Vulgar Ambitions: Social Class and Self-Culture in Modern British Literature

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that the phenomenon of popular self-culture, which emerged during the early twentieth century in response to desires for improvement from Britain’s growing lower middle class, was a point of interest within modernism’s preoccupation with class, culture, and the common reader. In line with the New Modernist Studies’ emphasis on returning to the historical moment to expand modernism across traditional lines of demarcation (including high and low culture, class, and types of readers), I argue that the concept of self-culture can be a fruitful way to approach issues of narrative construction and readership that complicate these conceptions of modernism. My contribution to this conversation is to focus on how self-culture as a popular trend in the early twentieth-century proved to be an enticing topic for modernist authors and middlebrow readers alike. On the one hand, many modernist writers featured self-educating characters in their novels. Many of these characters fail in their pursuit of individual edification for a number of reasons related to modernist social commentary on class difference, the pessimistic view of progress during and after World War I, and even the stylistic issues stemming from self-culture’s association with realist writing in an era of experimentation. On the other hand, mainstream readers who may or may not have been interested in avant-garde literature were just as interested in the kinds of self-culture stories and autodidacticism that many modern writers used as narrative lynchpins in their works. It was one issue at the time that,
despite its apparently class-specific educational focus, actually appealed to readers and writers on completely opposite ends of the cultural spectrum. Analyzing work from H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and George Orwell, I show how self-culture became common ground for modernism and the masses alike, and as such serves as an important and enduring marker of middlebrow culture in and around the writing which could not ignore it.
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Introduction:

“Devoted to the Impartial and Deliberate Discussion of Important Questions […] and to the Promotion of Self-Culture and General Education”

“I am not saying that reading and discussing the Great Books will save humanity from itself, but I don’t know anything else that will.”

- Robert Maynard Hutchins (qtd. in Beam 73)

“Anyone who is too lazy to master the comparatively small glossary necessary to understand Chaucer deserves to be shut out from the reading of good books for ever.”

- Ezra Pound (99)

Everyone is an autodidact.

All learning that is self-motivated is a kind of self-education, and all genuine learning is at least somewhat self-motivated. This is nothing new. The cultivation of the self is a concept as basic and as old as humanity’s recognition of the self, with the desire for individual improvement proceeding directly from that essential reflectivity. Current self-help nonfiction often seems to make claims about being “the latest thing,” but its history as a genre is at least as old as any other. Classical writing abounds with
instructional advice aimed especially at young men and women, a tradition of good living and thinking that is passed down through religious wisdom literature, folkloric proverbs, and more specific genres like the Early Modern *speculum principium* or the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conduct manual. My particular interest in this dissertation is how early twentieth-century practices of self-culture, many carried over from Victorian notions of Progress and individual betterment, help to shape the fabric and literary culture of modern British writing. By “self-culture,” I mean any procedures, programs, or philosophies designed primarily by individual motivation with the intention to improve oneself in one or a combination of these ways: artistically, intellectually, professionally, educationally, socially, or morally. In line with the New Modernist Studies’ emphasis on returning to the historical moment to expand modernism across traditional lines of demarcation (including high and low culture, class, and types of readers), I argue that the concept of self-culture can be a fruitful way to frame issues that problematize traditional conceptions of modernism. I do not wish to re-hash an old argument about high and low culture at least as old as Huyssen’s theorization of the “Great Divide”—I wish rather to enter the conversation about middlebrow modernism with a fresh perspective concerning alternative education that has not been fully explored. As Ann Ardis has said, “there is a great deal of work still to be done on this other cultural space, a space that complicates familiar, easy, oppositions of modernist high and low culture, a space inhabited by writers and a reading public with a more sophisticated appreciation of aesthetics […] than [modernism’s] contemptuous characterizations of both the Edwardian era and the vast publishing world lying outside the modernist ‘submarket’ would suggest” (138). The
printed instruments of self-culture—including guides, manuals, anthologies, and cheap reprints of the classics or “great books”—all lay outside of modernism’s coterie print world, and were certainly viewed suspiciously by the modernists (see Pound’s epigraph above). Yet they were essential in shaping both the real-world self-improver and the quintessential problematic figure of modernism: the lower-middle-class autodidact.  

