mathematical and physical science, (2) the organic world dealt with by biology, psychology and history, and (3) the world of ethical and religious values” (5). These gaps or “chasms,” are, he argues, “absolute,” and the failure of the humanist tradition lies in not recognizing that “[t]here must be no continuity, no bridge leading from one to the other” (6). The mechanistic and materialist theories of the mid-nineteenth century, as represented by Herbert Spencer’s biology, led to “a popular view” that “entirely ignored the division between the inner and outer zones, and tended to treat them as one. There was no separating chasm and the two were muddled together. Vital phenomena were only extremely complicated forms of material exchange” (6-7). Yet, his targets go beyond the naïve evolutionary theories of the mid-century. In another instance of Hulme’s tendency to offer self-critique as theoretical pronouncement, he states, “[t]hen you get the movement represented in very different ways by Nietzsche, Dilthey, and
Bergson, which clearly recognized the chasm between the two worlds of life and matter. Vital events are not completely determined and mechanical [. . .] This movement made the immense step forward involved in treating life, almost for the first time, as a unity, as something positive, a kind of stream overflowing, or at any rate not entirely enclosed, in the boundaries of the physical and spatial world” (7). On one level, he claims, such thinkers had the salutary effect of disentangling the “physical” from the “vital.” Yet, “[h]aving made this immense step away from materialism, it believes itself adequately equipped for a statement of all ideal values” (7). This results in a dualistic metaphysics that destroys the religious attitude: “All that is non-material, must it thinks be vital” (8). For Hulme, this marks the precise nature of the humanist legacy and the disaster it has engendered. Humanistic culture is founded on precisely such a dualism. In debasing and misappropriating religion, humanism cannot see that “[t]he divine is not life at its intensest. It contains in a way an almost anti-vital element; quite different of course from the non-vital character of the outside physical region. The questions of Original Sin, of chastity, of the motives behind Buddhism, etc., all part of the very essences of the religious spirits, are quite incomprehensible for humanism” (9-10). Humanistic culture becomes a quasi-religion of man. The humanistic phase of civilization, he argues, has enshrined “pseudo-categories” in the Western mind. “We do not see them,” he says, “but see other things through them. In order that the kind of discussion about ‘satisfaction’ which I want may be carried on, it is first of all necessary to rob certain ideas of their status of categories” (37). An appeal to history and culture, once an anathema to Hulme, now become the central weapons against the pseudo-categories of humanism.
On the one hand, historical critique offers a means of unmasking the claims of humanism to speak for absolute values. While such a critique is difficult, he observes that “Fortunately […] all such ‘attitudes’ and ideologies have a gradual growth […] Once they have been brought to the surface of the mind, they lose their inevitable character. They are no longer categories. We have lost our naïveté” (37). Likewise, in dethroning Western bias, the anthropological turn of mind has exposed the parochialism of humanistic assertions of superiority over the Other. “The change of sensibility,” Hulme argues, “which has enabled us to regard Egyptian, Polynesian and Negro work, as art and not as archaeology has had a double effect. It has made us realise that what we took to be the necessary principles of aesthetic, constitute in reality only a psychology of Renaissance and Classical Art. At the same time, it has made us realise the essential unity of these latter arts. For we see that they both rest on certain common pre-suppositions, of which we only become conscious when we see them denied by other arts” (12). Together, the historicist and anthropological perspectives provide a means of unhinging the pieties of humanist culture. The comparative method of these disciplines accomplishes on a different level what the poetic image does. It enables us to break out of the habitual. Hulme notes a story recorded by Levy-Bruhl in which a missionary confronts a Brazilian Indian who claims to be a parrot: “[t]here would seem to be an impasse here then; the missionary was baffled in the same way as the humanist is by the conception of sin. The explanation given by Levy-Bruhl, who quotes the story, is that the Indian has imposed on him by his group a conception of the nature of an object, which radically differs from ours. For him an object can be something else without at the same time ceasing to be itself […] The point is that it serves as an illustration of the way in
which minds dominated by different pseudo-categories, may have a very different perception of fact” (67-68). For Hulme, all cultures are simply an instance of different pseudo-categories operating in different situations. To invoke culture is not to engage in romantic passions of the exotic any more than to invoke history is to fall into a nostalgia for the past. While Hulme avoids using the term “culture” because of these associations, the anthropological idea becomes central to his refutation of humanism. While the comparative methods of both historicism and anthropology offer the conceptual leverage for such a displacement, Hulme does not appeal to them on the grounds of historical and cultural relativism.

On the contrary. Their use lies in the ability to make manifest the permanent and the absolute. They reveal, in other words, Hulme’s “religious attitude.” His famous assertion that “It is not, then, that I put up with the dogma for the sake of the sentiment, but that I may possibly swallow the sentiment for the sake of the dogma” places his position outside the question of faith (71). An authentic religious attitude is not, for Hulme, a return to the pieties of the Christian life, or that of any other religion. “I am not, however, concerned so much with religion,” he says, “as with the attitude, the ‘way of thinking,’ the categories, from which a religion springs, and which often survive it” (46). This cast of mind reveals the essential falsehood of humanistic assumptions about mankind. “I want to emphasise that this attitude is a possible one for the ‘emancipated’ and ‘reasonable’ man at this moment” (46).

In Hulme’s case, one might say that such an attitude was not only possible, but necessary. Hulme’s classicism had defended the new geometric art on the grounds of a recognition of human limitation. His antihumanism defends it on a much more desperate
count. The new art is symptomatic of a new sensibility born of the tragic insight of ancient and primitive cultures. “Such expression,” he asserts, “springs not from a delight in life but from a feeling for certain absolute values, which are entirely independent of vital things. The disgust with the trivial and accidental characteristics of living shapes, the searching after an austerity, a monumental stability and permanence, a perfection and rigidity, which vital things can never have, leads to the use of forms which can almost be called geometrical. (Cf. Byzantine, Egyptian and early Greek art.)” (9). In seeking an anti-vital permanence and rigidity, the modern artist is returned to that ancient understanding of tragedy that engenders not only Greek drama, so at odds with the felicity of its plastic arts, but the great non-Western traditions that were in touch with the primitive dread of the cosmos. “It is the closing of all roads,” he tells us, “this realisation of the tragic significance of life, which makes it legitimate to call all other attitudes shallow. Such a realisation has formed the basis of all great religions, and is most conveniently remembered by the symbol of the wheel. This symbol of futility of existence is absolutely lost to the modern world, nor can it be recovered without great difficulty” (34).

Humanism, in Hulme’s reading, is a great evasion of this truth. It struggles against this universal inhospitality to assert the centrality of mankind and its transcendent capacities. “I do not deny that humanism of this kind has a certain attraction,” he admits. “But it deserves no admiration, for it bears in itself the seed which is bound inevitably later to develop into sentimental, utilitarian romanticism” (62). Further, in rejecting the tenets of humanism, modern civilization will not lose its real
achievement: “The humanist period has developed an honesty in science, and a certain conception of freedom of thought and action which will remain,” while the modern mind, shorn of its naïveté can come into possession of its full maturity (58).

6.7 Conclusion: The Struggle of Cultural Paradigms

Hulme’s importance for the development of literary modernism does not lie, as is often asserted, in his classicism, nor necessarily in his doctrine of the image. His influence during his lifetime was largely restricted to his friends, who were, admittedly, key makers of modernism. Nevertheless, Pound and Eliot had conflicted relationships with him, and while this alone would not preclude intellectual influence, their roles as actual artists put them at a remove from Hulme’s concerns. Rather, Hulme’s role as a theorist and polemicist struggling against the culture thesis took his thinking to the horizon of modernist thought, at times seeming to prefigure the postmodern. Pound and Eliot would not follow him all the way because, as practicing artists, they understood that art, if it is to remain art, has an intimate relation not only to consciousness, but to culture both in the sense of tradition and in the sense of a whole way of life. In as much as Hulme was led to confront culture in this last sense, he deploys it as a weapon without positive value in its own right. For the other moderns, a reading of culture itself will lie at the center of their artistic production, and their divergences with one another will lie in a struggle to assert the priority of a particular cultural paradigm. As much as we think of these writers as collaborators, they were also competitors. At stake lay not only the desire to make their projects the center of the modernist enterprise, but—and here Hulme joins their company—the saving of Western civilization itself.
Though Hulme would be killed in the Great War, his major contribution to the development of modernism is his identification of romanticism as the specific enemy of the new art. Because of this enmity, Hulme’s critique of language sought to escape the culture idea altogether. While conducted on different grounds, his early aesthetic theory is deployed in terms recapitulate Arthur Symons’ own efforts: the desire to make art address spiritual needs. Significantly, what has been withdrawn from Hulme’s project is any appeal to humanistic categories that still inform decadence and symbolism. Hulme registers the way in which the model of academic rigor transformed modernist discourse. Modernism would increasingly assert its legitimacy upon theoretical discourse that belonged to the professional academy. While Hulme’s thought developed from a philosophical to an anthropological understanding of art, the authority of his theoretical pronouncements depended upon the various academic thinkers that he progressively encountered. If, as Michael Levenson says, Hulme “turns out to be interesting just insofar as he is derivative […]” (39), his interest also lies in the derivations he chose. Modern literary discourse would find little room for Paternian “appreciations” or impressionistic essays. More often than not, even the “little magazines” and various literary journals of the modernists would take on the appearance of the academic publication, culminating in the rapprochement between official university culture effected by Eliot’s editorship of The Criterion. Hulme’s one-time collaborator, Ezra Pound would not struggle against the romantic assumptions of culture; but he would struggle mightily against the institutionalization of modernism within the university.


7 See Life and Opinions of T. E. Hulme, 188.

8 Life and Opinions, 21.

9 Speculations, 72.

10 Further Speculations, 52.


15 Speculations, 69.

16 Speculations, 146.

17 Further Speculations, 174.


19 As Dangerfield observes, “[t]he death of Liberal England—the various death of security and respectability—may not be considered simply as a loud prelude, passing suddenly into war. It was a brief but complete phase in the spiritual life of the nation” (142)

20 Speculations, 116.

21 Genealogy of Modernism, 86.
22 Jones, Alun.  The Life and Opinions of T. E. Hulme.


25 Said, Edward, Orientalism.  New York: Vintage Books, 1979. “Everyone who writes about the Orient,” Said argues, “must locate himself vis-à-vis the Orient” (20). Such writers face the problem of appealing to the specific interests of an audience while “containing the Orient, and finally, representing it or speaking on its behalf” (20). This speaking on behalf of the Other, Said observes, is part of a strategy of representation that does not preclude a significant degree of sympathy, but it always operates in a “specific historical, intellectual and even economic setting” (273). The obvious parallels with anthropology indicate the way in which an institutional discourse like Orientalism is predicated upon the culture idea and the complex of needs it responds to.

26 Further Speculations.
7.1 Paidaia and Professionalism: Early Ez’

Ezra Pound is credited with being the great impresario of modern arts: the founder of “Imagisme,” the blasting Vorticist, a practitioner of the “ideogrammic method” of the Cantos, discoverer and supporter of a host of new writers. He was in short a “serious character” as Humphrey Carpenter entitles his vast biography of him. Yet Pound’s reputation for frenetic “boosterism” of modernism is accompanied by the reality that his own early poetry was not particularly modernist even as he promoted the need for a new art. No other English modernist struggled so intently with the legacy of nineteenth-century poetics. Like T. E. Hulme, he had to shed assumptions that were “mired” in Victorian aestheticism, but also the “cultural assumptions” of what “culture” indeed was. Yet whereas Hulme could theorize his way to ever-more-radical positions of what a new art should be on theoretical grounds, Pound struggled to discover a mode of actually writing it in order to create an art that depended upon something specifically latent within the present. He understood that art cannot jettison tradition in the manner of Hulme’s anti-Humanism.

Yet, the contrasts go deeper. Hulme was thrust into journalism by default, and he never stopped seeking legitimacy within academic philosophy. He had few ideological
commitments to maintaining the cultural role of the higher journalism, if he ever considered its fate to be problem. Pound, on the other hand, struggled to preserve a space that, as John Gross notes in The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters, was quickly disappearing as the twentieth century progressed: “On the one hand you had the mass media, relentlessly pressing forward; on the other hand the universities, steadily consolidating their grip on scholarship and intellectual life. How much room was there going to be left in between for the critic at large or the unattached littérateur?” (7).° Pound intuited that art and literature had to seek new grounds of legitimacy. And here, Pound eventually grasped that art in general, and literature specifically, must impress itself upon the middle and the working classes. The politics that he embraced in the thirties and forties should warn that theorizing the relation between art and society under the sign of culture is fraught with danger, and Pound lived in a time in which those dangers could manifest themselves to the full. For Pound, the full implications of the culture thesis were open to his mind. The institutions that structured the world of art and letters—in particular the small number of unofficial guardians and mediators of culture somewhat awkwardly covered by “men-of letters”—was being torn asunder by the commercial forces of mass culture and academic specialization. In order to re-establish the terrain, upon which art could assert its centrality, a modernist like Pound understood that they needed to reconstruct a “serious” audience that had been dispersed. Like the aesthetes and decadents before him, Pound himself would attempt to remake the faded role of the man-of-letters, a modernized Sage of sorts, within the widening gap between the specialized argot of the professional and the emerging culture industry. Yet for the
makers of modernism, reconstituting this role was even more problematic than it had been for their predecessors. John Holloway observes that the Victorian sage sought to speak for common truths and familiar values in striking and dramatic ways.\(^2\) Such writers could rely upon what they shared with their audiences, and their oracular stance, the Jeremiads they leveled against their society, appealed to common sense, or indeed, the sensus communis. As we have seen, the authority the sage possessed was grounded in high culture allied to religious values. In this fusion of the aesthetic and the spiritual, the writers who spoke for culture could appeal as secular priests to their audience. In previous chapters, we have seen how the rupture of this compact between art and religion led turn-of-the-century writers to theorize the authority of arts and letters on the basis of Hellenism. This maneuver asserted the centrality of art on the grounds of an imagined Greek mode of perception and being: the cultivation of authentic spiritual experience offered as aesthetic experience.

Yet, decadence, in frankly rejecting the traditional moral dimension of art, undermined humanism’s assertion of Greek significance: the cultivation of the whole person, not simply in the interests of the self, but also in the interests of the polis. The humanistic ideal of cultivation had been based upon the aura of the sacred: a “sanctity” that remained about the artwork and its mode of reception even after the fading of Victorian Christianity. The decadent artist proclaims art as a compensatory form of spiritual experience: Weber’s functional equivalent of religion. But as such, decadence relinquishes the authority of art to speak beyond the interests of the self. In identifying the “privileged moment” as the legitimating source of aesthetic significance, the decadent
self is left with the problem of self-parody, failure, and self-dramatization: Wilde’s new Hellenism is also a new Hedonism. Likewise, Arthur Symons’ version of symbolism offers a Schopenhauerian withdrawal from the world-as-will at the cost of isolating art within the self. His mystical project for modern poetry surrenders its ability to speak beyond that self.

Both decadence and symbolism, then, suggest the impasse of post-romanticism in the wake of the demise of theological humanism. The emerging polarization that would disperse the audience for the man-of-letters also led writers like Pater and Wilde, as we have seen, to reconceive spiritual claims of art by allying Hellenism with the culture concept of anthropology that they encountered through philology: an attempt to salvage, as it were, the spiritual authority of art by exploiting the idealist implications of culture. As we have also seen, the writers of the late nineteenth century register the way in which humanism was in danger of losing its credentials even within its own bastion: the university. The idea of culture as a “whole way of life”—so Greek-sounding—would in reality shift authority from the artist to the scholar and professional critic. The modernists, in their attempt to remake the idea of “men-of-letters” as an unofficial association of independent writers and intellectuals who published in unaffiliated journals and “little magazines,” would nevertheless be decisively shaped by the institutional power of academia. The origins of the modernist revolution lie in the realignment of the culture concept experienced by many of the moderns in their youth. As Mary Douglas reminds us, such realignments develop “invisibly” in an institutional process of semantic re-calibration. Furthermore, the power of the new university lay in its central role in
what Bledstein terms “the culture of professionalism.” Credibility came to lie, as the term implies, in credentials. But most importantly, the university would be the place where the modernists would be forced to find their audience.

Pound’s career offers one of the most striking examples of this problematic in modernism. Because of his role in the formulation of the doctrine of Imagism, Pound scholarship has typically focused on his aesthetics, either in terms of his impact on the idea of literary modernism, or more recently, the connection between his aesthetics and Fascism. Yet, however useful these types of studies are, we also need to recognized his importance beyond that of the innovator who “broke the pentameter” or as exhibit one in the case against a putatively reactionary modernism. For Pound illustrates in an overt way a “deep structure,” as it were, inherent in literary modernism: one that not only develops from a nineteenth-century inheritance, but one that has been bequeathed to us.

In his youth, Pound was caught between an aristocratic vision of the artist as a priest of beauty and the artist as expert, not simply of craft, but of knowledge. His well-known excoriation of academic experts exists side by side with his near worship of academic “authorities” whom he treated as prophets. His invective against general stupidity of the “populace” exists side–by-side with his nostalgia for the “people, which in turn underwrites his radical individualism but also his call for cultural authority. His much-voiced hatred of dry-as-dust scholarship is accompanied by a poetic practice that produces some of the most arcane poems in English. Pound would live this conflict personally and it would express itself in his artistic practice, and devastatingly, in his political development.
Though Pound was born in Idaho—a fact that he would love to mythologize later in his career—his family moved east when he was two years old to Philadelphia where his father, Homer, was employed in the U. S. Mint as a precious metals assessor. Fleeing the increasingly immigrant population of the city, the Pounds made a series of moves, ending up in Wyncote, one of the new suburbs of Philadelphia that were becoming a haven for the Wasp middle class. As Humphrey Carpenter observes, “This immigrant takeover of urban life, well underway when the Pounds arrived in Philadelphia, was driving many middle class families out to the suburbs in an attempt to preserve the ‘native’ culture from hopeful hordes of European refugees. It was a rear action, for in the long run many of the immigrants would come out on top, relegating families like the Pounds to ‘nouveau poor.’ But it was a movement which, in March 1890, Homer, Isabel, and Ezra found themselves joining” (19). While there exists no direct evidence of anti-Semitism in Pound’s family, such attitudes were common currency of the day. Anti-Semitism was part of a larger Anglo-Saxon reaction to this flood of immigrants. E. Fuller Torrey observes in The Roots of Treason, that in his later descriptions of “immigrants ‘sweeping along Eighth Avenue in the splendor of their vigorous unwashed animality,’ or when he talked about the Civil War having led to ‘extermination of the Anglo-Saxon race in America in order that the Czecho-Slovaks might inherit the Boston Common,’ Pound was speaking for his family and their friends. He merely said publicly what was said privately across the dinner table at home, loudly what was whispered on
Wyncote’s shaded streets” (24). As he would famously admit to Allen Ginsberg near the end of his life, “the worst mistake I made was that stupid, suburban prejudice of anti-Semitism”

However we regard this belated admission, Pound’s ethnic prejudices have become the central focus of critical examination, perhaps in reaction to the way in which they were explained away or ignored in the last years of his life. But ironically, the more recent ideological critique of Pound’s aesthetics as inherently political mirrors the positions that he, especially after the Great War, increasingly came to assert himself. Like the continental avant-gardists, Pound asserted the relevance of literature in the modern world through a strategy of, as we now say, “engagement.” Yet, if Pound’s poetics are bound to his politics, this linkage depends upon a great amount of tacit theoretical mediation: a mediation that Pound was much more frank about than many of his later commentators. Pound is quite forthright concerning the way his aesthetics and his politics emerge from his conception of culture, and he understood the contested nature of that term in ways that have become, if not invisible, then inherent to our conception of “cultural politics.” And politics in early twentieth-century America took a particular form. Pound’s philological education, and the competing concepts of culture proffered by humanism and science, became entangled with American racial and ethnic anxieties. As Gerald Graff notes, “Anti-Semitism […] was all-pervasive in universities, and more pervasive in English departments than anywhere else” (61). The academic paradigms that Pound encountered as a student were, of course, shaped by ideological pressures from the start, and not least among them were those “suburban prejudices.”
Having been educated at a number of private local grammar schools, and then at the Cheltenham Military Academy, he entered the University of Pennsylvania in 1901 at the precocious age of fifteen. His freshman and sophomore years were a disastrous mix of idleness and alienation from students and faculty, though his friendship with the young medical student, William Carlos Williams, would last until Williams’ death in 1963. Pound’s air of superiority and “poetic” affectations of manner made him the target of pranks and social ostracism. Besides Williams, Pound found companionship in the city in the person of William Brooke Smith, a young art student whose interest in “arts and crafts” and awareness of the current European avant-garde made a profound impact upon Pound. After Smith’s death from consumption, Pound dedicated his first book, A Lume Spento, to him. In a letter to Williams in 1921, Pound wrote of Smith, “How in Christ’s name he came to be in Phila.—and to know what he did know at the age of 17-25—I don’t know. At any rate, thirteen years are gone; I haven’t replaced him and shan’t and no longer hope to” (Sel Let. 125). Aside from these friendships, Pound was never able to find his footing at Penn. James Wilhelm rightly suggests an important source of this awkwardness. Besides the fact that Pound lived with his parents, isolating him from other students, he also faced an isolation of another kind. “Perhaps the greatest disadvantage to Penn,” Wilhelm notes, “was the fact that it was an urban school, and like most city institutions, faculty-student relationships were not closely cultivated. Since Pound was beginning to have difficulty relating to people who were not intellectually motivated, he was almost automatically thrown upon the faculty for discourse—not that
faculty tended to remain aloof” (96). Under these circumstances, his academic performance was mediocre at best. In particular, the distance of the faculty, of course, had specifically institutional sources. The professional is not, primarily, a friend.