Joan Shelley Rubin, with *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, has been highly influential in showing how gentility was marketed to middle and lower-middle-class Americans in the twentieth century. One of the key markers of gentility for the British as well as the Americans was education, and particularly the way education manifested itself in cultural appreciation, knowledge, and taste. One key aspect of middlebrow culture is an ambition towards appearing refined. The often-cited origin of the term comes from a 1925 *Punch* article describing people “who are hoping that someday they will get used to the stuff they ought to like” (qtd. in Ardis 116). Viewing modernism critically from a middlebrow perspective has recently allowed critics such as Lawrence Rainey and Sean Latham to explore both the kinds of lower middle class people who figured as readers and characters of modernism (for example, typists and clerks) and the class-spanning pleasures of snobbery involved in the very act of reading “elitist” literature.  

My contribution to this conversation is to focus on how self-culture as a popular trend in the early twentieth-century proved to be an enticing topic for modernist authors and middlebrow readers alike. On the one hand, many modernist writers featured self-educating characters in their novels. Many of them fail in their pursuit of individual edification for a number of reasons related to modernist social commentary on class
difference, the pessimistic view of Progress during and after World War I, and even the stylistic issues stemming from self-culture’s association with realist writing in an era of experimentation. On the other hand, mainstream readers who may or may not have been interested in avant-garde literature were just as interested in the kinds of self-culture stories and autodidacticism that many modern writers used as narrative lynchpins in their works. It was one issue at the time that, despite its apparently class-specific educational focus, actually appealed to readers and writers on completely opposite ends of the cultural spectrum. Self-culture became common ground for modernism and the masses alike, and as such serves as an important and enduring marker of middlebrow culture worth further exploration in and around the writing which could not ignore it.

1. Backgrounds and Contexts

The underlying motivations behind self-culture as a movement made popular in the nineteenth century are many, and include Christian evangelical and temperance efforts at replacing the bottle with the book (especially the Good Book), as well as more general movements of enforcing improvement upon a working-class audience from a middle-class perspective. As Richard D. Altick, Jonathan Rose and others have noted, this was the era of the Sunday Schools, workingmen’s institutes, mutual improvement clubs, and miners’ libraries devoted to collective cultural (and often times spiritual) advancement, sometimes in a self-directed manner but oftentimes with the support of well-to-do benefactors. While improvement efforts aimed at the working classes reached
varying degrees of success (some folded, some devolved into light entertainment, etc.), a new style of self-improver emerged from the lower middle classes to become prominent from the mid-century on. Increasing urbanization brought many more young men and women into the city to work white-collar office jobs to accompany the expansion of international trade. In the dense confines of the metropolis, members of this expanding class rubbed elbows with the working class below them and the well-to-do middle class above them. As F. M. L. Thompson has shown, anxiety about social standing led to a lower-middle-class urgency to appear respectable at almost any cost. One of the chief means of achieving respectability was to demonstrate awareness of the arts and culture. The demand for respectability among the lower middle class created a ready market for instruments and institutes of self-culture, as many of them possessed literacy but often lacked a full secondary education, and just about all sought the respect of the class immediately above them.

My approach to self-culture focuses primarily on characters of the lower middle class, in order to emphasize the importance of these particular figures within the historical era and literary tendencies of modernism; I am not, therefore, analyzing in any great detail the role of working class improvement groups or aristocratic disinterested amateurism in literature, though they both have theoretical connections to the lower middle class self-improvement I will explore. The lower middle class was growing during the period spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but traditional modes of social advancement through elite education and high-powered connections by-and-large did not accept vulgar intrusion. The net result of an expansion
of socially-ambitious citizens and a dearth of traditional educational resources was a need for alternative modes of improvement, which for all of the emphasis on the business and “busy-ness” of lower middle class life came in flexible forms of self-culture: including but not limited to doctrines of personal empowerment (through literature, art, and the cultivation of taste) and utilization of public educational outlets (museums, lectures, exhibits, and so on).

One Victorian periodical in particular can serve as a ready illustration of the assumptions, aims, and audiences behind what would become the twentieth-century self-culture I examine in this dissertation. *The British Controversialist and Impartial Inquirer*, a magazine circulated from 1850 to 1872, took as its stated mission the words of the introduction’s title above: “Devoted to the Impartial and Deliberate Discussion of Important Questions in Religion, Philosophy, History, Politics, Social Economy, Etc., And to the Promotion of Self-Culture and General Education” (n. p.). The *Controversialist*, as the title implies, adopted the debater’s format of affirmative and negative stances on hot topics of the day across a variety of areas: for example, “Ought the Indian opium trade to be suppressed?” (*Controversialist* Vol. III 21) and “Is the Bible alone a sufficient rule of faith?” (*Controversialist* Vol. III 10). Essays on both sides of the issues were supplied by authors writing under their initials. The magazine also featured a literary review, society pages concerning the exploits of mutual improvement clubs, and, at certain points during its run, a section entitled “Our Collegiate Course, or, Aids to Self-Culture.” These pages were filled with the equivalent of quiz questions designed to spur the reader’s mind and sharpen his or her processing ability in history, literature,
languages, linguistics, and figures. The questions ranged from “Who and what were the Lollards?” to “Which sum is made up by the multiplication of 43,046,721 by 531,441?”, and all had follow-up prompts to flesh out the examination process (*Controversialist* 236). Fitting the “collegiate” claims of the course, answering the questions required considerable concentration, even research. Nevertheless, there was no indication of competition in the examination, or even a correct answer guide. The Collegiate Course was designed to test the individual pupil to his or her own extent and interest in self-culture.