7.2 Philology and Anglo-Saxony

Professionalism had become a late-nineteenth-century obsession for the university. “In order to further their control over a discipline,” Fredrick Rudolph states, “professionals particularized and proliferated the possibilities for investigation in a field. The more technical and restricted the individual areas of investigation, the more justifiable it became to deny the public’s right to know or understand the professional’s mission” (328). The professional academic would serve society by serving the cause of “knowledge,” not the education of students. Like the theoretical scientist, the professor of language and literature could pursue knowledge that may not have any direct practical relevance for those outside the profession. This seeming weakness was, of course, a strength. The credibility of the profession would be based upon mystique. There would still be students to serve, but the practitioner of Geistwissenschaft would present himself primarily as the embodiment of the national intellect: a role that the public was increasingly willing to accept. Rudolf describes the now-familiar impact of this model upon the University of Pennsylvania: “‘Publish or Perish,’ the slogan became, and by the late nineteenth century at the University of Pennsylvania professors who insisted on pouring time and energy into teaching at the expense of research were told to go elsewhere […] Without research, of course, there would be little or none of the exciting
conquest of ignorance, the exciting advance on the frontiers of knowledge, which publication encouraged. But also, without research, there would be no departments, no departmental chairmen, no hierarchy—only teachers” (404).

The experience of coursework in this environment left a lasting impression—generally resentment—upon Pound. Years later, in a vita requested by Louis Untermeyer for an anthology, Pound wrote, “Entered U.P. Penn at 15 with intention of studying comparative values in literature (poetry) and began to do so unbeknown to the faculty,” and of his return for post-graduate work he states, “1905-7 at U. of Penn. Chiefly impressed by lack of correlation between depts. And lack either of general survey of literature or any coherent interest in literature as such (as distinct for example from philology).” Under the elective system, he took a hodgepodge of courses in English Composition and Grammar, Public Speaking, Latin, American Colonial History, Principles of Government, Algebra, and Elementary German, receiving a mere pass in his first term, and doing somewhat better in his second term.*[Wilhelm 98] In 1903, it was decided—probably at Pound’s suggestion—that he should complete his studies at Hamilton College, where his attempt to pledge a fraternity was thwarted by the objections of the Penn chapter: this at a college whose social system was utterly centered upon the “Greek” system.11

Pound spent two lonely years pursuing a set Liberal Arts curriculum of Romance languages, English literature, mathematics, and history. Nevertheless, at Hamilton he developed something of a friendship with three men: Herman Carl George Brandt, Munson Professor of German Language and Literature; Professor Joseph Darling “Bib”
Ibbotson who taught English Literature, Anglo-Saxon, and Hebrew; and William Pierce Shepard, Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures.[Stock 16] From Ibbotson, he would discover a passion for medieval literature and a taste for the arcane. Pound developed the habit of calling on Ibbotson at strange hours of the night. According to Carpenter, Ibbotson “was faintly taken aback by these night visitations; he has described how Ezra once dropped in at 11.40 p.m., staying until nearly 3 a.m., talking about Ossian, which (typically) he had discovered not in the original but in an obscure German translation” (51). Whatever the idea of “the original” might mean here, Carpenter does not say. However, it is significant that Pound’s interest in epic was spurred by a literary fraud in a translation. James McPherson’s eighteenth-century imaginative imitation of ancient Celtic epic suggests the way in which a “modern” poem in archaic diction with remote themes might constitute an effective artistic strategy.13

But most decisive was his relationship with Shepard who, as Noel Short observes, “not only introduced him to French, Italian and Spanish but when he saw the young man’s enthusiasm was backed by ability gave him free private tuition in Provençal” (16). As James Wilhelm records, “Shepard was well on his way to establishing an international reputation as a scholar in Provençal” (128). Pound’s Hamilton was hardly an academic backwater. As a practitioner of philological rigor, “Shepard was known for his many articles on [troubadour] poetry, and in 1924 he would edit the poems of the troubadour Jausbert de Puycibot” (129). Thus Pound’s relationship with academia and scholarship was beset with complexity. One the one hand, he was clearly in love with the romance of scholarship, and he found his artistic inspiration in arcane knowledge. But at the same
time he was a rejected outsider who loathed the stupidity of academic institutions and what he would later see as their inability to produce an American cultural renaissance.

Yet, Pound’s transfer from Penn to Hamilton is significant for reasons other than his personal alienation; his educational experience straddled a major fault-line of American life in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The distinction between college and university, as we have seen, marks the realignment of education toward the production of the credentialed professional. Yet, the reforms initiated by Jowett at Oxford were an attempt to assert the relevance of the classics and humanism to modern life. His efforts to establish continuity between the Greek experience and the modern one was directed toward the creation of an aristocracy of the spirit that could serve the needs of global empire. In America, these energies were inflected in a different direction.

Bledstein notes that the term “amateur,” which had once referred to one “who pursued an activity for the love of it,” acquired its pejorative status in the nineteenth century: “Amateurish, a new midcentury word, connoted faulty and deficient work, perhaps defective, unskilled, superficial, desultory, less than a serious commitment, the pursuit of an activity for amusement and distraction. The middle-class person required a more reliable institutional world in which to liberate individual energy than amateurs had previously known. Lawyers, medical doctors, teachers, managers, civil servants all now required working definitions of such elaborate concepts as ‘contract,’ ‘disease,’ ‘curriculum,’ ‘system,’ and ‘bureacracy,’ [sic] which the average and prudent men throughout the nation could accept’ (30-31). The new professional “did not vend a commodity, or exclusively pursue a self-interest,” Bledstein observes. “Rather, through a
special understanding of a segment of the universe, the professional person released
definition and rearranged reality on grounds which were neither artificial, faddish, convenient, nor at the mercy of popular whim. Such was the august basis for the
authority of the professional” (89-90). As a result, “Legitimate authority now resided in
special spaces, like courtrooms, the classroom, and the hospital; and it resided in special words shared only by experts” (78-9). If in mid-century America, one could become a lawyer by apprenticeship, such a possibility was unthinkable by its end. The institutions of higher learning were quickly becoming the legitimizing structure for the professional. The old-time college, with its essentially moral function, was clearly not up to the task of meeting the demands of the future. Such at least were the claims of the “Germanizers,” the one-time college presidents who, like Charles Eliot of Harvard, transformed their institutions into universities. The professor needed to secure the respectability of expertise. Bledstein notes, “As the presidents portrayed the American college teacher, he worked at a second-class activity that commanded slight respect. ‘Professor’ in America could refer to a music-hall pianist, the master of a flea circus, a gymnast, a weight-lifter in a carnival” (281).

Of course, the abuse of such a title by popular culture was an attempt to capitalize on the notion of expertise that adhered to it, especially in its European guise. Nevertheless, it suggests the anxiety of American intellectuals within the developing middle class reliance upon the professional. The university, based upon the German model, offered the means of legitimizing the authority of the professor and ensuring its central position in the transformations of national life. What lay at the heart of the ethos of the professional
academic was the assertion of independence from direct political and economic interests. The ideological assumptions of professionalism demand selfless service to a “client” that in turn becomes a mark of ethical commitment to the profession itself. For the academic, this “client” was seen as truth itself. “As an aristocrat of the spirit,” Bledstein says, “the German professor pursued knowledge for its own sake; he wished to view it from the inside, not from any contemporary perspective or careerist motive. A master of the humane sciences, the academic intellectual attended to the idealistic cultivation of the objective Geist, the true inner man and inner society in the ‘culture state’” (316). In pursuing this German model, the American professorate was coming quickly to colonize that realm of the self once seen as the preserve of the arts and the distinctly amateur (in the positive sense) activity of its practitioners: essayists, men-of-letters, and artists themselves.

Of course, the vehicle of this bold assertion of professional dominion over the spirit lay in the idea of culture. German philological scholarship emerged, as we have seen, from the Herderian concept of culture deployed as a critique of enlightenment rationalism.¹⁴ In the hands of classical scholars like Friedrich August Wolf, the literary remains of the ancient world could be studied for their more general human significance rather than simply for the sake of erudition or social accomplishment. Of course, humanism itself had followed such a vision. For the early historicists like Leopold Ranke and Theodor Mommsen, a moment in the past represented a living whole that must be understood in its concrete manifestations and interpreted in the light of the non-conceptual nature of historical reality. Conceived in terms of historicism, of
hermeneutics, of philology—all of these developments from the culture idea remained within the sphere of specifically humanistic values. Yet, the problem of asserting cultural value on the basis of a putatively scientific method would lead to a schism between humanistic and positivistic knowledge that, in the nineteenth century, scholars struggled to paper over.

Nowhere is this conflict between method and value more apparent than in the theory and practice of philology, which, because its object lies at the intersection of both, foregrounds the problem of hermeneutics or “interpretation.” Graff observes, “the history of the word ‘philology’ itself reflected a conflict between broad, humanistic generality and narrow, positive science” (69). In his reading, the split in the late nineteenth century between humanistic philology and positivist philology would lead to the divorce between literature and language departments. Yet, at the time when Pound was encountering this institutional conflict, the divorce had not been duly notarized.

Instead, the potential of humanistic philology still seemed vital. Of Graff’s distinction, K. K. Ruthven observes, “In a broad sense, [humanistic] philology was perceived as moving outwards from the study of particular languages to the cultural practices represented in and by those languages, such that to study any one language properly was to acquire a historical understanding of the total culture of its native speakers. This particular construction of philological endeavor was a guarantee of the claim that the humanities are socially indispensable on account of their ability to humanise people by encouraging an informed and sympathetic understanding of cultural heterogeneity” (8). This essentially Herderean tradition would authorize the way in
which humanism could claim to offer both a humane education of character and a sufficiently rigorous course of study to qualify as a science. “The nineteenth century exemplars of humanistic philology,” Ruthven remarks, “included scholars like Friedrich Max Müller and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, whose legacy of dazzling erudition continues into the twentieth century in the work of such scholars as Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach and Ernst Robert Curtius” (8). As Ruthven’s catalogue of the great twentieth-century comparativists suggests, what lay at the heart of the nineteenth-century philological revolution was the “comparative method”: the task of observing relations and differences between texts and contexts that would allow for systematic understanding to emerge, as it were, from the “data” itself: the famous “hermeneutic circle.” Yet, the importation of these German methods into the American context was piecemeal and largely inflected toward philological rigor. Among the legions of Americans who made the pilgrimage to Germany to complete their studies, some certainly absorbed the ideas of the humanistic construction of philology, but others simply were entranced by the idea of literature as a completed science. “[P]edagogic practices,” Ruthven continues, “unfortunately, tend to be known by their weaknesses rather than their strengths, largely because of the difficulty most run-of-the-mill practitioners’ experience in achieving those ideals reached from time to time by acknowledged masters of the method. Teachers who seemed merely to waffle on about literature and culture for a living were therefore easy targets for another breed of scholar who believed that the only way for humanities subjects to justify their existence in a modern university was by introducing scientific
methods into humanistic enquiry” (8). The target of this new breed was not simply made apparent by the dilettantism of the humanist. Rather, we need to see that the conflict lay in the tectonic shift in meaning that culture had undergone.

Tylorian anthropology developed a model of culture that tore asunder Herder’s Kultur: a delicate balance between the humanistic and the ethnological. Tylor’s uncompromising positivism lent aid and comfort to scientific philological investigation. Just as philologists investigated the diachronic laws of morphological and phonological change, Tylor pursues an idea of culture in the name of “objectivity” by removing questions of value in favor of positive knowledge of “laws” of human society and its development. Furthermore, Tylor’s culture, in the context of nineteenth century social Darwinism, nationalism, and various “racialist” discourses, could, contrary to Tylor’s aims, be appropriated for purposes quite different from the concerns of the pioneering anthropologists. Significantly, this complication of the culture concept came to the fore just as the debate between humanist and scientific philologists broke into the open. As Graff asserts, “One cannot minimize the importance of these theories of ‘race’ in the formation of language and literature departments in the 1880s” (70). If the humanist held a cosmopolitan view of literature, in either the name of Goethe’s Weltliteratur or Herderean Kultur, the new forces at work—not only imperialism, but in the American context, the European immigration that sent families like Pound’s to the suburbs—unhinged the arguments of both the belletristic professor and the humanistic philologist. The pressures to construct an American identity on the basis of European nationalism became irresistible.
The American sense of cultural inferiority helped to construct, in the late
nineteenth century, a compensatory vision of the English-speaking peoples, or more
comprehensive still, Teutonic culture—at least until World War One—as the basis of
encouraged a consciousness of the racial element in literature. The very decision to
divide the new language and literature departments along national lines was an implicit
assertion of pride in ‘the English speaking race.’” Brandler Matthews wrote in an
American literature textbook of 1896, ‘as literature is a reflection and reproduction of the
life of the peoples speaking the language in which it is written, this literature is likely to
be strong and great in proportion as the peoples who speak the language are strong and
great. English literature is therefore likely to grow, as it is the record of the life of the
English speaking race and as this race is steadily spreading abroad over the globe”’(71).

This sort of paean to Anglo-Saxony had the advantage of making the study of
literature more than esoteric nonsense to a public inclined to regard the arts as one of the
“higher things,” but for that very reason, of less urgency to an industrial democracy. The
American Experiment, riven by economic energies, could nevertheless find solace in the
desire to make America worship culture. The study of literature, and of English in
particular, stood ready to offer compelling testimony to the destiny of the English
speaking peoples and to offer moral self-assurance to the immigrant-threatened Wasp.
The longstanding claims for literature by Arnold—and by Emerson or Longfellow closer
to home—were given added authority by being confirmed by professionals whose
authority was assured through the massive prestige of German Wissenschaft. Literature,
especially those in modern languages, now seemed to offer a gauge whereby relative position on the wheel of fortune of each member of the family of nations could be determined.

In this context, the founding of the Modern Language Association in 1883 marked more than the assertion of the national importance of literature and language study. In a commercial society where wealth threatened to become the sole arbiter of social status, professionalism, with its ethic of disinterested service, offered an alternative measure of value: knowledge and competence. As Rudolph states, “the German experience offered American students a way of reflecting upon the possibilities and limitations—the liberation and containment—of their own lives in the context of nineteenth-century America” (319). The lure of professionalism lay in the way it seemed to combine two central values of Protestant America: moral duty and hard work. The spiritual and the vocational seemed to merge in the activity and ethos of the professional, and late-nineteenth-century academics would find this irresistible: the opportunity to “modernize” their disciplines would, haply, not only ensure their relevance in American life, but also ensure their social position within it. “Most Americans,” Rudolph observes, “admired the capacity of the German for concentrated and thorough work, which they could translate into their own motives for professional labor. Even if the Germans were ponderous, the contrast to the slipshod manner and philistinism of the Americans was welcome. The Germans respected the significance of ideas, they knew the value of an active mind—brainwork—and they pioneered in specialized research that excavated primary sources” (319).
7.3 Amateur Gullets and Gelded Ants

Within these attitudes we can see the kinds of charges Pound would hurl against the poetry of his time. “Brianwork” would indeed be the path that the modern poet must pursue. This ideal would be a cornerstone of Pound’s developing views of literature. Over and again, he charges the enemies of the new art with stupidity and praises his allies always with superlatives: as being “the most intelligent” person working in this or that endeavor. The poet, he implies, must become a “professional” of sorts: but not quite. Writing in 1912, he states, “[t]he mastery of any art is the work of a lifetime. I should not discriminate between the ‘amateur’ and the ‘professional.’ Or rather I should discriminate quite often in favour of the amateur, but I should discriminate between the amateur and the expert” (LE 10 “Prolegomena”). The distinction between “professional” and “expert,” however, is so fine as to almost disappear. As much as he discriminates “in favour of the amateur,” Pound continues, “[i]t is certain that the present chaos will endure until the Art of poetry has been preached down the amateur gullet, until there is such a general understanding of the fact that poetry is an art and not a pastime; such a knowledge of technique; of technique of surface and technique of content, that the amateurs will cease to try to drown out the masters” (LE10). Pound would be fissured along the fault-line of amateur and professional, between humanistic ethos and professorial expertise. At Hamilton, this inner conflict would be dramatically enacted for him.

The president of Hamilton College, Dr. Melanchthon Woolsey Stryker, scorned the emergence of the elective system that had become a model of higher education at “mighty Harvard,” as he disdainfully called it, under the guidance of President Eliot.
Yet the complaint itself suggests the ways in which the old-time college had been infiltrated by the institutional structures that, in providing elective courses, sought to break the grip of classical education. Though Hamilton maintained its liberal arts curriculum, it was feeling the pressure to remake itself. Hamilton, by making limited concessions to the new institutional imperatives while maintaining the paideia ideal, was, therefore, enmeshed in the friction between two conceptions of “philology” that Gerald Graff identifies. And while the administration of Hamilton had reason to believe that a modest introduction of specialization and the elective system that it required could be brought into consonance with humanistic ideals, there were signs of disharmony. H. C. G. Brandt, Pound’s German teacher, was himself at the heart of the academic Kulturkampf, not only at Hamilton, but nationally. As Gerald Graff observes, Brandt addressed the first meeting of the Modern Language Association in America in 1883 to insist that the study of language and literature must be constituted as a science in order to dispel the popular assumption that “any body [sic] can teach French or German or what is just as dangerous, any body can teach English” (67-8). As this comment suggests, part of the drive toward “science’ was conducted in the interest of asserting the stature of the study of language and literature in an America where its authority was precarious to begin with. By contrast, the association of “science” with “rigor” and “knowledge” offered a means of establishing the legitimacy of humanistic learning in the face of the massive prestige of the practical and theoretical sciences. Further, Brandt asserted, “By basing our instruction and text-books upon a scientific groundwork our department and our profession gain dignity and weight [……] By introducing scientific methods, we shall
show before very long that every body cannot [teach English], that the teacher must be as specially and as scientifically trained for his work in our department as well as in any other” (68). The humanist, thus transformed, could claim to be the peer of his colleague across the quadrangle. The belletristic professor at his worst—as gentlemanly bachelor, elderly widower, or young man waiting for some better opportunity—was coming to an end. But also, the idea of a liberal education asserted by a more humanistically-minded philology that struck a balance of sorts with humanism—centered upon the development of character, grounded in broad cultivation, and which asserted the spiritual value of a general acquaintance with the classics—would be thrown on the defensive. The new professional academic would pursue specialization that would work against the generalist.

“Prex” Stryker’s thunderings to Hamilton students in mandatory chapel or the senior course in “Christian Evidences” were defensive fire aimed to keep the views of people like Professor Brandt at bay. And he was not alone. Rudolph notes the extraordinary fact that “Brown, Hamilton, and Princeton all went into the twentieth century without yet having experienced a nonclerical administration” (170). Educators like Stryker were determined to maintain the core purpose of the classical college. Graff observes that “[t]he generalists’ educational aim was essentially to adapt the old college ideal of liberal culture to the challenges of modern times” (85). In principle and practice, this meant that the traditions of humane values would be deployed as Arnold’s “criticism of life”: in particular as a foil to combat the apostasy of the modern world. “The generalists channeled into literature,” Graff states, “emotions that, a half-century earlier,
would have likely been expressed in evangelical Christianity, Unitarianism, or
Transcendentalism, investing the experience of literature with the redemptive influence
their ministerial ancestors had attributed to the conversion experience” (85).

If Pound became an evangelist of sorts for modern poetry, he did so on the
grounds of “kulcher” in the generalist sense. In His early essay of 1912, “I Gather the
Limbs of Osiris,” Pound defends the paideia ideal against the professional specialization
that threatened to make “high culture” into the preserve of academic critics: “The aim of
right education is to lead a man out into more varied, more intimate contact with his
fellows. The result of education, in the present and usual sense, is usually to rear
between the ‘product of education’ and the unproduced, a barrier, a chevaux de frise of
books and of mutual misunderstanding. This refers chiefly to education in what are still
called the ‘humanities’, to processes by which, upon being examined, one becomes
‘bachelor or ‘master’ of the ‘liberal arts’, or even ‘one learned in philosophy’” (21-22).
And as late as 1917, in “Provincialism The Enemy,” Pound decries the evils of
specialization in rhetoric worthy of Dr. Stryker himself: “Knowledge as the adornment of
the mind, the enrichment of the personality, has been cried down in every educational
establishment where the Germano-American ‘university’ ideal has reached. The student
as the bondslave of his subject, the gelded ant, the compiler of data, has been preached as
a summum bonum” (SP191).

This deeply held humanist faith, however, coexisted with Pound’s attraction to
erudition. If, as Ruthven asserts, Pound was “a poet who wanted to be an academic”
(16), his early decisions make him out to be an academic who wanted to be a poet. Upon
graduation from Hamilton he returned to the University of Pennsylvania, the scene of his former misery and humiliation, to pursue graduate work in Romance languages. His first year went well enough, and he was awarded the M. A. degree, receiving a Harrison Fellowship to pursue his doctoral dissertation on the Spanish poet, Lope de Vega. He used this money to travel to Spain to do research, but he ended up in Paris, and finally London, by the end of the summer. Returning to Penn for his second year of postgraduate work in 1906, he managed to fail a course in literary criticism taught by Dean Josiah Penniman, who later, as Provost, would block Pound’s attempts to receive his doctorate.

After a famously disastrous stint as a teacher of Romance languages at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana, Pound would apparently abandon academia. Like T. S. Eliot, he would never complete his doctorate. With money from an aunt, he traveled to Europe, ending up in Italy where he published his first book of poetry—*A Lume Spento*—at his own expense. Broke, he became dependent upon subsidies from home and, in 1909, decided to launch himself into the London literary scene in a desperate gamble for literary success.

However, what appears to be a simple act of rejection covers over the way in which Pound’s education and failed academic career would become central to his work: not simply a source of his animus toward professors but to his developing poetics. Ruthven rightly observes that “Pound’s anti-academicism was the product of disaffection with American academies as currently constituted, but not academies as such, provided they were staffed by the right kind of people, that is, by people who contributed
creatively and significantly to the arts, and who could therefore be trusted to know what they were talking about” (28). Yet, such an attitude would only develop after a process of mutual rejection: by Pound himself, through his inability to discipline himself to systematically pursue specialized scholarship, and by an institution that now demanded it.

Years later Pound recalled, “Distress over a system of education and of ‘higher education’ remains a mystery to people with whom I converse as was my disgust with the system, to my professors, fifteen years ago. People see no connection between ‘philology’ and the Junker” (SP191). At the height of World War One, such anti-German sentiment was hardly rare. Yet, Pound was still inquiring, as he would for almost twenty years, if the University of Pennsylvania would grant his doctorate on the basis of his 1910 book, The Spirit of Romance, or other work he might submit. Intermittently, he sought academic positions, as when he enlisted the aid of John Quinn in inquiring if Columbia might employ him. In short, Pound seems to have felt intensely the way in which literary authority was shifting from poet to critic. His attempt to revive “the dead art of poetry” would be intimately connected to his need to revive the dead authority of the man-of-letters. Both projects were inextricable, as they would be in different ways for his fellow modernists, and his own debt to philology and its conceptions of culture would persist to underwrite his poetic practice, and more deviously, his theoretical pronouncements and political inclinations.