Besides the Collegiate Course, the bigger point of *The British Controversialist* was to provide a forum for controversy that would lead to not only greater awareness of issues on the part of the reader, but to the sharpening of intelligence through the full rigorous exercise of debate in print. It was part of the larger movement of liberalism sweeping Britain culturally and politically. In targeting the expanding lower middle class artisans, clerks, shop assistants, and small merchants, the editors believed that these people were “ready for every type of information and for thinking about and discussing as many timely and timeless issues as the magazine could accommodate” (Wolff 370). J. A. Cooper and Samuel Neil launched the journal with a lofty two-fold ambition: 1) to edify and educate the underserved classes, and 2) use the dialectics of the debate forum to foster an uplifting understanding of essential issues, if not actually approach the best response to each question. This second goal, according to Wolff, was “a procedure which [the editors] believed was the best and perhaps the only way of arriving at the truth and thus serving God and the cause of national progress,” and was evident in the journal’s
Latin motto: “magna est veritas et prevalebit” (“Great is truth and will prevail”) (Wolff 369). At this point Christianity and self-culture are still intermingled, but the twentieth century would see them severed at the prospect of more widespread commercial appeal under secular liberalism.

The *Controversialist* did not invent self-culture, but its publishing history proves that it corresponded to a society wanting self-improvement. Besides running for over twenty years, its circulation reached a large number of suitable, engaged readers. Evidence for this comes from a segment entitled “Our Local Literature” from the *Birmingham Daily Post*, 21 December 1863. The *Controversialist* is of interest because, “although it is apparently not local, one of its editors and many of its contributors being local men, it comes under our present class” (“Our Local Literature” 6). The verdict of the paper on the publication was this: “As a handbook for young debaters and self-taught students the volume is very useful, and the publication well merits the great success it has attained” (6). The “great success” of the *Controversialist* lay in its accessible philosophy of self-improvement delivered with practical information and theoretical inspiration. The words of “The Essayist,” (the author signed D. W.), are the essences of the *Controversialist*’s call to self-culture: “Duty and privilege unite in the work of mental progress. It cannot be a matter of option, whether a man employ his powers, and make the best and the most of them. It seems incumbent, from the very fact of their possession. And yet how few cherish aims and cultivate habits in full harmony with the capacities they possess. They suffer them to lie dormant, or use them only for base and ignoble
ends. This should not be. Let it not be so with us” (Controversialist Vol. III 43). The call, apparently, was answered.

The Controversialist was a harbinger of increased interest in the topic. The philosophy behind the practice remained popular well into the twentieth century. Perhaps the most well-recognized single volume promoting self-culture of the era was Samuel Smiles’ Self-Help, published in 1859. Besides pioneering by its title the “self-help” genre, the book acted as more theoretical inspiration for the lower middle class dreamers who would pick it up to read the rags to riches stories of industrialists and politicians, no better off than them themselves, who never idled and were always striving to work towards success. Smiles included these individual case studies of perseverance along with chapters devoted to guiding the process of self-culture into a virtuous pursuit: including, for example, “Application and Perseverance,” “Self-Culture—Its Facilities and Difficulties,” and “Money—Its Use and Abuse” (Smiles n. p.). Self-Help became a wellspring of inspiration for the self-culture movement and its most popular Victorian volume. As such it was well-received by the Controversialist, which praised Smiles’s illuminating presentation of “the lives of conspicuous men” in terms of their inspiring achievements, lauding the author’s “judicious precepts [which] are profusely illustrated by the most interesting and stimulating facts” (Controversialist Vol. III 44). It was also well-received by the commercial public, selling 20,000 copies in its first year of publication and still in high demand at the beginning of the twentieth century (Hammond 32).
Needless to say, both the Controversialist and books such as Self-Help inspired the generations of autodidacts originating from the Victorian period and leading into the early twentieth century. They are representative examples of the wealth of print material made increasingly available to an increasingly-large audience of working and lower middle class self-improvers. As self-culture hit its commercial and popular stride during this time, modern writing and writers came to pick up on its influence in their works. What began as support from crowd-friendly Edwardian realists H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett turned into ambivalence from E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, a playful dismantling of self-cultural pretense from James Joyce, and finally a reversal of the paradigm for political purposes from George Orwell. In the chapters that follow, I consider each representative author or author set in conjunction with at least one issue in the historical development of popular self-culture in Great Britain, as it came to be featured in their works. By connecting them all to ongoing considerations of middlebrow modernism, I show that the desire for the masses to improve themselves—i.e., “vulgar ambitions”—was actually of great interest to the modernist authors who may have otherwise sought to refine vulgarity from their art. Far from ignoring the popular trend of self-culture, these authors wrestled personally and professionally to reconcile the real-world potential of the movement, and its attendant social ramifications, with the sanctity of their own views of art. The most direct litmus test of this tension was in the heightened presence of self-cultivating characters. By reading them as problematic figures in modernism, while examining the historical reasons behind their presence in literature as in society, I prove that there was not a single (negative) blanket reaction to mass-cultural
education. Rather, modernist reactions to self-culture took many ambiguous and ambivalent forms, befitting a larger fascination with and distrust of the spheres of popular culture, social class, and education. The story of modernism is not complete without interrogating the significant presence of self-culture in it.