Others have noted the lasting impact of Pound’s academic experience upon his later career. This impact, however, is usually considered in terms of particular fascinations—like the troubadours and Chinese poetry—or interest in particular doctrines.
such as “Paideuma” of Leo Frobenius. For example, Ruthven states, “This notion of
traditional practices as the grounds on which innovations must always rest if they are to
avoid being meretricious—and the accompanying diachronic doctrine that we cannot
possibly know where we are until we see where we have been—testifies to the residual
influence on Pound of academic conceptions of scholarship and research, which were to
survive his anti-academic moods and continued to manifest themselves in both his poetry
and his criticism” (24). Ruthven is one of the most perceptive of Pound’s critics who
sees the importance of transformations in academia upon Pound’s thinking. However,
Ruthven also sees this influence as “residual” rather than constitutive. Yet, as my
extended discussion of Pound’s academic influences suggests, these conceptions are not
simply holdovers from an earlier period in his history that manifest themselves in his
work, but rather the foundational basis upon which he would launch his revolution of the
word and develop his conception of culture and art’s place in it. As Pound’s thinking
turns more to matters of general culture, his conflicted relationship with the academy
expresses itself along lines that mimic the friction between humanistic and
anthropological culture. In “How to Read” of 1929, Pound reflects on his educational
experience in ways that reveal this fundamental tension. On the one hand, he protests
against weak-minded belles-lettres professors. “Literary instruction in our ‘institutions of
learning’ was,” he asserts, “at the beginning of this century, cumbrous and inefficient. I
dare say it still is. Certain more or less mildly exceptional professors were affected by
the ‘beauties’ of various authors (usually deceased), but the system, as a whole, lacked
sense and co-ordination. I dare say it still does” (LE15).
Yet, Pound also complains that professors of literature are victims of specialization. “In my university,” he tells us, “I found various men interested (or uninterested) in their subjects, but, I think, no man with a view of literature as a whole, or with any idea whatsoever of the relation of the part he himself taught to any other part” (15). This sounds, of course, like an appeal for the study of comparative literature based upon a broad humanistic vision: not investigation of morphology and phonology in particular languages, but a grasp of the specifically literary value of great works across the boundaries of languages and cultures. Indeed, “comparative literature” departments had emerged in several universities in the first decade of the twentieth century. But for Pound, such efforts had been pursued in a haphazard manner; the one thing needful was a grasp of the idea of literature as such. He notes, “‘Comparative literature’ sometimes figures in university curricula, but very few people know what they mean by the term, or approach it with a considered conscious method” (16).

Such a “considered conscious method” places Pound’s position in awkward relation to the humanistic tradition, but not simply because the study of literature must be scientific. “And we could, presumably, apply to the study of literature a little of the common sense that we currently apply to physics or to biology,” Pound argues, but not in order that a scientific criticism might take charge of the literary. Instead, literature itself is analogous to science. “In poetry,” he continues, “there are simple procedures, and there are known discoveries, clearly marked” (LE19). It is the literary artist who is analogous to the scientist. Great poets make “discoveries” about the use of language for aesthetic effects. Through special knowledge and insight, the literary artist becomes the
true investigator of the nature of language, and scholarship’s pretensions to mastery are overturned. True literary study would devote itself to the recovery of the specifically literary quality of its object. Literature would not be misused as philological or archeological data for historical understanding. Rather, historical understanding itself would be predicated upon grasping the aesthetic significance of a given work. Pound asserts, “To avoid confusion, one should state at once that such [scholarly] method has nothing to do with those allegedly scientific methods which approach literature as if it were something not literature, or with scientists’ attempts to sub-divide the elements in literature according to some non-literary categoric division” (LE19). Obviously, Pound’s program anticipates the key concerns of the New Criticism. But Pound’s real interest does not lie in promulgating a narrow formalism. On one hand, the attempt to return authority to the artist is based on appropriating the authority of the professional. The poet becomes a specialist. On the other hand, he had seen what one version of scientific literary study looked like. If philology, in his view, was tone-deaf to the aesthetic merit of its object of study, then some way must be found to unite technical rigor with aesthetic sensibility; intellectual precision must be a means of enriching artistic vitality. Culture, conceived in terms of the animating force of Western tradition, could be treated with the rigor the scientist brought to nature without confusing one for the other. Pound would struggle to reconcile the humanistic and scientific conceptions of literary study and he would be haunted by his academic experience throughout his life. Most importantly, this struggle would be the obstacle to his attempt to produce a modern breakthrough in poetry; paradoxically, it would also be the means by which he would accomplish it.
7.4 Provençe and a Phantom Dawn

The poems of A Lume Spento (1908) hardly portend the author as one of the makers of modernism. This in itself would be hardly surprising in the sense that they are juvenilia written at a time when English poetics were at an impasse. Nevertheless, they are interesting for at least two reasons: they indicate Pound’s seemingly willful ignorance of the advanced literature of his time, and they are written in a style in which Pound will persist even as he later articulates his own advanced theory, Imagism. The opening poem of the volume, “La Fraisne,” is a Browningeque dramatic monologue spoken by Garulf Bisclavret, whose legend is related by Marie de France. The fifth full stanza offers a good example of Pound’s manner:

She hath drawn me from mine old ways,
Till men say that I am mad;
But I have seen the sorrow of men, and am glad,
For I know that the wailing and bitterness are a folly. (CEP9)

The intent of these lines is to represent the “Bacchic” madness of Bisclavret who has been “cured” of the folly of human vanity by giving himself to pagan impulses, falling in love with an ash tree. Obviously, this poetry is worlds away from Imagism; but it is also strangely “unmodern” by the standards of 1908. This is not only due to the large number of poems that pursue archaic themes based upon the troubadours. Even in its most determinedly “modern” gestures, Pound’s book, which appeared a mere year before Hulme’s experiments such as “Autumn,” is twenty years out-of-date. For instance, in “Donzella Beata” the speaker proclaims:
Surely a bolder maid art thou
Than one in tearful, fearful longing
That should wait
Lily-cinctured at the gate
Of high heaven, Star-diadem’d
Crying that I should come to thee. (CEP27)

Pre-Rapaelitism, Browning, Swinburne—all are presences in the poem. Donald Davie observes of the poems in A Lume Spento, “Whole books were written in this excruciating idiom [. . . .] This is romance language in the sense that it is the language of historical romances written in late-Victorian and Edwardian England.”18 In one sense, Davie is right. Yet, Pound is basing his early poetics on more theoretical ground than Davie allows. Indeed, what is surprising is the extent to which he rejects more immediate influences. Pound was aware of the poems of English Decadent/Symbolist writers (though uninterested in their French sources at this point in his career). Indeed, the poem “The Decadent” in the same volume shows this awareness. There we find:

Tarnished we! Tarnished! Wastrels all!
And yet the art goes on, goes on.
Broken our strength, yea as crushed reeds we fall,
And yet the art, the art goes on. (1-4)

Mercifully, the poem only does so for two more stanzas. Though the “Bearers of beauty flame and wane” they are martyrs for a rebirth “As new day glistens in the old day’s room” (5,8). And, though “Broken our manhood for the wrack and strain,” the speaker suffers to “see Art vivant, and exult to die” (9, 12). Even if one reads these lines ironically—as a parody of decadent self-pity—Pound’s language fails to distinguish between the poet’s attitude and the speaker’s precisely because it is not distinguished from the manner of his other monologues except in subject matter. Further, Pound’s poetry is not at this point the “new day” that he implies. Indeed, it is more outmoded, as
we have seen, than that written by these “Bearers of beauty.” We need only compare the 
manner of A Lume Spento to Oscar Wilde’s poem “Impression du Matin,” published in 
1881, to see this irony:

The Thames nocturne of blue and gold
 Changed to a Harmony in grey:
 A barge with ochre-coloured hay
 Dropt from the wharf: and chill and cold

The yellow fog came creeping down
 The bridges, till the houses‘ walls
 Seemed changed to shadows and St. Paul’s
 Loomed like a bubble o’er the town. (1-8)

Another poet will have use for the yellow fog in this poem. Yet here we can see that 
Wilde is developing a poetic language—inspired by Whistler and the French 
Symbolists—that anticipates, twenty-seven years before A Lume Spento, the direction 
that Pound’s poetics will move toward. Of course, Wilde’s poem is not Imagism in the 
sense that Pound will come to promote. The poem ends with a suitably “decadent” stage 
prop:

But one pale woman all alone,
 The daylight kissing her wan hair,
 Loitered beneath the gas-lamps’ flare,
 With lips of flame and a heart of stone. (13-16)

Despite the theatricality of prostitute—introduced to provide a suitably “Baudelarian” 
modernity, no doubt—most of the poem presents something approaching an impersonal 
and direct presentation of its subject. Even more striking in this regard, as we noted in 
chapter five, is the work of Arthur Symons, some of whose poems in Silhouettes (1896) 
approach Hulme’s version of the image avant la lettre. English poetry was clearly
developing resources that, in hindsight, would have been invaluable to Pound given his belief that poets build upon and transform the “discoveries” of other poets.

Pound’s own reticence about the avant-garde of his own day lies in his commitment to romantic Hellenism of earlier figures like Pater rather than the tragic pleasures of decline into decadence. Nevertheless, the influence of Decadence and Symbolism on Pound’s thought in this period presents itself, if in a rather oblique manner. Evidence for his emerging sense of the idea of culture can be found two years before his dramatic appearance in London. Ever the erratic scholar, Pound had come across a work entitled _Le Secret des Troubadours_ by, of all people, Josephin Péladan, the self-styled “Sêt Péladan,” decadent mystic, Gnostic, and Rosicrucian. On a brief return to the United States in 1906, Pound published a review of the book in _Book News Monthly_ where he claimed that the book was “filled with the snap of brilliant conclusions.” Ignoring Péladan’s leadership of “La rose+croix,” Pound explicates the thesis that secret mystical knowledge had been handed down throughout the Christian middle ages that derived from the worship of Dionysus and the rituals of the Eleusian Mysteries of ancient Greece. Pound’s scholarship in Provençal poetry was increasingly shaped by the conviction that the troubadours were the conduits of this secret knowledge and that their poetry was devoted to a Dionysian cult of love. Hence for Pound, troubadour poetry represented a survival: a living connection with ancient Greece and the Hellenic spirit that was available to be exploited in the creation of a new poetry. It is this conviction—one that he would be loath to abandon—that shapes the poetry of _A Lume Spento_ and will condition all of his poetry including the treatment of the Greeks in the
Cantos. It will also become transformed into “the spirit of romance” in his first major attempt at criticism in 1910. This conception of culture as a realm of conspiracy as well as field of vital forces from the ancient past would never leave his thinking even after he begins to transform these critical terms into a theoretical justification for his experiments in poetry.

The Spirit of Romance argues, when it argues at all, the thesis of Péladan’s book. Pound asserts, “Provence was less disturbed than the rest of Europe by invasion from the North in the darker ages; if paganism survived anywhere it would have been, unofficially, in the Langue d’Oc. That the spirit was, in Provence, Hellenic is seen readily enough by anyone who will compare the Greek Anthology with the work of the troubadours. They have, in some way, lost the names of the gods and remembered the names of the lovers” (90). Further, Pound reads this survival of paganism in terms of ritualistic religion, which he sees as authentic, versus dogmatic religion that sought to defeat it. The former encompass “cults or religions of orgy and of ecstasy, from the simpler Bacchanalia to the more complicated rites of Isis or Dionysus,” while the latter “is the Mosaic or Roman or British Empire type, where someone, having to keep a troublesome rabble in order, invents and scares them with a disagreeable bogie, which he calls god [sic]” (95). In a twisting of the traditional Arnoldian categories of Hebraism and Hellenism, Pound finds Christianity to be of the first type. “Christianity and all other forms of ecstatic religion,” he claims, “[…] are not in inception dogma or propaganda of something called the one truth or the universal truth; they seem little concerned with ethics; their general object appears to be to stimulate a sort of confidence in the life-force. Their teaching is
variously and constantly a sort of working hypothesis acceptable to a people of a certain
range of temperament—a ‘regola’ which suits a particular constitution of nerves and
intellect, and in accord with which the people of this temperament can live at greatest
peace with ‘the order,’ with man and nature” (95). Hence, Christianity, in Pound’s bold
reversal of Arnold’s categories, shares more with Hellenic culture than with its roots in
Hebraism. If Judaism is a religion of doctrine and the Law that proclaims one truth,
primitive Christianity is, like paganism, infused with the spirit of ritual that seeks accord
with nature. This strategic severing of Christianity and Judaism, at this point in his
thinking, is perhaps less of a direct expression of anti-Semitism than an attempt to
establish the Christian middle ages as a conduit for the spirit of Hellenism in the modern
world, though it is an expression of his latent tendency to make a vulgar conflation of
capitalism and Judaism as the enemy of a Western culture whose essence is thoroughly
Greek in origin. The threat to the European tradition—its true decadence—lies not so
much in the West’s inability to remember as in its modern propensity to dismember. As
he argues, “One must consider that the types which joined these cults survived, in
Provence, and survive, today—priests, maenads and the rest—though there is in our
society no provision for them” (95).

Pound’s early efforts would be directed to make some provision for them in the
form of artists. Pound’s *Spirit of Romance* releases Hellenism from its imprisonment
within a debased humanism of nineteenth-century moral earnestness and dry-as-dust
scholarship and life-denying positivism of the new scientific philology. This is not a
simple rejection of high culture in favor of a vital folk culture. If Pound’s attraction to
Péladan’s thesis lies in its assertion of the survival of an authentic Greek spirit in the Christian middle ages, his valorization of the troubadours makes clear that his interest does not lie directly in folk poetry: for example, the anonymous ballads and lyrics of the period. Despite their image in popular imagination, the troubadour poets were not folk poets in any traditional sense, nor were they traveling minstrels like the jongleurs who spread and popularized their songs. Rather, they were aristocrats who turned from the stilted traditions of court poetry—epic, gestes and lais—to remake popular love songs into the new forms of courtly love poetry. What stimulates Pound’s interest is the disavowal of artificial literati in favor of an elite in contact with the Dionysian energy of the folk. Pound tries to make culture into something both traditional in the deepest sense and critical of what his Mauberly will later call a “botched civilization” and a recuperation of a whole way of life. This will be accomplished by making aesthetic criteria the model for culture as a whole. An authentic culture is one that displays the organic wholeness that is also the wholeness of the work of art. Just as the troubadours were the inheritors of a Dionysian cult of love from antiquity that had survived unconsciously among the folk, so that essential Hellenism is still available to the modern mind.

Thus, despite its general appearance as an introduction to medieval literature, *The Spirit of Romance* indirectly defends Pound’s own version of the task of modern poetry. The book seeks to be scholarship, journalism, and manifesto at once. As such, it can be seen as a bold critical experiment: an attempt to assemble a new kind of audience. Yet, Pound’s attempt at constructing a man-of-letters role for himself continually runs up against the inchoate antagonism of the post-romantic artist toward the institution of
criticism: an ambivalence manifest in his own attitudes toward his education. His conflicted relationship with scholarship combined with his desire to outline a program for modern poetry makes The Spirit of Romance anything but a literary handbook for the uninitiated. As Ruthven notes, “For although he believed in the importance of primers, on the grounds that ‘the ultimate goal of scholarship is popularisation’, he lacked the patience of a first rate explicator” (26). Whether or not Pound lacked patience, it is clear that his purposes in the book are in conflict. Pound’s conflict between his desire to function as a man-of-letters and his denigration of that role—being a mediator between the world of scholarly knowledge and an interested lay public—come in to view most clearly in the way he struggles to reconcile tradition and the role of the artist as a prophet of the new.20 Yet, for this very reason, the book allows a view of Pound grappling with the problem of situating the nature and purposes of art against his developing idea of culture. Pound’s thinking in this period about both of these offers a clearer understanding of the genesis of his Imagism.

Modernism, our critical assumptions tell us, arose as a reaction against romanticism; few things could seem more certain about twentieth-century art. Certainly the classicism of Hulme and Wyndham Lewis, filtered through the anti-romanticism of Pierre Lasserre, as well as Eliot’s adoption of this view, authorize this reading. And yet, over and again, critics have discovered, like the modernists themselves, that the categories of romanticism continually re-emerge in modernist thought. Pound, of all the English moderns, stands alone in not making anti-romanticism the crux of his struggle for modernism. Unlike the early Hulme, whose primarily philosophical discourse defines
romanticism as a nineteenth-century intellectual and aesthetic catastrophe in order to directly link aesthetics with politics, Pound depends upon an older critical tradition that sees romantic sensibility as simply one aesthetic mode built into the structure of Western thought and feeling. “Speaking generally,” he says, “the spells or equations of ‘classic’ art invoke the beauty of the normal, and spells of ‘romantic’ art are said to invoke the beauty of the unusual” (14). Yet this dehistoricizing of the romantic is really a means of appropriating a crucial weapon of historical Romanticism as both a philosophical and an artistic movement.

As we have seen, romantic thought contested enlightenment “civilization” with a concept of culture of the kind developed by Herder. As Terry Eagleton observes in *The Idea of Culture*, Romanticism exploited the critical leverage this concept makes available. Culture, he notes, has functioned as “utopian critique,” a description of “a whole way of life,” and as “artistic creation.”21 Culture as a whole way of life is obviously traditional by definition: tradition marking the inheritance of unconsciously held assumptions that legitimize custom and belief. Yet, for the aesthetic understanding of culture—inflected towards aspiration and self-development—tradition is the record of civilized thought and feeling that is canonized through a process of conscious evaluation. As aesthetic culture becomes increasingly critical of actual civilization throughout the nineteenth century, tradition becomes either something to reject or otherwise transform.22 Pound’s persistent interest in the “spirit of romance” lies in both the critical and productive potential of the culture idea.
Pound intuitively grasps that the functions of the culture idea Eagleton identifies must be seen in terms of the others if the concept is to be both critical and productive. Yet he runs up against the problem that accompanies all invocations of the culture thesis. His discourse is caught between wanting to understand culture as both the unconscious bedrock of social life and as a conscious intellectual tradition. Pound’s interest in recovering the evaluative role of men-of-letters, the leadership role of artists, and the dormant spirit of European Hellenism leads him to an aesthetic “solution.” Culture, like a work of art, is an organic form that grows out of its own principles, and at the same time, is the embodiment of an idea: thought made visible. Pound’s concept becomes locked in a tension between his historicism and his Idealism; a tension that continually threatens to tear it apart.

We can see this tension most clearly in Pound’s attempts to theorize art’s role in shaping and responding to historical and social experience. His identification of transcendent aesthetic purity with culture posits a particular vision of social health. Art is the spirit of the body cultural, and health lies in a concord between the two. This allows Pound to imagine the aesthetic as conditioning the whole way of life of a people while still claiming that art has its own logic and independence. In the “Preface” to the book, Pound proclaims, “Art or an art is not unlike a river, in that it is perturbed at times by the quality of the river bed, but is in a way independent of that bed […] the artist is that which flows” (i-ii). This metaphor seems to figure tradition in the familiar terms of historical continuity; the assertion that art is “in a way independent of that bed” seems little more than the humanistic faith that genius transcends historical circumstance despite
showing marks of being “perturbed” by it. However, his assertion is more of a rejection of historicist principles than appears at first sight. Despite the temporal metaphor of the flowing stream, Pound suggests two kinds of time: the “apparent” time of material culture, and the spiritual timelessness of artistic consciousness. He asserts, “All ages are contemporaneous. It is B.C., let us say, in Morocco. The Middle Ages are in Russia. The future stirs already in the minds of the few. This is especially true of literature, where the real time is independent of the apparent, and where many dead men are our grandchildren’s contemporaries, while many of our contemporaries have been already gathered into Abraham’s bosom, or some more fitting receptacle” (ii). Artistic truth grasps an aesthetic absolute. The future is fecundated in the minds of the few, the authentic literary artists who live in the “real time” of art. They are contemporaries despite their apparent time because they have grasped the timeless essence of art and being; they are “that which flows” and hence are able to turn vital energies into human emotions.

However, the river metaphor masks the instability of Pound’s conception. The attempt to imagine a whole way of life in terms of aesthetic consciousness leaves open the question of how material culture and social power shape and are shaped by the “real time” of art. Pound has not yet succumbed to the cultural pessimism that will increasingly mark his fully modernist phase: a pessimism grounded in his growing sense of a conspiracy of the body against the spirit, of political and economic forces within culture that seek the bastardization of art. In an anticipation of Eliot, Pound presents his own version of the objective correlative. “Poetry,” he asserts, “is a sort of inspired mathematics, which gives us equations, not for abstract figures, triangles, spheres, and
the like, but equations for the human emotions [...]” (14). As such a mathematician of the spirit, great poets are in touch with necessary truths of art and human nature. Poetry, like the necessary truths of mathematics, can express the particular as a manifestation of the universal. Unlike Eliot’s version that recognizes the dialectical relationship between individual consciousness and history, Pound’s version seeks contact with the Absolute.

Pound’s privileging of aesthetic consciousness is inflected towards idealism because of the way the shift in institutional categories hidden beneath “culture” provides an opportunity to unite the humanist idea of tradition with the continuity of the identity of a people. For Pound, the principle of continuity must be ideational: the “spirit” of the book’s title. But what lies beneath Pound’s flirtations with idealism is not so much a metaphysical as it is an epistemological problem; not an issue between Being and becoming, but between conscious reflection and the unconscious fundamental ground of such reflection. Pound is alive to the dangers of seeing aesthetic consciousness simply the achievement of some form of stasis or contact with the Eternal. For this reason, Pound presents artistic consciousness as an alliance between mind and the vital universe. “The spirit of the arts is dynamic” he declares (222). Yet, what remains obscure is the relationship of such a vital poetic consciousness in touch with the ideal energies of creation to the general culture. One might be tempted to see him relegating self-consciousness to an highly developed elite that embodies the true spirit of a people that is lived unconsciously by the folk: one interpretation of what he will come to call the “antennae of the race.” Yet this misreads Pound’s struggle to imagine an authentic culture in the pre-modern terms, where general culture is the result not only of spiritual
continuity but also of hierarchical integration of society as a whole. The vitalism of the arts is predicated upon the vitalism of culture because artistic consciousness is itself predicated upon the hypostatic spirit that is the fundamental ground of the identity of the people. Pound asserts, “[t]he arts are not passive, nor static, nor, in a sense, are they reflective, though reflection may assist their birth” (222). Art is dynamic to the extent that it is part of the dynamism of an authentic general culture. The artist’s act is only partly a conscious one. “An epic,” he proclaims, “cannot be written against the grain of its time: the prophet or the satirist may hold himself aloof from his time, or run counter to it, but the writer of epos must voice the general heart” (216). The seeming impossibility of epic in the modern age suggests, for him, the danger that confronts European culture: that disappearance of a sensus communis.\(^\text{23}\) Just as the Decadents read modern civilization as an over-articulation of consciousness, Pound sees that true art is not on the side of dogmatic religion nor philosophical or intellectual system, but rather on the side of the expressing the vital forces of life.

Pound’s touchstone for the relation of artistic consciousness and general culture is Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*. In his attempt to imply that the “the spirit of romance” mode is the prototype of the modern, Pound quotes Pater’s translation in *Marius* of the story of “Cupid and Psyche” in Apuleius’s *Golden Ass (Metamorphoses)*. The story becomes for him what it is for Pater’s Marius: an example of a revolutionary literary project. In Pater’s novel, Marius’s “golden book” inspires Flavian’s literary ambition, which results in his writing of the *Pervigilium Veneris*. Pater’s narrator tells us, “Latin literature and the Latin tongue were dying of routine and langour; and what was
necessary, first of all, was to re-establish the natural and direct relationship between thought and expression, between the sensation and the term, and restore to words their primitive power” (ME 89). Thus Flavian’s poem will assert “the rights of the proletariat of speech” (ME 89). Pound will follow Pater’s formulation. He contends that “we must look to the style for our distinction between the Latin of Apuleius and classic Latin. Restraint, which drives the master toward intensity and the tyro toward aridity, has been abandoned” (SR 17-18). Pound’s concern is to establish the antiquity of romantic art and to present it as a revitalization of language and poetry. “Enough here to point out, he states, “that there was in Latin an ‘unclassical’ style, from which certain qualities in ‘romance’ literature may be derived” (SR 18). Not coincidentally, Pound discusses the Pervigilium in the context of Apuleius’ Metamorphoses. The romantic element of this hymn to Venus Genetrix lies not simply in its embodiment of the May Day ritual, but in its conscious stylistic intervention in cultural and linguistic decline. “The point is,” Pound notes, “that the metric of the Pervigilium probably indicated as great a change of sensibility in its day as the change from Viennese waltzes to jazz may indicate in our own” (18-19). Pound’s invocation of popular culture is, of course, the point. Poetry reinvigorates—indeed revolutionizes—itself always by returning to the proletariat of speech. Hence, he tells us, “the Troubadours were melting the common tongue and fashioning it into new harmonies depending not upon the alteration of quantities but upon rhyme and accent” (22). Hence, for early Pound the issue for modern art was never a conflict between romanticism and classicism. Rather, he implies that the fragmentation that has befallen modern civilization is the result of a severing of popular culture from
high culture. Pound’s own version of being one part revolutionary and one part reactionary has an obvious parallel with Pater’s Hellenism. For both, the renaissance proves in a spectacular manner the living power of the Greek spirit. In a particularly Paternian turn of phrase, Pound declares, “The Renaissance is not a time, but a temperament […] There was no abrupt humanistic revolt. Boccaccio and the rest but carry on a paganism which had never expired” (167). Modernity’s fragmentation and sense of belatedness is to be overcome by reading the spirit of romance as the spirit of Hellenism.

The artist is not, however, just the expression of unconscious Dionysian energies of the folk. Pound’s desire to revive the role of the man-of-letters forces him to both accept and reject the self-conscious humanist version of culture, and it is here that the faultlines of his thought are exposed most clearly. He ends his book with a rejection of Arnold’s vision of high culture and his definition of poetry a “criticism of life”: “Poetry is about as much a ‘criticism of life’ as a red-hot iron is a criticism of fire” (222). Of course, Pound is disavowing Arnold’s culture offered as a foil to anarchy. His rhetorical flourishes are often directed in opposition to humanist constructions of culture as the most self-conscious and sophisticated expression of human life. Even allowing for Pound’s love of an immoderate phrase, his animus creates problems for his argument. While he shows contempt for what he sees as the civic humanist’s claptrap about art’s moral mission as much as his distaste for the intellectual systematizing of the academic, what Pound needs to retain from humanistic constructions of culture is the sense of a standard of value and judgement that he could use to promote his equally strong interest in literary revolution. As Pound states, “‘[w]hat we need is a literary scholarship, which
will weigh Theocritus and Yeats with one balance, and which will judge dull dead men as
inexorably as dull writers of today, and will, with equity, give praise to beauty before
referring to an almanack [sic]” (ii).24 It would be easy to dismiss this apparent
contradiction by arguing that Pound rejects the idea of “poetry” as “criticism of life.”
Yet, Pound himself makes this problematic. “An art is vital,” he tells us, “only so long as
it is interpretive, so long, that is, as it manifests something which the artist perceives at a
greater intensity, and more intimately, than his public”(87). If this vitality is not a
“criticism of life,” it is close to it.

But of course, to say that an art is interpretive is not quite the same as saying it is
criticism in the ordinary sense. Obviously, art’s procedures are not only much more
oblique—something Arnold himself understood—but are for Pound guided by a different
relationship between means and ends. Critical judgment—that reflection that “assists”
art’s birth—simply marks the mode by which the artist perceives with “greater intensity”
than the non-artist. And what the poetic artist perceives “more intimately” than non-
poets is the way in which the relationship between words and things embody or fail to
embody the authentic spirit of the general culture. For him, the true test of poetic
greatness lies in one’s authentic mastery of the means of language and the goal of
revitalizing perception. Genius lies in the ability to use these means to conjure an
audience from mass indifference or complacent convention by bringing words back into
relation with that which lies dormant within the pre-rational or intuitive sensibility of a
people. “The interpretive function,” Pound argues, “is the highest honor of the arts, and
because it is so we find that a sort of hyper-scientific precision is the touchstone and
assay of the artist’s power, of his honor, his authenticity. Constantly he must distinguish
between shades and degrees of the ineffable” (87). What is of interest here is the
insistence upon poetry’s interpretation of experience: the necessary precision of
describing the essence of things and their ineffable effects upon consciousness. As such,
it is, significantly, functional. While most live life within the “phantastikon” of daily
concerns, there are “certain others” whose consciousness is “germinal.” “And this latter
sort of mind”, Pound observes, “is close on the vital universe; and the strength of the
Greek beauty rests in this, that it is ever at the interpretation of this vital universe, by its
signs of gods and godly attendants and oreads” (93). Once again, it is the Greeks who
represent for the European mind an originary—and hence authentic—relationship to the
vitality of life and world. Only through our dead contemporaries can the future be
realized. Pound’s conflicted relationship with scientific scholarship, his ambivalence
towards humanism, and his nostalgia for organic community leads him to reposition the
intersection of art, culture, and critical consciousness at the level of language. Ironically,
the problem turns out to be the solution: an aesthetically grounded humanistic philology,
as it were. It is in the emerging theory of the image that Pound will think through the
problem of unifying aesthetic consciousness, general culture, and cultural critique.
7.5 Imagism and Cultural Imagination

Oddly, even as Pound develops his theoretical foundation for a doctrine of the Image, his own poetic practice seems barely touched by it. Both the 1909 version of Personae and Exaltations of the same year, despite scattered successes like “Sestina: Alteforte,” are still mired in pseudo-archaic poetic diction that suggests Pound’s inability to find a way forward and put into practice the aesthetic values he voices in his criticism. Indeed, his friendship with W. B. Yeats seems to have instilled a retrograde influence of “Celtic Twilight” into much of his work, as the Yeatsian title Exaltations implies. Pound himself seems to have recognized this, for he includes a poem entitled “Revolt: Against the Crepuscular Spirit in Modern Poetry” in Personae. Yet, the poem, far from being a revolt, seems more of an excuse to engage in the “crepuscular spirit” itself while seeming to reject it. In it, the speaker proclaims:

No! if we dream pale flowers,
Slow-moving pageantry of hours that languidly
Drop as o’er-ripened fruit from sallow trees.
If so we live and die not life but dreams,
No dalliance, but life! (9-14)

Pound’s famous melodic ear is present here—one might say too much so—but like the disjunction between his prose assertions about poetry and his poems, he seems to mistake effect for statement of effect, just as he will later mistake at times the aesthetic energy he seeks for modern verse for invective toward what he regards as the ills of modern life. Donald Davie has said of the early poems that “[t]he language is a chronically unstable mix of linguistic elements from the European past, held together by will, by nothing more than the urgency of the poet’s need” (16). Yet where Davie sees a failure, Pound will
discover a strength; a “chronically unstable mix of linguistic elements” will be precisely the basis of an emerging modernist poetics that Pound will play a central role in making.

The breakthrough year for Pound was 1912. This is the year in which Pound would formulate his version of “Imagisme.” Upon discovering Eliot’s poetry, Pound would express astonishment that the young poet had “modernized himself.” Of course, this simply means that Eliot’s own reading had led him to develop his poetry in a way that made use of the very Symbolist poetry that Pound seemed determined to ignore. Pound, in contrast, was modernized by others more directly. Most directly, Ford Maddox Ford (Hueffer) delivered a devastating critique of Pound’s recently published *Canzoni*: the last book Pound would devote to archaic lyricism. “Ford,” Pound recollected, “[…] felt the errors [in Canzoni] …to the point of rolling (physically, and if you look at it as mere superficial snob, ridiculously) on the floor of his temporary quarters at Giessen when my third volume displayed me trapped …in…the stilted language that then passed for ‘good’ English” (Carp, 162). Later, Pound would write, “That roll saved me at least two years, perhaps more. It sent me back to my own proper effort, namely, toward using the living tongue” (162). From Ford, Pound had received the kind of shock he needed to reconsider his path.

Nevertheless, *Canzoni* contains poems that indicate Pound’s growing awareness that reawakening the dead in the context of modern life might be a good deal more difficult and more fraught with dire urgency than previously supposed. The collection begins with poems like “Canzon: The Yearly Slain” that continue the interest in the survival of pagan ritual in the middle ages: the object of Ford’s hilarity. Yet the
volume’s final sequence of poems, “Und Drang,” suggest a new direct confrontation with the crisis of the modern self, and consequently, a need to break from nineteenth-century poetic diction and pursue more radical forms in the interests of art’s ‘interpretive function.” The poem sequence opens with a speaker exhausted by the possibilities of Nietzschean freedom where being beyond good and evil signifies the Western mind’s erosion of morale:

I am worn faint,
The winds of good and evil
Blind me with dust
And burn me with cold,
There is no comfort being over-man;
Yet are we come more near
The great oblivions and the labouring night,
Inchoate truth and the sepulchral forces. (CP 167-68:1-8)

The speaker’s shift from “I” to “we” clearly turns a personal crisis into a collective one. Faith in the ability to call forth the eternal essence of art and beauty, to become one with the stream of art, is shaken by the betrayals of time and history. The fifth poem represents a stark reversal of confidence in the spirit of romance and anticipates his later approach to modern culture:

How our modernity,
Nerve-wracked and broken, turns
Against time’s way and all the way of things,
Crying weak and egoistic cries!

* * * * *

All things are given over,
Only the restless will
Surges amid the stars
Seeking new moods of life,
New permutations.
See, the very sense of what we know
Dodges and hides as in a sombre curtain
Bright threads leap forth, and hide, and leave no pattern. (CP 169-70:1-12)

Modernity is figured as the enemy of culture itself. Modern civilization “turns/Against
time’s way and all the way of things” leaving “Only the restless will” that seeks the new
sensation. Tradition, “the very sense of what we know,” is reduced to broken threads that
“leave no pattern.” Between the artist and the essence of art stands a modern world
whose civilization has progressively betrayed its own foundations. The technical
prescriptions of Imagism become a means for recovering the very possibility of expressing
not only what has been lost, but of reweaving the fabric of culture itself. The pure flowing
stream of genius has been disastrously blocked and diverted. Pound’s modern poet seeks to
return it to its proper bed. The poet must reassert the rights of the proletariat of speech
through a mastery of all the resources discovered in the history of poetry.

As a result, Pound’s original fascination with poetic technique takes on an even
greater urgency. At the end of 1911 and the beginning of 1912, Pound published a series
of articles in *The New Age*: the important text “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris.” Even
before Ford’s devastating critique, Pound was clearly moving in the novelist’s direction.
He asserts, “As for the arts and their technique—technique is the means of conveying an
exact impression of exactly what one means in such a way as to exhilarate” (SP33). The
idea of rendering an “exact impression” owes not only to Ford, but to Pound’s interest in
Pater. Yet, his interest does not really lie in impressionism, with its commitment to
subjectivism. “As far as the ‘living art’ goes,” he continues, “I should like to break up
cliché, to disintegrate these magnetised groups that stand between the reader of poetry
and the drive of it, to escape from lines composed of two very nearly equal sections, each containing a noun and each noun decorously attended by a carefully selected epithet gleaned, apparently, from Shakespeare, Pope, or Horace. For it is not until poetry lives again ‘close to the thing’ that it will be a vital part of contemporary life” (SP41). This position clearly bears resemblance to Hulme’s assault on cliché and “counter language.” On one level, Pound’s insistence upon a close relationship between word and thing is directed principally towards Hulme’s epistemological critique. As he will write later, “It has to do with maintaining the very matter of thought itself. Save in the rare and limited instances of invention in the plastic arts, or in mathematics, the individual cannot think and communicate his thought, the governor and legislator cannot act effectively or frame his laws, without words, and the solidity and validity of these words is in the care of the damned and despised litterati [sic]. When their work goes rotten—by that I do not mean when they express indecorous thoughts—but when their very medium, the very essence of their work, the application of word to thing goes rotten, i.e. becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive or bloated, the whole machinery of social and of individual thought goes to pot. This is a lesson of history, and a lesson not yet half learned” (LE21). Yet, Pound’s desire to “disintegrate these magnetised groups that stand between the reader of poetry and the drive of it” seeks more than well-oiled social machinery.

Summing up the meaning of “Imagism” in “A Retrospect,” published in 1918, Pound takes the occasion to reaffirm the original formulations he offered in “Some Don’ts by an Imagist” that F. S. Flint published as a mysterious “interview” in 1913.
Indeed, much of “A Retrospect” is composed of earlier articles on Imagism, beginning with his famous trinity of modernist principles:

1. Direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome. (LE3)

As Hugh Kenner notes, this “criteria prescribed a technical hygiene” (PE178). It is this notion of ascēsis in combination with the term “image” that has created the critical assumption that Imagism is defined in terms of the visual. This impression is further heightened by the poems of others, H. D.’s in particular, that Pound himself pronounced to be “Imagiste.”

Indeed, critics like Vincent Sherry have charged that the authoritarian politics Pound embraced is reflected in his abandonment of “vocal affinity” and “musical empathy” for the elitism of visual authority. The problem with such arguments is that they rely upon a reductive reading of Pound’s doctrine. Hugh Kenner rightly observes that “Pound’s Imagism is energy, is effort. It does not appease itself by reproducing what is seen, but by setting some other seen thing into relation” (PE186). The imagist poem is an “activity” that brings past and present together in the interests of the future. As Kenner states, “The action passing through any Imagist poem is a mind’s invisible action discovering what will come next to sustain the presentation—what image, what rhythm, what allusion, what word—to the end that the poem shall be ‘lord over fact,’ not the transcript of one encounter but the Gestalt of many, from the Metro traveler’s to that of Koré in the underworld” (PE 186). Kenner’s reference to the poem as “lord over fact”
comes from Pound’s book on Gaudier-Brzeska, and Pound’s original statement clarifies what kind of “relation” he has in mind: “The statements of ‘analytics’ [Cartesian geometry] are ‘lords’ over fact. They are the thrones and dominations that rule over form and recurrence. And in like manner are great works of art lords over fact, over race-long recurrent moods, and over to-morrow” (GB 91-2). The mathematics of *The Spirit of Romance* has been transformed here from an identity to an analogy. Art is shorn of its mathematical truth; instead, art rules, not some transcendent Platonic reality, but “in like manner” over untidiness of time, history, and “race-long moods.” Such a contention may indeed be authoritarian, but not because of the elite eye.

The image then makes the past a presence. If Pound originally sought a means to be a conduit of the Hellenic spirit in his troubadour-inspired monologues, the retrograde nature of his effort led him to an idea of the image that was both more and less than that of Wilde, Symons, or even Hulme. It was less because it was shorn of the Hulmean “philosophical” ground. It was more than Wilde’s and Symons’ who had deployed images in order to foreground the act of perception itself. While Hulme’s image seeks to foreground the linguistic medium in order to reinvigorate its capacity to connect with both world and experience, Pound’s is shorn of the Hulmean philosophical ground. For Pound, the image had to address precisely the problem of history and culture, but not because it was an image. Pound’s use of “the image” is really meaningless unless it is the use of images. And that use of images depends upon making present that which is both historically absent and also culturally present.
With its dedication to William Carlos Williams and its appendix of “Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme,” Ripostes of 1912 is usually seen as the breakthrough that announces Pound’s modernization. Whatever anticipations there may be in Canzoni for this new direction, the poems of Ripostes clearly show Pound’s poetic practice catching up with his theory. But what has not changed is his commitment to Hellenism as the true spirit of Western culture, available now not simply as nostalgia but as a critique of modernity’s betrayal. “Bright threads leap forth, and hide, leaving no pattern,” “Und Drang” tells us. Romantic Hellenism based upon a living continuity is no longer tenable. But modern Hellenism will reawaken the gods; if it cannot restore the fabric of culture, it can at least revive “the dead art of poetry.” And as the title of the collection indicates, it can offer a riposte to the impoverishment of modern experience.

If Pound’s Imagism is an assertion of the need for discipline and craft, this requires the kind of scholarship that seeks to recover how technique has embodied the essence of Western culture—a scholarship like Pound’s own. “I think the artist should master all known forms of and systems of metric,” Pound writes, “and I have with some persistence set about doing this, searching particularly into those periods wherein the systems came to birth or attained their maturity” (LE 9). [Prolegomena—1912] Indeed, a large number of poems in Ripostes deal directly with Greek themes. Pound experimented, as Victorian and Georgian poets before him, with quantitative meters of antiquity. “Apparuit,” for instance, is written in Sapphics. Yet, this type of Hellenism is not what he sees as its true value. Pound’s experiments along these lines were a stimulus to his desire to break up cliché at the level of syntax as well as phrase. “I think the desire
for ver libre,” he says, “is due to the sense of quantity reasserting itself after years of starvation” (LE12). As he later says, “I think progress lies rather in an attempt to approximate classical quantitative metres (NOT to copy them) than in a carelessness regarding such things” [Eliot dates this statement 20 Aug., 1917]. (LE13). Yeats commented that Pound’s free verse poems seemed “as if he were translating at sight from an unknown Greek masterpiece,” the effect is not due to copying quantitative meters, but to approximating them (PE191). In “The Return,” we can see how this approximation of quantity is combined with the “interpretive function” of the image:

See, they return; ah, see the tentative
    Movements, and the slow feet,
    The trouble in the pace and the uncertain
    Wavering!

See, they return, one, and by one,
With fear, as half-awakened;
As if the snow should hesitate
    And murmur in the wind,
    And half turn back;
These were the “Wing’d-with-Awe,”
    Inviolable.

Gods of the wingèd shoe!
With them the silver hounds,
    Sniffing the trace of air!

Haie! Haie!
    These were the swift to harry;
    These the keen-scented;
    These were the souls of blood.

Slow on the leash,
    Pallid the leash-men! (CEP, 198)
Kenner asserts that the poem “is about the mode of divine apparitions in poetry. Not only the sharp meters but the sharp images, the winged shoe and the silver hounds, belong to their past state” (PE190). Yet, clearly his reading is too formalist here. While he is right to note the poem’s “fragmentary effect” in which we feel “that important syntactic members of this statement have dropped out, as though they have dropped through rents in the ruined papyri of Sappho,” the poem is not restricted to a statement about poetry, nor is it only “the rhythm that defines the meaning” (PE 189-190). While he stresses the temporal shift in the poem—between how the gods were in their predatory splendor as opposed to how they are at their frightened return—Kenner misses the critical leverage Pound is employing against how we are now. All Kenner can make of the final lines is that “though they specify slowness and pallor,” they “are both imagistically sharp and metrically cut” (PE190). The point here is not to cast aspersion on a critic as astute as Kenner, but to show how interpretations of imagism tend to focus too exclusively on technical means rather than on Pound’s ends. It is we, not the gods, who are “Slow on the leash.” We are the pallid “leash-men” in the face of these “souls of blood.” Culture-as-image offers the irruption of past meaning that has the capacity to bring the present-as-history, a product of historical time, to account. His Poem “The Return” figures this issue in exactly the terms that he would enlarge in the Cantos.