2. Chapters

Chapter 1 is entitled “No Time to Waste: Efficiency and Self-Culture in H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett.” These two friends of the Edwardian era showed a real-world rise from lower middle class backgrounds through the discipline of intensive authorial output to become the prolific and popular authors they were. Apprenticed as a draper’s assistant, Wells read his way into a scientific and literary career with a combination of curiosity, diligence, and systematic cramming. High-volume, goal-oriented studying was common preparation for recently instated civil service and University entrance exams, a symptom of educational evolution towards democratizing access to higher learning through meritocratic testing. While a proponent of efficiency, Wells spoke out in favor of educational reform to limit cramming, and wrote in his fiction about the dulling effects of too narrow a self-driven academic focus. Likewise, one of the black sheep of the modern period, Arnold Bennett never received the critical attention and acceptance of the modernist coterie about which he often wrote. Nevertheless, his commercial success was considerable. He achieved his popular status in a classic double-barreled publicity ploy: being a prolific writer, and writing about being a prolific writer. Among numerous other
topics targeted to his lower middle class readers, Bennett wrote about how to develop
mental efficiency, how to breed literary taste, and how to focus on any task at hand.
Following the logic of “what man has done, man can do,” Bennett has proof in stacks of
his own books that his systems can work for anyone; this is, again, regardless of class,
intellect, or financial circumstances. Bennett, like Wells, raised himself up and loved to
tell about it.

Chapter 2, “Leonard Bast, Clerk-Autodidact,” will analyze the role and function
of Leonard Bast from E. M. Forster’s Howards End in terms of representing the growing
“Suburban” class of C. F. G. Masterman’s Condition of England and going along with a
trend in fiction featuring office clerks with literary or artistic aspirations. Picking up on
Masterman’s characterization of a mainly clerk working force, I emphasize the
importance of self-culture to Bast, his treatment in the novel, and the class assumptions
Forster makes and breaks to pen Bast’s tragedy. I will also examine Forster’s own
ambivalence towards self-culture. Having experienced a rich, exclusive education
himself, Forster led working class men in a study group for over a decade. As Howards
End shows, and his own experiences reflect, he was deeply unsure about the value of
such a pursuit even as he actively helped administer it—an ambivalence which I maintain
to be a typical modern (and frequently modernist) mentality.

In Chapter 3, “Aesthetic Sympathy and Aesthetics, Simply: Social Ideology and
Literary Representations of Self-Culture in Virginia Woolf,” I examine the gender issues
that are inherent in self-culture. Female autodidacts are an interesting but sparse subject
in modern British literature, as they almost always appear in minor roles as foils to main
characters (like Miss Kilman to Mrs. Dalloway). Even though women do not feature prominently as main self-cultural subjects in literature, their literary-historical participation and interest in public cultural events was high, especially among the progressive-minded middle classes of which Virginia Woolf was a part. Despite her progressive social leanings, and rather like her Bloomsbury friend Forster, however, Virginia Woolf was ambivalent about self-education and the way it should be properly conducted. She is supportive of feminism’s call for democratic education, but could not fashion fiction in which autodidactic characters actually succeed. She featured a range of male and female self-cultivating characters in her work, from Rachel Vinrace to Septimus Smith, who were variously affected by their experiences trying to learn and shaped by the social and historical environment encouraging them to learn but not being able to provide the proper pathways to cultural advancement.