The artist is that which flows because what really flows, for the West, is the authentic energy of Hellenic modes of perception, and only by re-appropriating those energies can the disintegration of modern civilization be overcome. Pound’s later interest
in China does not contradict this. The style of cultural thought that he engages in can quite easily accommodate a fascination with an ancient civilization whose spiritual continuity has not been ruptured by the experience of modernity; indeed, assimilating knowledge of the Other is central to grasping the significance of what one’s own culture is. The ideogrammic method is not some superficial interest, but neither is it a full engagement with Chinese civilization (Pound’s Sinology is notoriously flawed). As Kenner puts it, “Its real achievement lay not on the frontier of comparative poetics, but securely within the effort, then going forward in London, to rethink the nature of the English poem” (199). What Pound saw—or thought he saw—in the Chinese written character was an ideal language in which words lay close to things. In this sense, the Greek experience, before its decline into Alexandrian decadence, was made possible by a similar relation between the word and the concrete. Premodern civilizations and societies are important to him because they illuminate what he saw as aesthetic and linguistic universals that become obscured by the overwrought conditions of a civilization in its decadence. For this reason, the relation between words and things is an index of cultural health and vitality. Ancient China not only throws light upon the nature of poetic language but on the fate of Occidental culture and tradition. His other interests in anthropological Others is equally marked by this interest in Western continuity. For instance, his fuller engagement with anthropology under the influence of Leo Frobenius led him to an interest in West African cultures. But it was largely motivated by Frobenius’s assertion that these tribes “had been in contact with the Greek city-states, by Aegean ships on the sea passage past the Pillars of Hercules” (Davie 108). Pound’s
thought is not what we today would term “multicultural”; it is Europe-centered in the literal sense (Davie 108). Pound sought his own version of an authentic culture idea in what Eagleton has termed “good utopia”: discovering “a bridge between the present and the future in those forces within the present which are potentially able to transform [civilization]” (22). Eagleton would be appalled by this; his phrase is meant to indicate a responsible use of the culture idea grounded in Raymond Williams’ thought that rejects the naiveté and nostalgic utopianism of “Ultra-Leftism” (IC 22). Nevertheless, the culture idea has many pitfalls, not the least of which being that the kind of dialectical thought it nurtures can turn reactionary. Recognizing the way that the winds were blowing, Pound would try to make his accommodation with academic legitimacy. Seeking to ally himself with established centers of authority as late as 1914, Pound asserts in his essay “The Renaissance,” “The universities can no longer remain divorced from contemporary intellectual activity. The press cannot longer remain divorced from the vitality and precision of an awakened university scholarship. Art and scholarship need not be wholly at loggerheads” (LE221 Poetry, 1914). Of course, Pound coyly presents the university a backward institution that must join “contemporary intellectual activity”: in other words, join him. Yet, in that same year, he would join Wyndham Lewis in an all-out assault on the institutions of art and criticism. Culture is not in the hands of the professors and institutions but in the hands of artists; they are the true inheritors because their role is not custodial, but productive. True men-of-letters become those who seek a new renaissance in the form of avant-garde confrontation.
Pound’s subsequent career, after the failure of Vorticism, demonstrates the way in which the culture theory can ratify repellent ideologies as much as it can foster cultural understanding. Pound’s unwillingness to modify his earliest convictions about the nature of culture—his commitment to an idealized version of Hellenism—made him particularly blind to the realities of the early twentieth century. His nostalgia for a pure Hellenic consciousness would express itself as the desire for a pure culture. It would be T. S. Eliot who would come to see that the legitimacy of both aspirational and general culture were mutually interdependent. And most importantly, the organic basis of such a culture must lie in something that still functioned as a the structuring principle of a whole way of life.

1 Gross, John. The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters. 7.
2 Holloway, John.
3 Carpenter, Humphery. A Serious Character.
4 Fuller, Torrey. The Roots of Treason. Also see Donald Davie, Ezra Pound, 19. Davie observes, “Faced with the consequences of the Open Door policy on immigration, many relatively long-established American families, especially if they had come down in the world (and Pound’s grandfather had been conspicuously richer and more notable than Pound’s father was), shared […] this suspicion or conviction that Europe in the nineteenth century had unloaded on the United States only her more feckless and rootless and shallow-minded citizens. Because a significant proportion of those immigrants had been Jews from Eastern Europe, one product of this state of feeling was a distinctively American sort of anti-Semitism […]” (19).
6 Graff, Gerald.
8 Wilhelm, James.
9 Rudolphe, Fredrick.
10 Quoted in Wilhelm, p.97.
11 Hamilton was one of the cradles of the fraternity movement that would displace the literary societies that previously had been the center of extracurricular life in the classical college.
Further, the epic interest that would lead him to write the Cantos also has a connection to Ibbotson. The professor had told him of Richard Bentley, an eighteenth century editor of Milton, who had spent forty years working on Paradise Lost. "Ezra seems to have been struck by the remark that the work took Bentley forty years," Carpenter observes. "It sowed the idea of writing an epic poem so huge that it would require a similar time span. In 1936 he offered the Hamilton alumni magazine the suggestion that they ‘might record that the CANTOS started in a talk with ‘BIB,’ and Bib’s remarks on Bentley’s attempt to ‘edit’ Milton.’” Quoted in Carpenter 51.

Herder’s insistence upon the unique value of human collectivities conditioned by the specifics of time and place, of the essential supra-rational nature of human experience and meaning, of the pivotal role of a people’s art and poetry in registering their singular response to the central events of life—all of these served to make culture the rich area of inquiry for nineteenth-century historicism. Of Herder, Hayden White asserts that “His approach to the data [of historical cultures] was that of a pious celebrant of its variety and vitality, and he worked it up in such a way as to make of it a story in which this variety and vitality are stressed rather than explained away” (79). As we have seen, this Providentially ordained diversity was, for Herder, the central fact of human collectivities and the individuals they nurtured. Neither the collective nor the individual was ontologically prior to one another. Rather, White observes, “Both are equally expressive of the spiritual force or power of God, which is ultimately responsible for the integrity of the individual and of the type, and for their harmonization within a larger, cosmic totality over the course of time” (70). As the scene of Herderian Bildung, the culture idea was returned to its agrarian metaphor. “If," White asserts, “[…] the historian detaches Herder’s technique of investigation from the more general spiritualist interests which, in his mind, it was conceived to serve, and makes the simultaneous apprehension of things in their individuality and formal coherence the object of study of the historical field, in such a way as to define a specifically ‘historical’ explanation as a description of the formal coherence displayed by an individuality, whether as a particular or a congeries of particulars, he will write history in a mode which has come to be called ‘historicism’ […]” (74). From this Herderian legacy, hermeneutics and philology would come to dominate the activities of the professional scholar who sought to grasp, if not positivist knowledge of texts and contexts, at least an empiricist understanding of their historicity. [**relate to Geist (and Hulme?)]

Literary Essays.

Quoted in Carpenter p. 47

In a historical examination of the curriculum of Hamilton undertaken in 1940, then-President W. H. Cowley noted the importance of this pressure. Cowley recounts that in 1881, Henry Darling was inaugurated President, and he initiated the first alteration in the curriculum since the founding of the college in 1812. Cowley notes, “Since Harvard and Cornell had, fifteen years previously, adopted the philosophy of the elective system, the Hamilton Faculty followed their example. The Hamilton revision, however, concentrated upon the junior and senior years. It failed to go so far as the reorganized curriculum of Harvard and the curriculum of newly-established Cornell. At these and several other leading institutions the elective system applied in large measure during all four years” (48). Hence, the Hamilton that Pound attended was fighting a rear-guard action against the prevailing winds. Hamilton insisted upon a language-heavy mandatory course of study while expanding the number range of advanced courses for upperclassmen. Yet its goal was always humanistic education that addressed the development of the whole person. As Rudolph observes, “The elective principle was the instrument by which departments of knowledge were built, by which areas of scholarly interest were enlarged, and therefore it was the instrument that enabled colleges to become universities […] It transformed the English college in America
by grafting upon it German ideals and in the process created the American university” (305), and he notes that “Rutgers with twenty-four required courses in its B. A. program was the least elective, and in close running were Williams, Hamilton, and Union” (302).


19 See Carpenter p.67

20 The great Sages of the nineteenth century launched their assault against the materialist culture of the age, confident that they were on the side of an art and beauty with which they could confront the ugliness and spiritual poverty of modern life. Arnold’s “Hellenism” or Ruskin’s valorization of the medieval craftsman never precluded their appreciation of the advanced artists and writers of their day. In this, criticism, still tied to popular journalism, possessed large areas of ideological agreement with romantic artists and the public that appreciated them. Unlike his Victorian predecessors, Pound found himself turning his critical energy against the art of his own time. Though his critical categories rely upon the historical and aesthetic traditions of humanism—the reading of culture in terms of universal values—in an attempt to explain the spirit of romance to his readership, he also plays off of the Herderian ethnic culture ideal that is latent in those traditions. At this stage in his thinking, however, the tension between scholarship and manifesto creates some strange results that help us understand the barriers he faced in modernizing his own poetry.


22 Eagleton makes a distinction between what he calls “good” and “bad” utopian thinking. “Bad “ utopia is his label for an “infantile disorder known as ultra-leftism, which negates the present in the name of some inconceivably alternative future” (22). “ ‘Good’ utopia,” he argues, “[…] finds a bridge between present and future in those forces within the present which are potentially able to transform it” (22). Clearly “good utopia” is his formula for responsible marxist use of the culture idea. Yet the fact that Pound’s culture idea can respond to this definition—more ironically so given Pound’s reactionary version of anti-capitalism—suggests that way in which definitions of “culture” have a tendency to double back upon themselves politically.

23 In Ezra Pound, Popular Genres, and the Discourse of Culture, Michael Coyle connects Pound’s assertion of “cultural integrity” with the tradition that emerges from John Ruskin, and no doubt, this is partly so. Yet, the problem with such attributions lies in the way critics—and Coyle is in good company here—restrict influence to the field of specifically literary discourse. Pound’s understanding of the literary, even at this early point, always assumes that it is a privileged and prior spiritual understanding that culture successfully or unsuccessfully comes to embody.

24 While Pound’s position seems to anticipate Eliot’s “tradition,” it remains committed to an idealist position that contrasts sharply with Eliot’s cultural historicism.

25 Louis L. Martz observes that these poems “move through a series of masks that seem to reflect the various aspects of Pound’s early poetical experience” (CP xvii). The justice of such a claim depends upon what is meant by “poetical experience.” Certainly little of Pound’s early published poetry prepares us for so direct a confrontation with the cultural impasse of the early twentieth century. If we see the sequence as a series of masks, it is difficult not to see such masks as a means of confession.

26 Pound’s explanation of the origins of the “movement” and the term would become part of modernist myth. In a letter dated 17 September, 1915 asserts that “the whole affair was started not very seriously chiefly to get H. D.’s five poems a hearing without its being necessary for her to publish a whole book. It began certainly in Church Walk with H. D. Richard and myself” (PE177). Hence, Pound’s “invention” of Imagism is often regarded as a publicity stunt designed to create the illusion of an avant-garde movement
taking literary London by storm. Whatever the motivation for the naming of Imagism, Pound’s exposition of Imagist principles was more than an ad hoc justification for the poems of Aldington and H.D. that he sent to Marianne Moore. Rather, his championing of their poetry was based upon the fact that they could be explained upon grounds that Pound had been thinking through since Ford’s roll on the carpet. As Kenner observes, what Pound had been developing was a good deal more than *ut pictura poesis*.

27 In *Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and Radical Modernism*, Vincent Sherry analyzes Pound’s poetics in terms of the European political discourse that developed out of the nineteenth century. Sherry notes, “In the continental understanding, after all, the eye serves the interests of the elite, detached discrimination or a collectivized, engaged sensation. Whereas for Benda and Gourmont eyesight defies the happy sympathy between sound and auditor, for Sorrel and LeBon it opens into the most direct sort of sensual excitement and so provides the language of mob bonding and crowd excitement. Yet, what eludes Sherry’s analysis is the way in which shifting institutional assumptions had repositioned the idea of the individual and the collective. For Sherry, the key year for Pound—1912—in which Imagism comes to occupy Pound’s mind after Ford’s roll on the carpet, is also the point in which he abandon’s “musical empathy” as the basis of his poetics: “The change Pound underwent to move from his ‘early’ aesthetic posture to his ‘later’ political position should not be reckoned [...] as a shift from a pristine imagism to an unrelated, latter-day authoritarianism. We must account instead for his movement away from his first *vocal* affinity [...] to the authority of visual Imagism [...]” (48). Sherry locates this change in Pound’s encounter with the essays of Rémy de Gourmont. Yet Sherry’s argument is partly indebted to the widespread assumption that the doctrine of Imagism depends upon the composition of word-pictures and a devotion to presentation of the visible. Most importantly, it remains to be seen whether a “vocal affinity”—whether it belongs to a poet making treasonous broadcast, or a Duce—is really less authoritarian.
CHAPTER 8.

T. S. ELIOT: PERVERGILIIUM OF CIVILIZATION

8.1 Reconsiderations

As I have noted earlier, T. S. Eliot’s reputation, especially in its political and social dimensions, determined increasingly the way in which English modernism was, and is, received. That Eliot himself struggled to make this so sanctions, it seems, this identification. Having learned from Ezra Pound what can only be called “publicity,” he spent decades domesticating those strategies to create the kind of intellectual world he needed, artistically and personally: That this world bore more resemblance to the one of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ware Eliot, however, is an irony that must wait. Literary history, at present, tends to remember the poet of “The Waste Land,” the Anglo-Catholic, and the enthusiast of Charles Maurras and l’Action Française. We tend to read his earlier career in light of these interests, searching for the Christian royalist in the March Hare. Yet, the Eliot of the inter-war period was remaking himself. Certainly, the Eliot of the thirties and forties—a period in which his political and religious concerns gained ascendance over his literary ones—became the very image of the modern man-of-letters. Though he sometimes didn’t realize it, the modernism he had envisioned had won. After World War Two, Eliot had attained something of the status of a sage. The Christian society may not have appeared in the post-war world, but the idea of it certainly intrigued many of his
contemporaries. And, though it ended in 1939, the ideal of intelligence, authority and a correct standard of taste had been made flesh in the pages of *The Criterion*.

Hence, it can hardly surprise that the values of Eliot’s period of dominance in Anglo-American letters shaped and, in some ways, determined how modernism as a whole was to be assessed. No less astute an observer than Michael Levenson argues for an image of “Eliot wilfully merging into his surroundings, no longer easily distinguishable from the established literary order, and modernism having thus won a place within that order” (220).¹ Levenson is, of course, right. At least he is right concerning the broader outlines of modernism in the period his study covers: 1909-1922. Levenson’s genealogy, as I noted earlier, has taught us to be alive to the shifting theoretical and ideological grounds of emerging modernism. Nevertheless, the story he tells reinforces the public identity modernism, under Eliot’s guidance, achieved as it became institutionalized. Given the limits of what Levenson sets out to do, one can hardly complain. Yet, however much he came to embody the triumph of a style, sensibility, and idea, Eliot himself was never so self-assured about what the movement had become. Even the post-conversion Eliot—one is tempted to say especially him—never was able to still doubt about his achievement: doubt about his literary legacy, his social vision, and even the viability of Christianity. During his formative years—the period that culminated in *The Waste Land*—he presented a very different figure and held very different ideas than those he would come to defend in *The Criterion* and elsewhere. Eliot’s confrontation with the culture thesis and classical aesthetics is the most sustained and complex of the modernists I have discussed. To see the trajectory of his intellectual
and artistic crises throughout his career is to recover some sense of his continuing relevance to us. Thus, Eliot is a symbol of a particular stance modernism adopts. Yet, that stance is imperfectly understood. The result is a story of moderns “right” and “left.” Yet, we, as post-Eliot observers, often find it difficult to understand that “right” and “left” can change places. As a symbol of an authoritarian or reactionary modernism, Eliot might still be of interest as a representative of what needs to be transcended. Yet, it may be that he himself had already gone some way toward such transcendence. To recognize this is to find, as is so often the case, that Eliot anticipates the problems we find ourselves confronting, and in the terms with which we confront them: justifying literature in a capitalist society, confronting the relation of mass culture to high culture, and the making of moral value (in the widest sense) in a post-Christian, or post-religious world. As Eliot himself might have it, this is to be aware “not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.”

8.2 Brahmins and Marionettes: Class and Sensibility

The writers of the past, especially of the immediate past, in one’s own place and language may be valuable to the young writer simply as something definite to rebel against. He will recognize the common ancestry: but he needn’t like his relatives.—T. S. Eliot, “American Literature and Language”

The trajectory I want to trace begins not simply in a place, but in a setting. The place, St. Louis, Missouri, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, has been well documented by others. Recently, Robert Crawford has uncovered specific material from Eliot’s childhood that throws a great deal of light on the sources for specific images, lines, and characters (especially Sweeney) that recur in the later poetry. Late in life,
Eliot himself paid tribute to the role of St. Louis in his development: “And I feel that there is something in having passed one’s childhood beside the big river, which is incommunicable to those who have not. Of course my people were Northerners and New Englanders, and of course I have spent many years out of America altogether; but Missouri and the Mississippi have made a deeper impression on me than any other part of the world.” Crawford has noted that one consequence of Eliot’s childhood in St. Louis was to instill a sense of living on the frontier between civilization and savagery: “Eliot’s Wild West [began] specifically at Forest Park on the western, genteel side of town, and it demonstrates how physically, in the poet’s early environment, city and savage were inextricably bound together”(14). Yet, the perceptiveness of Crawford’s identification of savagery as a central concern in Eliot’s poetry must wait; rather, we must concern ourselves with the “genteel side” of Eliot’s “Northerners and New Englanders.”

However important the place of Eliot’s childhood is, the setting within the Anglo-Saxon, and especially Unitarian, upper middle class has vital importance for understanding Eliot’s developing poetics. His grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, a Unitarian Minister, graduated from Harvard Divinity and became a founder of Washington University in St. Louis. His father, Henry Ware Eliot, as Roger Kojecky puts it, “had chosen a business career in preference to a ministerial vocation in the Unitarian Church, a vocation which beckoned all the sons of William Greenleaf Eliot”; yet despite his involvement in commerce, he “loved to fill his house with paintings, played an active part in the St. Louis Philharmonic and Choral Societies, and served on the governing board of Washington University [. . .]” (35). His Mother, Charlotte
Champe Eliot, pursued poetry, writing a long dramatic poem, *Savonarola*, and
publishing a *Life of William Greenleaf Eliot* in 1904 (Eliot thought enough of his mother’s
dramatic poem to publish it in 1926). She also fought for juvenile law reform and was a
member of the Humanity Club and the Wednesday Club—two liberal women’s groups.5

The cultural style of the Protestant elites, as is often noted, adopted much of the
British aristocratic obsession with genealogy. Eliot’s mother traced her ancestry to the
first settlers in the Bay Colony, and his father’s family claimed Sir Thomas Elyot, the
sixteenth-century English humanist whose writings would be exploited by Eliot in *East
Coker*. The first of his father’s ancestors in America, Andrew Eliot, emigrated to the
Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1688 from the village of East Coker after the end of the
Puritan Commonwealth. Eliot’s grandfather, Reverend Greenleaf Eliot, left Boston in
1834 to found a Unitarian Church in St. Louis. Yet, as Eliot later reflected, “The family
guarded jealously its connections with New England; but it was not until years of
maturity that I perceived that I myself had always been a New Englander in the South
West, and a South Westerner in New England.”6 Though Eliot would attend the
preparatory school of Washington University, Smith Academy, followed by a year at
Milton Academy, he was sent to Harvard to establish, beyond reproach, his New England
credentials, arriving there in 1909, the year Charles William Eliot, a cousin, resigned the
presidency of that institution.7

To ask to what extent such a setting and background embodies the values of a
“class” may seem to beg the question. Certainly, the class concept describes and
determines the “social terrain,” as it were, in which families like the Eliots moved. Their
horizon of values and aspirations were decisively shaped by the assumptions of the late
nineteenth-century Protestant establishment. Nevertheless, the kind of cultural style the
Eliots represented is not identical at all points with those of the ruling elites. Indeed,
sensitivity to differences, both overt and subtle, with the orthodox creeds of the ruling
classes is central to the “elevated” aspirational style that formed the milieu of these
families. Max Weber defines “class” in terms of “economically determined power,” in
which wealth and opportunity create a convergence of interests. Such a group, in his
view, cannot be seen as a community. Rather, communities emerge in what he calls
“status groups”: “In contrast to the purely economically determined ‘class situation’ we
wish to designate as ‘status situation’ every typical component of the life fate of men that is
determined by specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honor. This honor may be
connected with any quality shared by a plurality, and, of course, it can be knit to a class
situation: class distinctions are linked in the most varied ways with status distinctions.”

Weber also stresses that such status groups can cut across class lines. That
clergymen and university professors have, or had, social status above their economic
class famously exemplifies this. “In content,” Weber tells us, “status honor is normally
expressed by the fact that above all else a specific style of life can be expected from all
those who wish to belong to the circle” (187). Hence a status group forms itself around a
particular style that is defined in terms of “status honor”: a shared valuation of what
should be esteemed. Nevertheless, Weber argues, the theoretical openness of status
groups tends, over time, to become limited, or even closed as restrictions on social
intercourse and expectations of endogamous marriage prevail. Such stratification, once its restrictions become hardened, can develop into a “caste.”

Obviously, this term describes the Boston Brahmin. As Alex Zwerdling puts it, “The Harvard-educated Boston Brahmin culture . . . prides itself on its colonial ancestry, its hereditary castelike status, its civic-mindedness. It is often described as America’s untitled aristocracy, its achievements multigenerational, its marital patterns endogamous.” Zwerdling’s interest is in examining the xenophobic consequences of the Brahmin’s keenly felt exclusivity in the context of a supposed American egalitarianism. Indeed, Weber notes a similar class tension in the American patriciate, in which the socially superior “gentleman” must treat his inferiors with deference in non-business contexts. He notes that “This ‘equality’ of social esteem may, however, in the long run become quite precarious” (187). Thus the hardening of a status group into a caste is, in part, a defensive measure to ensure social superiority.

Hence, the Eliots’ “jealous” guarding of their New England roots is, on one level, hardly surprising. Yet, Weber’s analysis of the distinction between “class” and “status” allows us to see a more subtle, yet crucial, distinction: the honor that creates a status group can conflict with class interests. It is all too easy to mistake T. S. Eliot’s early questioning of the values of his family as simply a recoil against the narrow philistinism of his class, or as a rejection of its dilettante attitudes toward high culture. Yet, his anxiety was directed against, not his class affiliations (this went without saying), but the values out of which the status of his family was built. The style of life that his family
embodied was itself a rejection of narrow philistine materialism and the notion that culture is simply a social adornment. In short, the Eliots were bearers of high culture in the face of its devaluation by the forces of mass society and industry.

I have already discussed in some detail the humanistic ideal of culture in Chapter Two. Yet, the particularities of the American context need to be examined. Those members of the Protestant establishment who aspired to the task of making a high culture ideal prevail in America did so by linking taste and education to a specific moral outlook and a sense of public duty. Culture and taste, like religion, were marshaled against the growing wealth and self-interest of capital. This was a struggle over status within the patrician classes. Speaking before Washington University in St. Louis on “American Literature and the American Language,” Eliot remembered the role of his grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, in establishing the aspirations and duties that cultural privilege bestowed. Like Moses, he says, his grandfather seemed to have brought down the Tablets of the Law from on high. Such a Law-Giver, as Eliot noted in this 1953 address, embodied the particular style of American liberal high culture values:

[The] original Law of Public Service operated especially in three areas: the Church, the City, and the University. The Church meant, for us, the Unitarian Church of the Messiah, then situated in Locust Street, a few blocks west of my father’s house; the City was St. Louis—the utmost outskirts of which touched on Forest Park, terminus of the Olive Street, and to me, as a child, the beginning of the Wild West; the University was Washington University, then housed in a modest building in lower Washington Avenue. These were the symbols of Religion, the Community and Education; and I think it is a very good beginning for any child, to be brought up to reverence such institutions, and to be taught that personal and selfish aims should be subordinated to the general good which they represent.10
Eliot is being revisionist. Here, he asserts the value of such a beginning, but his youth and early adulthood represented an attempt to escape such duties. If, as he notes, “any deviation” from these principles “would be sinful,” Eliot himself would become something of an apostate.

But why? Eliot, in his mature years, would enshrine many of these aspirations in his *The Idea of a Christian Society*. We might be tempted to see this as merely the time-worn story of a man returning to the values he rejected as a youth. There may be some truth in this explanation, as there always is. Yet, the question needs to be framed another way: why, at the moment of its greatest ascendancy, did the WASP patriciate fail to establish a high culture ideal, on the European model, in America?

The answer to this question gets us closer to understanding Eliot’s early career and his subsequent shaping of Anglo-American modernism. To see how, we need to recall the problem of authority and its legitimation I have discussed earlier. Speaking of Weber’s “traditional” legitimacy, Mark Conroy argues for a distinction between “legitimacy” and “legitimation”: “Legitimacy may be said to refer to the posited source of value that renders power as authority. But legitimation is the act or rather the ongoing process of positing that value: the struggle to associate the source of authority with the thing to be authorized.”¹¹ The source itself, as Conroy notes, is usually one that is already established. As Weber argues such pre-established sources are experienced as sacred ones: “Patriarchalism is by far the most important type of domination the legitimacy of which rests upon tradition [. . . .] It is characteristic of patriarchal and patrimonial authority, which represents a variety of the former, that the system of
inviolable norms is considered sacred; an infraction of them would result in magical or religious evils” (296). That Eliot’s family conflated patriarchal authority with the sacred almost goes without saying. But what if God, if He has not disappeared, has at least become a little faded?

In a letter to his mother in 1919, Eliot writes, “I am writing now about a cousin of ours, who has written a very interesting book which you would like to read: The Education of Henry Adams.” Adams’ autobiography offers the kind of embodiment and critical examination of the New England Brahmin style that Eliot, outside of the poetry itself, rarely presents. Eliot’s review in The Athenaeum, “The Skeptical Patrician,” sees Adams as a representative type. In a letter to John Quinn, he says, “I wonder what American opinion would think of my article on Adams, but it is a type that I ought to know better than any other.” That The Education would interest Eliot is hardly surprising. Adams describes precisely the kind of consciousness that Eliot knew: “The habit of doubt; of distrusting his own judgement and of totally rejecting the judgement of the world; the tendency to regard every question as open; the hesitation to act except as a choice of evils; the shirking of responsibility; the love of line, form, quality; the horror of ennui; the passion for companionship and the antipathy to society—all these are well-known qualities of New England character in no way particular to individuals [. . .].” Though Adams would see himself as a “variation” of the “type,” such character was, in his view, fated. Yet, Adams finds that what fails him is not his character, but his education, “the result of that
eighteenth-century inheritance which he took with his name” (7). Eliot would finally make a similar judgment about himself: not the failure of legacy, of a political ideal, but of Unitarian moral and intellectual style that Adams also embodied.

That style Adams describes with characteristic acidity and wit: “Nothing quieted doubt so completely as the mental calm of the Unitarian clergy. In uniform excellence of life and character, moral and intellectual, the score of Unitarian clergymen about Boston, who controlled society and Harvard College, were never excelled. They proclaimed as their merit that they insisted on no doctrine, but taught, or tried to teach, the means of leading a virtuous, useful, unselfish life, which they held to be sufficient for salvation. For them, difficulties might be ignored; doubts were a waste of thought; nothing exacted solution. Boston had solved the universe [. . .]” (34). Yet, as Adams finds later, Boston’s achievement had, in the end, simply come to nothing. The indistinct appeal to a feeling that some God exists, that belief that this feeling is necessary for a good society, is revealed to be simply powerless in the face of the dynamo of modern life. Adams himself is perplexed by the way in which such pieties could disappear: “Of all the conditions of his youth which afterwards puzzled the grown-up man, this disappearance of religion puzzled him most [. . .] he went through all the forms; but neither to him nor to his brothers or sisters was religion real [. . .] The religious instinct had vanished, and could not be revived, although one made in later life many efforts to recover it” (34).

Yet, the decisive shift in post-Civil War America was the realignment of political power with economic forces rather than cultural ones. Indeed, this development is the linchpin of Adam’s critique of his own education. Like the European aristocrat, “He had
hugged his antiquated dislike of bankers and capitalistic society until he had become little better than a crank. He had known for years that he must accept the regime, but he had known a great many other disagreeable certainties—like age, senility, and death—against which one made what little resistance one could”(344). The futility of such resistance is indicated by E. Digby Baltzell in the Protestant Establishment: “During this same period [1870-1900], wealth became increasingly centralized in the hands of a few. In 1891, Forum magazine published an article, ‘The Coming Billionaire,’ which estimated that there were 120 men in the nation worth over $10 million. The next year, the New York Times published a list of 4,047 millionaires, and the Census Bureau estimated that 9 per cent of the nation’s families owned 71 per cent of the wealth. By 1910 there were more millionaires in the United States Senate alone than there were in the whole nation before the Civil War” (110).15 One of the results of this unprecedented concentration of wealth and power was Midwestern Populism, nativism, and anti-Semitism, the last two playing a prominent role in Adam’s own response. Yet, this hostility often transcended today’s class and ideological associations. Baltzell notes that “both Midwestern Populism and the Eastern, patrician-led Progressive movement were part of the general protest and were, in turn, infused with varying degrees of nativism; and even organized labor, many of whose members were of recent immigrant origin, was by no means devoid of nativist sentiment” (111). Baltzell goes on to describe the way in which anxiety over the new accumulation of capital found expression in an increase in anti-Semitism and engendered a new WASP exclusivity in the club, the resort, and the newly emerging suburb. Whereas Jews were largely assimilated into the elite in Colonial
and antebellum America, with a number of ‘blue-stocking” families counting Jews among their ancestors, the new prominence of capital brought forth all the old religious bigotry even if religion itself had ceased to be the prime mover. What had once need of religious sanction now found its sustenance in cultural terms. Adams’ xenophobia, and that of his “silver” friends, was an instinctual, if vile, response to the rapidity of the change that made his class irrelevant: “In 1893, the issue came on the single gold standard, and the majority at last declared itself, once for all, in favor of the capitalistic system with its with all its necessary machinery. All one’s friends, all one’s best citizens, reformers, churches, colleges, educated classes, had joined the banks to force submission to capitalism; a submission long foreseen by the mere law of mass” (344).

What seems to have amazed him in retrospect was the ease with which aspirational culture simply evaporated as the motivating force of American elites: “Such great revolutions commonly leave some bitterness behind, but nothing in politics ever surprised Henry Adams more than the ease with which he and his silver friends slipped across the chasm, and alighted on the single gold standard and the capitalistic system with its methods; the protective tariff; the corporations and trusts; the trades-unions and socialistic paternalism which necessarily made their complement; the whole mechanical consolidation of force, which ruthlessly stamped out the life of the class into which Adams was born, but created monopolies capable of controlling the new energies that America adored” (344-45). If Eliot found that he, above all, could understand Adams, he did so from a slightly different position. His family stubbornly held to the old forms, the old duties. They remained in their house long after most of their peers had moved to the
western suburbs of St. Louis. Despite their mercantile connections, they held fast to aesthetic and moral sensibilities of the “Law of Public Service.” Like Adams, Eliot himself was in a unique position to experience the glaring contradictions in his own education. Yet, as he prepared to go to Harvard, those contradictions seemed to lie not simply between his family’s values and those of the larger society, but rather within the version of culture that his family upheld. Rather than holding fast to nativist bitterness, Eliot would cast a sardonic eye towards his own upbringing.

8.3 The Education of T. S. Eliot

At Harvard, Eliot would struggle to make a break with what his family came to symbolize for him. The Harvard to which he arrived in 1906 was an institution still marked by the transition set in motion by Charles William Eliot that turned Harvard College into Harvard University. T. S. Eliot’s eminent relative, who had retired from the presidency just prior to the young undergraduate’s arrival, had accomplished a revolution analogous in spirit but greater in scope than that launched by Jowett at Oxford. And the success of the university movement registers the extent to which America’s own nationalization of culture proceeded. For over half a century, it had become clear that some sort of reform of higher education was needed. The old American college, still rooted in the colonial experience, had reshaped its mission according to the needs of the new nation. Its self-proclaimed purpose was the engendering of civic virtue. “The goal,” Lawrence Cremin observes, “was nothing less than a new republican individual, of virtuous character, abiding patriotism, and prudent wisdom, fashioned by education into
an independent yet loyal citizen.”16 Yet, the original purposes of the old college were tied to the dual religious role of training Christian gentlemen and producing clergy for the respective churches that had established them: a function too narrow for the needs of the fledgling republic. The need for some reform became increasingly clear. Yale launched one of the first efforts to enlarge curriculum along more humanistic lines. The Yale Report of 1828 proclaimed, “The two great points to be gained in intellectual culture, are the discipline and the furniture of the mind; expanding its powers, and storing it with knowledge.”17 The Report became a model for similar efforts at other institutions. The goal, as Cremin notes, was “to help define an American paideia and teach it to a polyglot population spread across a continent. Yet that paideia was variously perceived and applied by different segments of the country” (507). Yet the Yale report also sternly cautioned, “We hope at least, that this college may be spared the mortification of a ludicrous attempt to imitate . . . [the German universities], while it is unprovided with the resources necessary to execute its purpose” (135). Yet, by the eighteen-fifties, even this moderate reform seemed inadequate to many observers as the country faced ever more rapid industrialization. As Fredrick Rudolf states, “Whether higher education in the United States was going to serve the people was one question; whether it was going to serve learning was another….The old-time college had been willing to serve both, but on its terms, which meant that the people must take from the colleges what the colleges had decided was good for the people and that learning must not interfere with the colleges’ commitment to character” (221).18 If the American people had a manifest destiny to conquer a continent, it seemed to proponents of the liberal arts college that educators had
a duty to civilize a populace. Something of the Arnoldian culture idea lay behind this project. Rudolf observes, “Some advocates of the free elementary public school movement argued that schools would tame the masses. Yale now proposed to use the classical curriculum and the colleges to tame the millionaires” (133-4). In time, as Henry Adams discovered by the end of the century, the millionaires would tame the humanists.

The rise of the university movement and the elective system at Harvard with its attendant shunting aside of the humanities from pride-of-place and the elevation of the sciences and professional schools fostered the atmosphere in which the notion of culture would be transformed. “It surely underwrote,” Rudolf states, “a good deal of the motivation problem in the American college and university by encouraging the notion that one subject was no more important than another and by making it possible for the nonserious student to find an easy berth. Too, it became the instrument but not the cause for the ushering out of American experience the acquaintance with the classics which for centuries had been the mark of an educated man” (306). Eliot often voiced his own perplexity over the elective system. His own more rigorous classical training would be finished during a year at Merton College, Oxford as he prepared to write his doctoral thesis. Yet, the shift of the institutional categories that the term culture was undergoing is readily apparent in the intellectual climate of his undergraduate training. Rather than immediately looking to explicitly anthropological concepts that Eliot encountered, an examination of more humanistic notions—namely the aesthetic—reveals the way in which art and literature were being reconceived. Though George Santayana had left Harvard just before Eliot arrived, his former presence was still keenly felt.
The Sense of Beauty, occupies an ambiguous position in the development of Eliot’s aesthetic ideas. Based upon Santayana’s Harvard lectures, the book seeks to offer a post-Kantian theory of beauty that at first blush appears similar to Pater’s. Both offer subjectivism as the ground of aesthetics, and both see pleasure as its aim and justification. In short, like Pater, Santayana draws a distinction between morality and aesthetics. In particular, his target is Kant’s claim that a judgment of beauty is, by definition, universal. Even though Kant stressed the psychological, the subjective, grounds of aesthetic judgment, his attempt to link the aesthetic sense to the moral one by asserting the universality of such judgments reopens the very objective definition of the beautiful that he seeks to overcome. For Santayana, such an assertion is a “natural inaccuracy” which is rooted in misattribution of the quality of beauty to object itself rather than the mind of the beholder. His insistence upon the subjectivity of beauty—a psychological capacity or faculty—would seem to place Santayana in the familiar company of other fin-de-siecle figures.

Yet Santayana sees individual culture as the key element in the perception of beauty, and here, he owes much to Arnold: “What is loosely expressed by saying that any one ought to see this or that beauty is that he would see it if his disposition, training, or attention were what our ideal demands for him; and our ideal of what any one should be has complex but discoverable sources” (27). Those sources end up being based upon a the Kantian error of universality in matters of aesthetic judgement. Our human intuition that an object possesses beauty is actually rooted in savage superstition: “It is the survival of a tendency originally universal to make every effect of a thing upon us constituent of its conceived nature”(30). As a result, Kant’s Critique of Judgment, Santayana implies,
far from being an expression of modern enlightened thought instead reinscribes primitive superstition in the heart of aesthetic philosophy. This error is part of our animalistic nature: “The right and tendency to be objective is equal in all, since they are all prior to the artifice of thought by which we separate the concept from its materials, the thing from our experiences” (30).

Yet Santayana’s master-stroke is to insist that this error cannot be avoided in our experience of the beautiful. Furthermore, philosophical analysis of the sense of beauty cannot simply set out to correct this error. Rather, it must incorporate this psychological fact into its analysis. Santayana’s point of departure is primitive consciousness: “One of the first classes of effects to be treated as secondary were naturally pleasures and pains, since it could commonly conduce very little to intelligent and successful action to conceive our pleasures and pains as resident in objects. But emotions are essentially capable of objectification, as well as impressions of sense; and one may well believe that a primitive and inexperienced consciousness would rather people the world with ghosts of its own terrors and passions than with projections of those luminous and mathematical concepts which as yet it could hardly have formed […] This animistic and mythological habit of thought still holds its own at the confines of knowledge, where mechanical explanations are not found” (30). Hence, Santayana can conclude that “Beauty is a pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing” (31). Yet, this formulation has already gone a long way toward displacing the humanistic aesthetic grounded in determinate judgments
of consciousness. Moreover, this persistent “habit of thought” links the most primitive human impulses to what traditionally had been regarded as a disinterested act of the sophisticated civilized mind.

Avoiding a celebration of the solipsistic aestheticism of a thinker like Walter Pater, Santayana develops a subjectivist account of the experience of beauty that describes the way in which a psychological event is attributed as a quality of its objective cause: “the pleasures of sense are distinguished from perception of beauty, as sensation in general is distinguished from perception; by the objectification of the elements and their appearance as qualities rather of things than of consciousness” (32). The debt to Kant is clear, if somewhat repositioned.

Hence, for Santayana, “beauty is the co-operation of pleasures” (33), and the result of this concert of the pleasurable is a projection of mental state on to an object: “Thus beauty is constituted by the objectification of pleasure. It is pleasure objectified” (33). Two of Eliot’s more famous “doctrines”—if they can be called such—find part of their inspiration in Santayana’s ideas. Yet, crucially, Eliot transforms “pleasure” into “emotion” (which we may “enjoy” nevertheless), and he limits Santayana’s “co-operation,” not to a general sense of beauty, but to an experience of art in particular. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” he asserts, “The experience, you will notice, the elements which enter the presence of the transforming catalyst, are of two kinds: emotions and feelings. The effect of a work of art upon the person who enjoys it is an experience different in kind from any experience not of art. It may be formed out of one emotion, or may be a combination of several; and various feelings, inhering for the writer
in particular words or phrases or images, may be added to compose the final result.”

“Feelings” within the writer, Eliot maintains, are worked up into combinatorial effects that produce “significant emotion.” And the writer does this by reversing the causal chain of Santayana’s conception. Though his formulation of this idea is so famous as to hardly bear quotation, it is still useful to examine it in the present context: “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.” Thus Eliot reworks Santayana’s categories into a theory of poetic creation rather than one of taste. If Santayana saw this process of objectification as a primitive survival of animistic consciousness, Eliot would find this association congenial to his developing understanding of art and anthropological culture. Where Santayana simply acknowledges this process of objectification as an integral part of the experience of beauty, but not the philosophical analysis of it, Eliot finds this primitivism central to artistic consciousness, even its salvation. As he states in “Tradition,” “the poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways” (56). Eliot’s poetics of impersonality would become, of course, a major justification for modernism own version of Aestheticism and the Formalist criticism that would later interpret it. Walter Pater’s insistence that “[w]hat modern art has to do is in the service of culture is so to rearrange the details of modern life, so to reflect it, that it may satisfy the spirit”
which desires a “sense of freedom” is strangely repositioned. Pater’s artist expresses
temperament in aesthetic form, which is most often presented as a relief from our sense
of mortality: a relief that the impressionistic critic recovers through a capacity to be
“deeply moved by beautiful objects” (xxx). Eliot’s continuous excoriation of Pater
suggests his own Bloomian anxiety of influence as he works over the same categories.
Eliot shares with Pater a horror of abstraction and a focus upon “the moment,” which he
casts, following F. H. Bradley, as “immediate experience.” Yet, such a consciousness
does not lead to burning with a hard gem-like flame. “Poetry,” he famously states, “is
not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of
personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have
personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.”

Eliot would come to be repelled by Santayana’s materialism and his sense of
religion as an instinctual response to the mystery of existence as well as his Arnoldian
view that Christianity is poetic metaphor. Nevertheless, Eliot’s aesthetics precisely
capture the tone of Harvard thought as much as his reading of Pater covers over his own
commitment to a decadent diagnosis of modern society. This diagnosis depends upon
seeing self-consciousness itself as a mark of decline. To want to escape personality and
emotions, marshaled by modernists like Eliot in the service of critical intelligence and
classical form, is ironically grounded in the desire for a primitive immediacy so clearly
expressed in Eliot’s notion of the “dissociation of sensibility.”
8.4 Pervigilium of T. S. Eliot

Eliot’s Graduate work at a Harvard still informed by the spirit of Santayana and William James had exposed him to the philosophical problem of consciousness through the teaching of Josiaiah Royce and J. H. Woods, as well as Sanskrit and Indian philosophy. The doctoral thesis on F. H. Bradley has been seen as a vital element in his developing aesthetics, and so it is, though not in the way usually supposed. As A. David Moody observes, “in philosophy as he practised it the mind finds no objects of knowledge. Real knowledge is in immediate experience. Philosophy is but a training of the mind for the criticism of its experience” (7). The self-reflexive nature of modern consciousness, for Eliot, emerges in the confrontation with time expressed in terms of the present awareness of history and the future. The present, that slippery stream of perception that seems to disappear even as we try to grasp it, leaves consciousness with the experience of memory and the anticipation of the future. Eliot first interpreted this in terms of the pre-Socratics, in particular Heraclitus. Conceived as such, consciousness is a prison. But as much as the ancient philosophical paradoxes of Being and Becoming, like his struggle with F.H. Bradley’s Absolute, lie behind such sense of entrapment, the ironies of linear time would become more acute for Eliot.

His early poetry would often pursue the presentation of such a tortured consciousness. Santayana’s projection of emotion on to an object is one way Eliot the poet would find to structure meaning out of experience: words used to evoke feelings that are worked up into “significant emotion.” But a poetry made out of the objects of immediate experience would, paradoxically, miss part of experience itself. Objects of
consciousness, philosophically speaking, include other consciousnesses. Such others can be objectified, as in Eliot’s early poetry, but the problem of aesthetic objectification clearly transcends epistemology and metaphysics. Eliot’s thesis advisor, James H. Woods, offered Eliot another way of thinking about the objectification of emotion. As Crawford notes, “Woods’s Practice and Science of Religion contained chapters on ‘Primitive Beliefs,’ ‘Mystical Ideals,’ and ‘Levels of Religion.’ In it Eliot came across ideas that would be of crucial importance to his own work. One of these, to which he would return many times, dealt with the development of drama and its relations with primitive ritual. Woods had related dramatic forms to those of primitive religion and had written that ‘the god is alive, as alive as Hamlet, alive with the beliefs of his worshipers. So the concept of the god also consists of objectified feelings.’ In 1919 Eliot was writing in his own essay, ‘Hamlet,’ of the ‘objective correlative’ necessary to all art. His literary theory was drawing on his anthropological reading.”

Though anthropological concepts of culture were in the Cambridge air, Eliot’s early poetry reads custom and social forms as artifice and an almost intolerable burden. In this, he was responding to the sense of fading aspiration of the Wasp that permeated his family. This sensibility was nourished by his reading of the decadents as his literary ambitions began to take shape. In Poetry (Sept. 1946), Eliot recalled that “Undergraduates at Harvard in my time read the English poets of the ‘90s who were dead: that was as near as we could get to any living tradition. Certainly I cannot remember any English poet then alive who contributed to my own education.” His discovery of French Symbolism through the work of Arthur Symons, as he would later
say, made Eliot “grateful to him for putting me in touch with the work of the French poets, and for not having got out of them, for his own poetry, what I was to find there myself.”

One of the things he got from both the English decadents and French symbolists was “the idea that one could write poetry in English such as one would speak oneself. A colloquial idiom.” In such an idiom, Eliot would explore the degradations of modern life from the perspective of a tortured Wasp psychology.

Hence the outlines of his later classicism and cultural thought are “present” in retrospect in the poems he began writing in 1909, but in a negative way. Ritual is as much an urgent concern for the early Eliot as it is for the author of *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, but ritual as an atrophy of the psyche. The early drafts of “Prufrock” contained in his youthful notebook, *Inventions of the March Hare*, include an extended middle section, part of which would be reworked into the final version, entitled “Prufrock’s Pervigilium.” Eliot’s treatment of the “Night Watch” theme is mediated through both the earlier uses of it by Pater in *Marius the Epicurian*, with its general atmosphere of decadent illness, and Pound’s enthusiastic appreciation of the Latin “Pervigilium Veneris” in *The Spirit of Romance*, published in 1910 while Eliot was working on his poem. But beyond this, Eliot’s retractatio of other pervigilia intended to establish an ironic gulf between the ancient nuptial hymn to Venus and modern psychosexual trauma. Yet, this irony is not as marked by the Laforguean “double irony” that is so prevalent in his early poetry and indeed, the final version of “Prufrock” itself.

Yet, in “Prufrock’s Pervigilium” we find:

> And when the evening woke and stared into its blindness  
> I heard the children whimpering in corners
Where women took airs, standing in entries—
Women, spilling out of corsets, stood in entries
   Where the draught gas-jet flickered
And the oil cloth curled up the stairs. (4-9)

What follows is a relentless registering of degraded modern consciousness on the model
of James Thompson’s *City of Dreadful Night*. The speaker displays little or no self-
irony; instead the tone is one almost of self-pity. One need only compare the opening of
“Convictions,” the first poem in the *March Hare* collection, to see this:

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Among my marionettes I find
The enthusiasm is intense!
They see the outlines of their stage
Conceived upon a scale immense
And even in this later age
Await an audience open-mouthed
At climax and suspense. (1-7)
```

The poem opens with an irony (and one might say subject) that is thoroughly Laforguean
and able to suggest the dubiousness of modern sexuality and social ritual without
presenting it as the end of Western civilization. His “Paladins” pick “tissue paper rose,”
engage in moral exhortation—“learn to live by nature’s laws!”—and pine for romantic
love, to which the speaker comments:

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My Marionettes (or so they say)
Have these keen moments every day. (28-9)
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This is irony directed at the social types in poems like “Mandarins” where portraits of
Boston bluebloods never implicate the speaker as such: “The eldest of the mandarins,/ A
stoic in obese repose,/ With intellectual double chins,/ Regards the corners of his nose”
(3: 1-4). The comparison might seem facile except for the fact that these poems
anticipate the final version of the “Love Song” by directing just such irony towards the
speaker. However, the Prufrock of the “Pervigilium” expresses relentlessly a fascination with self-disgust mingled with moments of terror. We need not speculate upon whatever problems Eliot may have had in integrating sexuality into his life to see why he felt these lines needed to be cancelled.

Eliot’s use of the hymn-to-Venus theme has, at its root, the desire not for empty ritual—the world that is “peeling oranges and reading evening papers,”—but for some authentic ritual meaning in the modern context. Yet, this ends up being reduced to mere gesture. Venus is more associated with the venereal than the Venus Genetrix. All this stance can do is point to the absence of the ancient “Pervigilium,” which dissolves under the pressure of Dorian Gray’s sordid London, the Paris of Baudelaire, Laforgue’s “La Première nuit,” and a host of other night watches in the brothels and tenements of the modern metropolis. This Prufrock is not one of his marionettes. Unlike the Latin “Pervigilium,” Eliot’s cannot end by asking “when will my spring come?” Instead, the speaker’s hold on reality dissolves along with his libido:

— I have seen the darkness creep along the wall
  I have heard my Madness chatter before day
  I have seen the world roll up into a ball
  Then suddenly dissolve and fall away. (35-8)

The published version of “Prufrock” would return the character to being, if not a marionette, then at least a good deal more impersonal. What he will later say of Hamlet could also be applied to his own struggle to forge a modern poetry that moves beyond romantic expressivism: “In the character of Hamlet it is the buffoonery of an emotion which can find no outlet in action […] The intense feeling, ecstatic and terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something which every person of sensibility has
known [...].”

If poetry is not an expression of the poet’s emotions, then he confronts the problem of the status of the “significant emotion” that poetry builds up into form. What is its significance, and for whom? Eliot’s latter criticism faces this issue in different ways, but central to this effort is the idea that poetry has to do with “something that every person of sensibility has known.” Poetry must speak beyond the self to something that is collectively available.

Prufrock and Other Observations was publish in 1917, just as Eliot was publishing his first major critical statements: “Reflections on ‘Vers Libre’” and the essays that became The Sacred Wood. The classical position he was coming to develop—grounded in poetic impersonality and Tradition—suggests not only a revaluation of his youthful treatment of custom and social ritual, but of the role of art in vivifying an atrophied culture. “Culture” is a word that Eliot studiously avoids in his early criticism even as his thought becomes increasingly shaped by the culture idea. In “Reflections on ‘Vers Libre,’” he attacks the notion that free verse constitutes a movement, or even a method. Speaking of poetic meter, he declares, “freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation.” Increasingly, poetic meter will not be the only thing that requires a background of limitation. That limitation is first found in Eliot’s idea of Tradition. The problem of a decadent civilization and a fragmented modern consciousness is not to be overcome by nostalgic invocations of Hellenism or the “spirit of Romance.” Eliot’s famous reversal of historicist principles—of seeing the past order of literature altered by the present—is on one hand radically ahistorical, but it is so in order to inscribe history more surely in the present. By ensuring
that the past is grasped not only in its “pastness,” but in its “presence,” the impasse of poetry can be superceded. Because the poet must “surrender himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable” in a “continual extinction of personality,” the poet’s mind becomes “a perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.”

In not expressing himself, the poet instead expresses a unity of cultural tradition—“the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind […]” (39). This collective consciousness is a mind which “abandons nothing en route, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen” (39). To say with Eliot that such a role brings with it “great difficulties and great responsibilities” is putting it lightly. The poet’s mind mediates between the past and present, in the manner of Tiresias of The Waste Land, bearing witness as one who has seen it all, not so much to the monuments of human achievement as to the timeless despair and barbarism that has accompanied human history. Eliot’s Tradition is a radical rejection of the ordinary humanist sense of the word. In as much as a Shakespeare or a Homer may remain within the mind of Europe, so there also lurks those Magdalenian draughtsmen—this in an essay written in 1917 while the Western Front ground up its victims.

This is not the place for yet another reading of The Waste Land. That Eliot underwent a spiritual crisis during its composition and was dependent upon Pound’s editing of the poem is well known. If Eliot had defined tradition as a means of escape from personality, the modern world’s mixture of cultural desiccation and savagery—“the
immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history”—requires more than his Tradition alone can provide (177). In one sense, the “mythic method” as a way “of ordering, of giving shape and significance” to such a world meets Eliot’s demand for seeing the past and the present with a single gaze (177). Yet, by 1923 when Eliot came to publish “Ulysses, Order, and Myth,” the “order,” ideal or otherwise, has been subtly realigned. What in the “Tradition” essay had been cast as a conscious literary tradition obtained “through great labour” has now become grounded in the material that emerges from a whole way of life and its unconscious foundations: “Psychology […] ethnology, and The Golden Bough have concurred to make possible what was impossible only a few years ago” (178). And myth also indicates a new primacy of religion in his interests. Eliot turned to Christianity in the years after the publication of The Waste Land—ironically his one work that pursues the mythic method most intently—and it would also move his thought away from the problem of the structure of literature embodied in tradition towards the relation of that tradition to other departments of life: most conspicuously the political. His commitments to the politics of Charles Maurras and flirtations with fascism have been well documented by others, perhaps so much so that his political sins are assimilated not only to his poetry but to modernism itself. But the important problem for present purposes is to account for the way in which his thought develops the modernist engagement with culture that is so much a part of our vocabulary.

As Terry Eagleton has shown, Eliot’s influence would be felt well outside of reactionary circles.31 Further, that influence was made possible by the way in which Eliot facilitated the institutionalization of modernism in the university.
8.5 Culture and Cultus

The personal crisis that led Eliot officially to embrace Christianity in 1927 obviously had a profound effect on his thought; yet it would also have an equally profound effect on the reception of modernism. Religion offers him an intellectual means of grounding culture in the Hebraic concept of faith rather than some pagan or Hellenic spirit; indeed, this is what sets him apart from the other English moderns. He was well aware of the way in which Christianity had accomplished a revolution in conception of the temporal: a breaking of the Hellenic cyclical view of time in favor of a directional time unfolded by the salvation narrative. In this sense, Christianity itself had contributed to the emergence of modern consciousness as much as it represented a principle of continuity with the ancient world. If Eliot’s previous classicism shared the convictions of Hulme and Lewis that time-philosophy was an expression of the destructive romantic tendency in modern thought, his approach toward Christianity would take him toward the problem of time and its relation to historical thought in a way the reveals the peculiar nature of Eliot’s religious sensibility. Christianity is, in part, a religion of personal salvation: a quest for personal redemption. But Eliot finds, in the later poetry, that time itself is that which must be redeemed, indeed that which seems unredeemable. It is this problem that is taken up in St. Augustine’s Confessions. In The Waste Land, Augustine is simply one more allusion to the sense of sin and degradation. Augustine comes to Carthage where he finds himself “in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust” (55). Indeed, Eliot’s title is suggested by Augustine’s assessment that he had “created of myself a barren waste” (53). Characteristically, Eliot projects what is a judgement of the self
onto a judgement of the social world, just as his Christianity is expressed, in his poetry, in terms of the impersonal category of time. Putting aside the question of Eliot’s personal understanding of his faith, it is worth seeing that he follows Augustine’s trajectory in the Confessions by using the personal as a platform upon which to make a foray into philosophical problems. Having narrated his life, Augustine takes up the problem of time and memory in the second half of his book. “My problem,” he says, “is to discover the fundamental nature of time and what power it has” (271)—an ambition that resonates in an age of Bergson and Heidegger. “But how,” Augustine asks, “can the future be diminished or absorbed when it does not yet exist? And how can the past increase when it no longer exists? It can only be that the mind, which regulates this process, performs three functions, those of expectation, attention, and memory” (277). The idea of remembering, for Augustine, is an act of recollecting a dismembered life. Eliot’s understanding of the dismemberment of the modern world guides his cultural thought into categories of Christian understanding. “Who gathered the bitter sea of humanity into one society?” Augustine asks. “All men are united by one purpose, temporal happiness on earth, and all that they do is aimed at this goal, although in the endless variety of their struggles to attain it they pitch and toss like the waves of the sea. None but you, O Lord, gathered them together […]” (324). Eliot came to agree.

Hence, Eliot’s social criticism refuses the Pound strategy of constructing culture on the model of aesthetics. It is not that he is uninterested in the organic metaphor at the heart of the culture idea: he depends upon it. What is important to Eliot’s classical idea is making discriminations. Art and culture may have a relation, but they are not identical.
Likewise, Eliot needs to avoid Lewis’s tendency to read art and culture as a direct form of political engagement. For Eliot, culture is not simply ethnos, nor simply a relation between art and politics, nor even simply the transmission of tradition. It is something that lies behind these things.

His is a genuine cultural theory in the anthropological rather than the aesthetic sense. It is in the new prominence of unconscious thought structures versus conscious activity that we can detect the shift in his thinking. In the “Tradition” essay, he had noted, “Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind” (37). Tradition had marked a coordination between creativity and the critical mind. In his 1932 Norton Lectures, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, Eliot states, “The people which ceases to care for its literary inheritance becomes barbaric; the people which ceases to produce literature ceases to move in thought and sensibility. The poetry of a people takes its life from the people’s speech and in turn gives life to it; and represents its highest point of consciousness, its greatest power and its most delicate sensibility.” This is Eliot the classicist and the royalist; it is not yet completely Eliot the Anglo-Catholic in the sense that he would understand it seven years later as he offers his idea of a Christian society.

Having emerged from the “political thirties” as a prominent figure for the conservative intelligentsia, Eliot found himself, on the eve of the Second War, having doubts, not about his conservatism itself, but about his earlier interests in syndicalism and fascism. Pound’s belief that fascism provided the only political conditions conducive to art is something Eliot does not share. In The Idea of a Christian Society, Eliot links the
rise of European totalitarianism to “the Idea of a Pagan Society” while democratic liberalism has offered simply “the Idea of a Neutral Society” (6). European civilization, confronted such a choice in the absence of Christianity. Eliot carefully claims that he is engaged in definition, not polemic. “I am not at this moment,” he asserts, “concerned with the means for bringing a Christian Society into existence; I am not even primarily concerned with making it appear desirable; but I am very much concerned with making clear its difference from the kind of society in which we are now living” (6). Given, Eliot’s current reputation, his actual argument may come as something of a surprise. His distrust of democracy—a form that can easily become “totalitarian democracy”—is grounded in the particular form it has taken. The Neutral society of liberal democracy has, in his view, produced a society without a positive identity. In its political form, it has spawned political parties that erase the basis for confronting the most important questions that face a society: “We are always faced both with the question ‘what must be destroyed?’ and with the question ‘what must be preserved?’ and neither Liberalism nor Conservatism, which are not philosophies and may be merely habit, is enough to guide us” (13). Liberalism, he finds, “is a necessary negative element” that challenges the “petrification” of society, but this negative element also can lead to “chaos” when “a negative element [is] made to serve the purpose of a positive” (13). Such a neutral or negative society leaves it at the mercy of materialism and capitalism.

If intellectuals of the thirties tended to see the political choice that confronted them in stark right/left terms, given the general consensus that democracy was in crisis and about to go the way of the last vestiges of the European ancien regime that the Great
War swept away, Eliot’s is something of a unique intervention in that dialogue. The attractions of the “pagan” societies of Soviet socialism and totalitarian fascism lie, for Eliot, not in political ideas, but in their imposition of “a way of life for a people” (14) which negative liberal society cannot embody. “Our choice,” he concludes, “is not now between one abstract form and another, but between a pagan, and necessarily stunt culture, and a religious, and necessarily imperfect culture” (14).

Eliot’s Christian Society is offered as non-marxist and non-fascist critique of capitalism. His Christian Society is not some nostalgia for the organic society of mediaeval Christendom, though it posits its own form of organic unity. Indeed, he depends upon what remains of that unity. Though the present society is still “mainly negative,” he finds that “so far as it is positive, [it] is still Christian” (10). “The Idea of a Christian Society,” he argues, “is one which we can accept or reject; but if we are to accept it, we must treat Christianity with a great deal more intellectual respect than is our wont; we must treat it as being for the individual a matter primarily of thought and not feeling. The consequences of such an attitude are too serious to be acceptable to everybody: for when the Christian faith is not only felt, but thought, it has practical results which may be inconvenient” (6). Christianity, because it is still what remains of an authentic cultural presence, has the intellectual leverage to create a positive idea for Western societies. Eliot’s own description of those “inconvenient” results creates problems for those who see him as a reactionary in simplistic terms. Christian social thought “must lead us inevitably to face such problems as the hypertrophy of the motive for Profit into a social ideal, the distinction between the use of natural resources and their
exploitation, the use of labour and its exploitation, the advantages unfairly accruing to
the trader in contrast to the primary producer, the misdirection of the financial machine,
the iniquity of usury, and other features of a commercialised society which must be
scrutinised on Christian principles” (26). Eliot’s continuing importance lies in the way
his argument set the agenda for cultural discourse that still informs our own.

Of course, Eliot’s reactionary thought is to be found not in his Christianity, but in
the idea of culture that undergirds it: in the role he assigns to social class and the
maintenance of an elite. He identifies “the Christian State, the Christian Community, and
the Community of Christians, as elements of the Christian Society” (20). Eliot astutely
recognizes that a Christian Society cannot be one in which everyone is a believing
Christian. Committed believers are those who make up the Community of Christians.
Nevertheless, Christian assumptions, the categories of thought it establishes, would
qualify the society to be a Christian Community. These categories would constitute the
unconscious background to moral judgement, artistic expression, and the making of
policy. In short, religion becomes culture when it is unconscious. Most important, these
values would become operative at the level of politics. “It must be clear,” he states, “that
I do not mean by a Christian State one in which the rulers are chosen because of their
qualifications, still less their eminence, as Christians” (21). Yet, the fact that politicians
may not be part of the Community of Christians does not undercut the Christian
Community if the idea of culture has performed its unconscious magic. “In the Christian
Community that they ruled, the Christian faith would be ingrained, but it requires, as a
minimum, only largely unconscious behavior” (23). Hence, “The Christian and the
unbeliever do not, and cannot, behave very differently in the exercise of office; for it is the general ethos of the people they have to govern, not their own piety, that determines the behavior of politicians” (21). Eliot’s theory of culture turns out to be a more effective means for “making reason and the will of God prevail” than any ever imagined by Matthew Arnold.

But the true intertext for Eliot’s argument is not so much *Culture and Anarchy* as it is Coleridge’s *On the Constitution of Church and State*. Like Coleridge, Eliot finds the proper instrument for reform in an existing institution: a National Church. But for Eliot, its role beyond the Community of Christians is as a gadfly of the State. It is an embodiment of the moral precepts of the Christian Society, which, in conjunction with the educational system, constitutes the real basis of culture. Hence, the State, for Eliot, does not operate at the crucial level: “A nation’s system of education is much more important than its system of government; only a proper system of education can unify the active and the contemplative life, action and speculation, politics and the arts” (33). Paideia becomes a means of uniting the self-understanding of individuals with that of the society. Yet, those to whom the education process is entrusted need not be secular priests. Alive to the dangers of turning education into indoctrination, he presents Christian categories of thought as the means by which Western societies might practically regain cultural integrity: a positive identity. “In any future Christian society that I can conceive,” he argues, “the educational system will be formed according to Christian presuppositions of what education—as distinct from mere instruction—is for; but the personnel will inevitably be mixed: one may even hope that the mixture may be a
benefit to its intellectual vitality. The mixture will include persons of exceptional ability who may be indifferent or disbelieving; there will be room for a proportion of other persons professing other faiths than Christianity” (29). What Eliot takes to be generous in the final statement is a bit chilling given his comment in After Strange Gods. Eliot’s own struggle to overcome latent anti-Semitic tendencies in his thought was more tortured and honest than many suppose.35 Nevertheless, they issue not simply from his commitment to Christianity—something he might have overcome by recognizing the common Hebraic basis of both religion—but from his commitment to the idea of cultural integrity as well. In short, his understanding of culture is always on the verge of reifying culture, and he will do just that, calling culture an “incarnation” of religion. At this point, he resists such a move. “The unitary community,” he states, “should be religious-social, and it must be one in which all classes, if you have classes, have their centre of interest. That is a state of affairs which is no longer wholly realised except in very primitive tribes indeed” (24). It is to the model those tribes provide that he will turn in the postwar period as the terms established by the idea of Christian society have less rhetorical force.

8.6 Notes Towards the Definition of Culture:

Eliot’s 1948 work represents a complete engagement with the culture concept that is either merely latent or used warily in his earlier criticism. It is also a work that puts the question of culture at the fore of the developing debates about the nature of postwar society, shaping a discourse we have come to inherit. Notes towards the Definition of Culture does not so much abandon the argument of The Idea of a Christian Society as it
transposes its critical terminology directly into anthropological terms. Further, the book brings together a host of anxieties and problems rooted in the nineteenth century and that shaped the development of modernism: the problem of cultural fragmentation and decadence, the shrinking authority of art, the fate of tradition and the basis of its continuing significance.

Eliot makes what has become an obligatory gesture in any approach to the culture idea: noting the complexity of the term: “The term culture has different associations according to whether we have in mind the development of an individual, of a group or class, or of a whole society” (93). The boldness of Eliot’s argument, especially in the late forties, lies not only in his embrace of all these definitions, but in positing culture, not as individual behavior and belief working its way up to constitute the community, but the other way around. Humanistic culture is not some alternative, rival, or antiquated conception, but derivative of anthropological concepts: “It is part of my thesis that the culture of the individual is dependent upon the culture of a group or class, and that the culture of a group or class is dependent upon the culture of the whole society to which that group or class belongs. Therefore it is the culture of the society that is fundamental […]” (93). The problem that besets modern society lies in the way the activities we call cultural tend to gain their own independence, and over time, enervate the unconscious basis that constituted their original unity as part of the same culture. The study of primitive cultures by anthropology has revealed this unity: “The Dyak who spends the better part of a season in shaping, carving and painting his barque of the particular design required for the annual ritual of head-hunting, is exercising several cultural activities at
once—of art, religion, as well as amphibious warfare” (96). But such a state of affairs is not some happy paradise. Indeed, historical forces work to undo it at any rate. Like biological evolution, culture develops out of its own potentials. The result is that “As a society develops towards functional complexity and differentiation, we may expect the emergence of several cultural levels: in short, the culture of the class or group will present itself” (97). Social class, and the inequalities it marks, are thus legitimated on the authority of nature itself. This is perhaps the most odious implication of his argument for Eliot’s detractors. Yet, in frankly uniting the sociological concept of class with culture, he opens up the question of the relation between “high culture” and “low” or “popular” culture that has informed our contemporary theorizing. Eliot insists that in an authentic integrated culture, development at one “level” affects all the other “levels.” As he puts it, “[…] a civilisation cannot simultaneously produce great folk poetry at one cultural level and Paradise Lost at another” (98). Art becomes an indicator of cultural integration and disintegration. As he puts it in the Christian Society essay, “their decay may always be taken as a symptom of some social ailment to be investigated” (31).

Hence for Eliot, this evolution towards complexity and differentiation is not wholly positive: “While it appears that progress in civilisation will bring into being more specialised culture groups, we must not expect this development to be unattended by perils. Cultural disintegration may ensue upon cultural specialisation: and it is the most radical disintegration that a society can suffer” (98). Indeed, this is the hazard threatening the modern world. An authentic elite becomes impossible—one in vital contact with the force that animates popular culture and a whole way of life. Such an
“elite” simply degenerates in the professional group that is oriented towards pursuing its own interests. This amounts to a more intellectualized version of idea of civilizational decadence inherited from the nineteenth century. Hence Eliot rejects a “commonplace of contemporary thought,” that “[t]here will be groups concerned with art, and groups concerned with science, and groups concerned with philosophy, as well as groups consisting of men of action: and these groups are what we call élites” (108). But such a liberal view “implies an atomic theory of society” (109). It is unable to posit an authentic ground of solidarity that could be called culture in any meaningful sense. What threatens modern life is not the emergence of a debased culture, but the disappearance of culture itself.

If art is an index of cultural integrity, then Eliot’s earlier literary criticism suggests that poetry and the arts, while not identical with culture, draw their vitality from the same source. Eliot’s concept of the “dissociation of sensibility” is not only a reading of the history of the Tradition, but of the idea of modernity. Eliot’s problem is to describe culture in such a way that it can embrace the humanistic and the anthropological meanings. As Terry Eagleton describes Eliot’s dilemma, “How can culture be at once what we don’t need to think about, and the finest fruits of our consciousness?” (IC 115). The concept of sensibility becomes the central issue. Sensibility, as part of the humanist and aestheticist discourses, had marked an extreme form of conscious cultivation. The problem for Eliot is not only to see conscious life as rooted in the unconscious springs of life, but to preserve a means for the conscious level of society to influence the direction of social life. “Culture,” as Eliot argues, “can never be wholly conscious—there is always more to it than we are conscious of; and it cannot be planned because it is also the
unconscious background of all our planning”(170). For Eliot, this problem of consciousness becomes a crucial problem for a theory of elites. Like Eliot’s earlier description of a pre-seventeenth-century unified aesthetic sensibility as “a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or recreation of thought into feeling,” the cultivation of sensibility can be not only reflective but productive at the visceral level. But in order to avoid being simply reflective, sensibility must posit an intuitive relationship with the transcendent.

Eliot asks “whether any culture could come into being, or maintain itself, without a religious basis” (101). While a society’s elite may have a more conscious relation with religion, it still shares the religious attitude “groups and classes”: each lives out the same culture, but at different levels. On this Eliot stakes his concept of solidarity. He insists that religion and culture are not identical on the conscious level of life; rather, their coupling “holds good only in the sense in which people are unconscious of both their culture and their religion” (103). Hence Eliot imagines, with no little discomfort on his part, “the culture of a people as an incarnation of its religion […]” (106). Religion (whether it is “true” or not, Eliot insists) is the vivification, the power which animates, a whole way of life. As Eliot’s more pessimistic language puts it, “any religion, while it lasts, and on its own level, gives an apparent meaning to life, provides the framework for a culture, and protects the mass of humanity from boredom and despair” (106). As Eagleton observes, “it is religion above all which unites reflective awareness with spontaneous conduct, and this unity can be directly mapped on to a hierarchical social order” (IC 116-7).
Thus an elite composed along liberal lines, Eliot argues, would not only fall prey to the individual self-interest of those “who find their way into it,” but would be unable to foster cultural integrity because “the differences of background will be so great, that they will be united only by their common interests, and separated by everything else” (115).

The way around this institutional self interest lies, not surprisingly, in another older institution. “An élite,” Eliot claims, “must therefore be attached to some class, whether higher or lower: but so long as there are classes at all it is likely to be the dominant class that attracts this élite to itself” (115). Eliot’s Coleridgean “Clerisy” will not be populated by Arnold’s “Aliens.” One must wonder, given that Eliot was an expatriate American living in a country with one of the most rigid class systems in Europe, how Eliot could yield so willingly to this “solution.” As one who had become more English than the English themselves, he had gained access to its highest levels of society. Certainly, his own New England identity may have allowed him to feel that Englishness was his birthright. Yet, for a man who could assert that “it would appear to be for the best that the great majority of human beings should go on living in the place in which they were born. Family, class and local loyalty all support each other; and if one of these decays, the others will suffer also” (125). Eliot himself, as Eagleton notes, rejected this course for his own life, and this despite the wishes of his parents and a strong letter of rebuke from none other than Charles W. Eliot, the former Harvard president.37

Ironically, Eliot’s defense of social class is based precisely on the acculturation the family provides: “The primary channel of transmission of culture is the family: no man wholly escapes from the kind, or wholly surpasses the degree, of culture which he
acquired from his early environment” (115). If Eliot could count himself lucky in the family he was born into, in another sense, his illiberalism was fated by it. The aspirational culture they held fast to, shunted aside by the millionaire society, had failed spectacularly. Though veneration of the family is not, he asserts, based upon the “vanities and pretensions of genealogy” (116), it nevertheless looks a good deal like his concept of the Tradition. Family is not simply the existing one that nurtures the developing self. “But when I speak of the family,” he states, “I have in mind a bond which embraces a longer period of time than this: a piety towards the dead, however obscure, and a solicitude for the unborn, however remote. Unless this reverence for past and future is cultivated in the home, it can never be more than a verbal convention in the community” (116). Eliot’s idea of culture has come home, even if Eliot himself never did.

But further, Eliot’s concept of culture responds to the desire to retrieve it from the place where its actual transmission was occurring: the university. For this reason, he insists that a hierarchical culture is not a minority culture in the sense that F.R. Leavis uses it. Social classes, because they have the same culture lived out at different levels of consciousness, are interdependent: “this higher level of culture,” Eliot asserts, “must be thought of both as valuable in itself, and as enriching of the lower levels: thus the movement of culture would proceed in a kind of cycle, each class nourishing the others” (110). As Eagleton rightly observes, “culture as civility and culture as solidarity are for the most part sworn enemies. But they can also strike up some strange, potent alliances, as they do in the work of T.S. Eliot. Eliot may be a connoisseur of high culture, but he is
also a champion of culture as a popular way of life; like all the most intelligent elitists, he is also a full-blooded populist. There is no logical contradiction between these cases, whatever postmodern theory might consider”⁵⁸ (112).

For this reason, Eliot held that cultural life must not be defined as education. Education, he observes, covers “both too much and too little: too little, when it implies that education is limited to what can be taught; too much, when it implies that everything worth preserving can be transmitted by teaching” (120). Yet, the impact of Eliot’s literary and critical efforts would only be fully felt in the academy, despite the efforts of Eliot and Leavis to preserving some place for high culture outside of it. Eliot had put the idea of culture as the most effective means for resisting the degradation of civilization, not only for conservative intellectuals, but, as Eagleton demonstrates, for men of the left like Raymond Williams as well. In America, however, the increasing pace of mass culture in the postwar years meant that more often than not, it was the reactionary rather than the populist side of Eliot’s thought that garnered most attention. As John Guillory observes, “[w]hereas Leavis was committed at least to the possibility of a minority culture independent of the university, the New Critics found in the university a place exterior to ‘mass civilization’ itself, a place in which “orthodoxy” was expressed by the form of literature” (CC140). Modernism too had come home.

8.7 Conclusion

“Yet the history of literary terms serves only to confirm the irrational genius of language. We come closer to the question of postmodernism itself by acknowledging the psychopolitics, if not the psychopathology, of academic life” (147).

Ihab Hassan—Toward a Concept of Postmodernism
Ihab Hassan’s location of cultural forms within the psycho-dynamics of “academic life” could have made no sense before the mid-nineteenth century, when the university increasingly came to be the scene of both cultural production and consumption. While this is not the place to join, or join in earnest, the conversation on postmodernism, it is worthwhile to look at modernism from our own putatively postmodern perspective. Given that my examination of modernism is based upon historical rather than purely theoretical description, I want to examine the nature of the theoretical challenge postmodernism mounts, not only to modernism itself, but to the possibility of gaining the type of historical understand toward which my project aims. Yet, I also want to return the favor, as it were, by suggesting some of the consequences of the view of modernism I have been developing for the current sense that we live in a postmodern era. Hassan’s argument is worth considering in this regard, not only because of its honest admission of the difficulties involved in defining the postmodern, but also because it focuses upon questions of artistic and literary culture rather than the larger claims made by such writers as Jean-Francois Lyotard that we have moved beyond social and cultural modernity itself into the hyperspaces of postmodernity.

Hassan’s concept of a “postmodern turn” rather than a “rupture” or “breakthrough” attempts to confront the problem of historical continuity and change. 39 As we have seen, the older critical tradition that sees modernism itself in terms of innovation, rupture, and rebellion, even against immediate predecessors in favor of more remote “ancestors,” seriously misreads the theoretical and practical considerations that lie behind statements
like Ezra Pound’s “Make it new!” (in which determining the “it” becomes all-important). Nevertheless, it appears that much postmodernist understanding of modernism takes at face value the more assertive claims of the modernists and the criticism that championed them. Such assumptions seem to lie behind Hassan’s efforts to describe the postmodern. Rather than recapitulating the modernist myth of rupture, he wants to see the postmodern as resisting such simplified mythologies. Hassan asserts that “the prevalence of postmodernism today, if indeed it prevails, does not suggest that ideas or institutions of the past cease to shape the present. Rather, traditions develop, and even types suffer a seachange” (146). Hassan sees the postmodern as a “significant revision” of ideas that “still pervade the Western mind.” The postmodern, for him, “may evoke a number of related cultural tendencies, a constellation of values, a repertoire of procedures and attitudes” (147). He notes the awkwardness of the term itself, which, unlike other period terms, “contains its enemy within”—a fact that leads to semantic instability, and ultimately, historical instability as both modernism and postmodernism begin to “slip and slide in time, threatening to make any diacritical distinction between them desperate” (149). Furthermore, since “a ‘period’ is not really a period at all,” but rather must “be perceived in terms of both continuity and discontinuity,” we are continually in the awkward position of discovering “antecedents” of postmodernism ever further back in time. Finally, Hassan asserts that, as much as critics have attempted to define postmodernism in theoretical rather than historical terms, it also displays a desire to understand itself historically. Yet, its mode of doing so translates questions of change and continuity into ones of innovation (through a rejection of determinate meaning) and a
disclosure of meaning. While postmodernism is “antiformal, anarchic, or decreative,” it also “contains the need to discover a ‘unitary sensibility,’” and to “attain [. . .] an immanence of discourse, an expanded noetic intervention, a ‘neo-gnostic immediacy of mind’” (150).

Despite the quasi-mystical rapture latent in such assertions, Hassan does provide a final description of the postmodern that is highly suggestive of the fantasies and fears that inform its heterogeneous impulses:

But the fact in most developed societies remains: as an artistic, philosophical, and social phenomenon, postmodernism veers toward open, playful, optative, provisional (open in time as well as in structure or space), disjunctive, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of ironies and fragments, a ‘white ideology’ of absences and fractures, a desire of diffractions, an invocation of complex, articulated silences. Postmodernism veers toward all of these yet implies a different, if not antithetical, movement toward pervasive procedures, ubiquitous interactions, immanent codes, media, languages (154).

What emerges from this rhetoric is a translation of the modernist “sensibility” from the historical to the spatial: a substitution of the modernist concern for diachronic conceptions of culture for synchronic ones. Postmodernism, in Hassan’s account, rejects the hierarchies of high culture and the possibility of discovering meaning in some organic conception of culture that takes shape, and is intelligible through, a history that we can recover. All that we have, the postmodernist understands, is the “trace” of those historical moments dispersed within synchronic cultural structures. It is here that the postmodernist wants to differ from the modernist.

In order to understand this difference more clearly, it is instructive to remind ourselves how the modernists themselves attempted a synthesis of the synchronic and diachronic points of view. It is not so much a question of the modernists refusing to
recognize the synchronic or structural nature of culture, far from it. T. S. Eliot notion of “the Tradition,” seems to haunt, consciously or not, much postmodern thought, just as his horror of abstraction and belief that the immediate flow of experience and sensation are the only forms of positive knowledge are recapitulated in many accounts of the postmodern sublime.

Hassan, discussing the never-ending discovery of antecedents of postmodernism among theorists, tells us, “What this [continual discovery] really indicates is that we have created in our mind a model of postmodernism, and have proceeded to ‘rediscover’ the affinities of various authors and different moments with that model. We have, that is, reinvented our ancestors—and always shall” (150). The entire relationship between past and present has been turned to run the other way, as it were—a “postmodern turn” in which the past is utterly in the service of the present. If this seems to be a recapitulation of the very activity that Eliot’s tradition accomplishes, it is so with a difference. The postmodern mind, in Hassan’s account, finds itself longing for the “‘white ideologies’ of absences and fractures” and finds itself “veer[ing] toward pervasive procedures, ubiquitous interactions, immanent codes, media, languages.” Given such an occlusion of the historical sense, it is not surprising to see Hassan concurring with the more general assessment of postmodernism as a “neo-avant-garde”: “Yet postmodernism remains ‘cooler’, in McLuhan’s sense, than older vanguards—cooler, less cliquish, and far less aversive to the pop, the electronic society of which it is a part, and so hospitable to kitsch” (151). There is hardly anything new in the recognition that postmodernist art re-appropriates the ethos, goals, and many of the strategies of the historical avant-garde, nor
that its forms are fascinated by the “hyper-reality” of the mediated world. Nevertheless, Hassan’s formulation of the postmodern allows us to see the ways in which the particular concepts that I discuss in regard to modernism become involved in the same paradoxes and indeterminacies, but are no longer resolvable through a recourse to historical thought. Postmodernism seeks a relationship with history, but only as an opportunity for the appropriation of past cultural forms in the interests of the present. History, then, represents not a past record of the aspirations and failures of a culture, but a storehouse of allusions and motifs that can be playfully subverted. The rejection of history, most importantly, is also a rejection of hierarchies of value; high culture is dependent upon the privileging of past works. To reject high culture (and the values that surround such a phrase) is for the postmodernist predicated upon the rejection of historical depth and organic understandings of culture.

It is within this context that we can understand how the various, and sometimes conflicting, contemporary critical projects share a common discomfort with high culture, and by extension, with the traditional role of the academy. Beyond the overt political agendas of these projects, we can discern an anxiety that was first registered by the early moderns themselves. Multiculturalism, cultural studies, postmodernism—all mark the increasing discomfort with the relative isolation of what can only still be called “high culture” in the academy. This discomfort can take many forms, i.e: from the specifically American distrust of “elitism,” from the sense that the cultural values of the academy are hopelessly remote from the forces really shaping a new “virtual” society and are hence powerless to critique it, from a desire to “decenter” an inherently patriarchal, racist,
imperialist Western Tradition, etc. Whatever way we may regard these and other projects that constitute much of the “advanced criticism” in the humanities, there lies within them, I argue, the anxiety of an academy seeking some means to reestablish a shaping role, some means of intervention, in the social order—some pertinence that is direct. Matthew Arnold, writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, could contentedly assert that “culture works by indirection.” But he could assert such a faith largely because the full implications of the anthropological “culture thesis,” the full consequences of mass-literacy and audience fragmentation, and the professionalization of the academic (and the consequent decline of the man of letters who spoke to a large public) had not yet utterly transformed intellectual life. As much as this anxiety expresses itself by an appeal to an anthropological culture-concept, its desire is for an older mode of authority and legitimacy. The same desire is registered by Coleridge’s concept of the “Clerisy,” further elaborated by Arnold as the ideal of “Culture,” and briefly realized in the Oxford of Benjamin Jowett, or the Harvard of Charles Eliot. It is the desire that informed the New Criticism of the forties and fifties as it sought to domesticate the difficulties of high modernist texts through the discipline of formalistic “close reading.” Yet, it is also the anxiously held goal of the radical avant-garde, from the feline urbanity of Oscar Wilde to the ever-increasingly aggressive practices of the Futurists, Vorticists, and Dadaists.

Mention of the historical avant-garde here is hardly beside the point, for it is their strategies that have seemed to offer a means of reconnecting art and life while resisting the particular forms that contemporary life takes. The persistent problem faced by the
avant-garde, as many have recognized, is the ways in which its characteristic strategies have increasingly been appropriated by commercial culture. One of the most prominent champions of the neo-avant-garde, Jean Francois Lyotard, has argued for a postmodern “sublime” that would describe this complicity. The problem, in his view, lies in the “programmatic” nature of the historical avant-garde: “the school, the programme, the project—all proclaim that after this sentence comes that sentence, or at least that kind of sentence is mandatory, that one kind of sentence is permitted, while another is forbidden.” For Lyotard, this insistence, proclaimed in the manifestoes of the historical avant-garde, sets up a logic of overcoming. Lyotard’s concern is to define the postmodern avant-garde by paradoxically disentangling it from the notion of a “project” itself—a rejection of modernism’s (and modernity’s) self-understanding dependent upon its embeddedness in secular history, its insertion between a past and a future in which it seeks to open up a “space” for itself in the name of “innovation.” Rather, Lyotard’s postmodern avant-garde arrests our experience of what he calls the Hegelian “now”—the present which is to overcome its prior determinations in historical time—in order to ask, and leave open, the question, “is it happening?” As he states: “Through innovation, the will affirms its hegemony over time. It thus conforms to the metaphysics of capital, which is a technology of time. The innovation ‘works.’ The question mark of the ‘Is it happening’ stops. With the occurrence, the will is defeated. The avant-gardist task remains that of undoing the presumption of the mind with respect to time. The sublime feeling is the name of this privation” (245). Hence, Lyotard’s version of postmodern aesthetics goes even farther than the “presentism” of Hassan. The neo-avant-garde, for
Lyotard, must not simply negate its prior modernist modes—an avant-garde committed to a rejection of history—but question the category of time itself. If the modernist avant-garde sought to overcome history in the name of time in order to forge a weapon against bourgeois culture, then the postmodern must struggle for a sublime in which awe is directed toward a vertiginous sense of loss and gain rather than the sense of fullness and transcendence of impoverished bourgeois modes of experience—ones that characterize earlier forms of the sublime. Hence Lyotard can claim that this sublime is still the one “that Kant and Burke described” while not really being “their sublime any more.”(246). Lyotard’s target here is not simply “bourgeois capitalism” nor is it simply a means for art to make itself immune to appropriation by that order. His target is the privileging of the human itself. The problem, for him, is not simply getting rid of some residual humanism, but to question consciousness itself, to produce an experience of the non-human, as the title of an influential collection of his essays announces: The Nonhuman. It is this experience that Lyotard announces as the “sublime.”

Without, for the moment, pronouncing judgment on the desirability of this kind of aim, Lyotard’s description of the neo-avant-garde allows us to see the kind of tectonic shift postmodernism attempts to affect. The anti-humanist turn represented by the modernists I have discussed is predicated upon a construction of humanism-as-romantic-individualism. For Hulme, Lewis, Pound, and Eliot, it constituted a more dangerous “decadence” than the self-avowed decadent writers of the “yellow nineties” could have ever represented: a decline due, not to an over-ripe civilization fecundated by its own sophisticated exhaustion, but of one that was fast losing contact with traditions that
formed its basis: its more properly anthropological cultural identity. These traditions, supra-individual and trans-generational, represented, for them, the “survivals” of cultural forms and meanings that formed the unconscious background without which any society (even so-called “primitive” ones), let alone art and literature, could not exist. While the moderns would struggle to reject nineteenth-century versions of secular and theological humanism, they did so in the name of an attack on bourgeois individualism that such versions of humanism supported, and they did so with the belief that there were other richer grounds of human intelligibility: the ground of anthropology. And while this way of thinking about culture allowed the modernists I discuss to produce works that we still often find compelling, their use of the culture thesis could produce a politics at times disturbingly authoritarian, and at others horrifically fascist and racist. Certainly, the various political and social commitments and flirtations of the modernists have contributed to our sense of distance from them, especially since the waning of the New Criticism and its separation of aesthetics from all other considerations. And yet, in the midst of our tendency to congratulate ourselves on how much better we are than they, we need to ask ourselves to what extent many of the versions of culture that are current today have the same kinds of disturbing potential; the same capacity to reify concepts like race as a means of avoiding a full engagement with issues like class, let alone literature.

Lastly, it remains unclear whether or not the avant-garde strategy of épater la bourgeoisie has the capability to confront its targets in an age when a television news program can bring far more shocking and threatening images before us. Likewise, it is unclear the extent to which Lyotard’s rigorous project for the neo-avant-garde,
establishing “a privation in the face of Is it happening?” can really reflect “the spirit of the times” rather than “the spirit of the market.” I say “unclear” because a full examination of this question is well beyond my scope here. Suffice to say that the struggle to keep these two geists distinct strikes me as a particularly urgent need in an age when the “culture” of advertising seems particularly committed to the appropriation of modernist, postmodernist, and avant-garde formal strategies in the interest of lifestyle consumerism.

The two most prominent inheritors of the modernist discourse are cultural studies and multiculturalism. Obviously, the former exploits the populism, the latter, the organismism of the modernist culture idea. Both find their common ground in a rejection of modernist “elitism.” Yet, the effect of these approaches has been to transform the idea of culture into consumer culture itself, usually cast in more folkish language as “popular culture.” Yet the widespread charges of “elitism” against modernism that are encountered so often in the humanities seem particularly misplaced. All depends upon how one defines “elitism.” Like the images of nineteen-fifties suburban correctness that so often constitute the stage-prop enemies in advertisements glorifying what Thomas Frank has called “the rebel consumer,” the stogy elites of a bygone academy are not, or not much, in evidence today. If by elitism we mean snobbery and classism, then many moderns, including figures like Virginia Woolf, can stand condemned, and so can many postmodernists. If by elitism we mean egotism, then we are all in trouble. But, if the charge of “elitism” refers, as I suspect it does, to the valuing of works that require education to appreciate them—ones that resist easy consumption, that sustain and repay critical attention, that seem to divide their audience into those able to appreciate them
more than others—then we are in a different kind of trouble: art differentiates itself from other cultural forms on precisely this ground. Even if we accept that anything can be an artwork, or any writing is a fictional construct, this can be so only for the spectator or reader who knows how to apprehend the work in this way, whether in the interest of a Paternian aesthetic experience, or in the interest of a critical unmasking of its ideological operations. And theorizing the postmodern in the academy is hardly a means of living one’s solidarity with the working class. In this sense, the alternative to elitism is simple ignorance. Attacking modernism on these grounds as way of differentiating it from postmodernism is, in my view, self-refuting. The inherited problem of what Mark Conroy has called “the phantom audience” is not so easily evaded. The current commitments to multiculturalism seem to suggest that, instead of seeing literature in terms of an author’s struggle (in modernity) to create an audience in and for a work, a work is always destined for a specific audience grounded precisely in cultural difference, which another audience, if they care to, can overhear but never fully understand. If so, then modernism truly is over, for it represents a frank admission that no greater general audience can be reconstituted. Or perhaps Madonna videos and “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” really do repay as much as Gerontion; but that is a question for a different project.


5 Kojecky, p.36.
8 Moody, p.4.

7 Moody, p.5


13 Letters, p. 313.


17 From the Yale Report. Quoted in Cremin, p. 132.


21 The Sacred Wood, p. 100.


23 The Sacred Wood, p. 58.

24 Crawford, Savage and the City, p. 73.


26 Inventions of the March Hare, p. 396.
27 Inventions of the March Hare, p. 397.

28 The Sacred Wood, p. 102.


30 Selected Prose. p. 40-1.


34 Both The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes towards the Definition of Culture are published together under the title Christianity and Culture. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1977. All citations for both texts come from this edition.

35 Recent information has come to light regarding the vexing question of Eliot and anti-Semitism. For years, Eliot had been corresponding with Horace Kallen in a frank manner. See Ranen Omer, “‘It is I Who Have Been Defending a Religion Called Judaism’: The T. S. Eliot and Horace M. Kallen Correspondence.” Texas Studies in Literature and Language. 39:4. Winter, 1997.

36 Selected Prose, 63.

37 Selected Letters, p.323.

38 Eagleton, The Idea of Culture, p. 112.


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