Chapter 4, “‘Cultured Allroundmen’: Joyce’s Autodidacts,” takes the topic to Ireland. Although James Joyce came from a modestly affluent family, and was educated for a time at the best schools around Dublin, his encyclopedic erudition was not enough to convince Woolf he was anything other than a low-born man wallowing in vulgar self-education. This chapter explores three related topics: the assumptions behind Woolf’s distaste for Joyce’s self-culture, Joyce’s own experience as a lifelong autodidact, and the presence in his works (Dubliners, A Portrait, and Ulysses especially) of self-cultural characters. Stephen Dedalus and the controversy behind his depiction’s sincerity question how seriously we should take a character who strives to achieve something extraordinary by himself. Joyce, like other modern writers, was ambivalent about the seriousness of
self-culture, presenting the futility behind Little Chandler’s self-motivated poetic aspirations but later crafting a highly sympathetic and humane urban autodidact in Leopold Bloom. The presentation of Bloom as a “cultured allroundman” is best revealed in Joyce’s favorite episode of Ulysses, “Ithaca,” which takes as its narrative frame the kind of question-and-answer catechesis Joyce had hijacked from his Jesuit education to guide his own humanistic self-development.

In Chapter 5, “Going to the Dogs: Self-Culture’s Culminating Reversal in George Orwell,” I take the works of the author in the thirties as complicating self-culture in its depiction and execution. For example, the decision of Gordon Comstock to actively fight the influence of money to better his writing is shown to be a flawed one in Keep the Aspidistra Flying. Yet Orwell himself undergoes a similar self-directed fall in his slum ethnographies, such as Down and Out in Paris and London and The Road to Wigan Pier. I read these accounts as interesting examples of self-culture because they involve an unexpected reversal of the philosophy’s model of hard work yielding success (and improvement in social standing). Orwell’s accounts show him “gone to the dogs” and documenting the kind of lives hidden underneath the social ladder. This kind of sacrifice reversed the paradigm of self-culture and culminated in a politicized coda to the concept’s national importance.

The chapters follow roughly chronological order by author, but I have tried to trace in each one the relative importance of self-culture to its literary-historical period and its changing shape over time. I include contextual information about other forms of self-cultivation when appropriate, but it is important to remember that print—my main
focus in this dissertation—was just one of an expanding array of choices for improvement. Libraries, museums, lecture series, public exhibitions, university extension courses, book clubs, radio broadcasts and film documentaries also played an important role in supplementing print to reach large audiences interested in learning. The narrative I uncover is one where self-culture first meets the masses in fiction and non-fiction shaped in part by models of efficiency in early modernism (Wells and Benett), where it is later outlined and critiqued more vibrantly but ambiguously in high modernism around World War I (Forster and Woolf), and used for ironic and political reasons by writers on the margins of society afterwards (Joyce and Orwell). By the end of World War II, both modernism and self-culture as I discuss them here largely disappear. Utilizing postmodern techniques to deconstruct the atomic age, or else capturing the futility of the generation of Angry Young Men in an increasingly welfare-orientated society, British literature abandoned the typical autodidact. The school-leaving age after World War II was also raised to 16, providing more extensive education to the generations growing up. But before these developments, modernism and popular self-culture intertwined amidst the tumultuous social and artistic upheavals of 1900-1945. It was an era when just about everyone, from authors to autodidacts, sought cultural significance on an unprecedented scale.
1 The *OED* defines self-culture as “the cultivation or development by one’s own efforts of one’s mind, faculties, manners, etc.” and cites Ralph Waldo Emerson for its first appearance in print in 1847.


3 The term “lower middle class” is likely just as contentious as “self-culture,” but its meaning and usage are of primary importance to this work. By the lower middle class, I mean those men and women who fall income- and class-wise between the solidly “respectable” middle class and the working class immediately below. Terry Eagleton, in his classic work *Exiles and Émigrés*, provides a succinct view of this lower middle class status position:

[It is] wedged painfully between the working class on the one hand and the dominant social class on the other, but unable to identify itself with either. […] It is a world intelligent enough to feel acutely the meanness of its own typical experience, but powerless to transcend it; a world suspicious alike of the sophisticated manners of its rulers and the uncouthness of its working-class inferiors. It knows its own life to be trivialised and demeaning, and struggles to maintain decencies and pretensions which define more sharply that precariously thin line which divides it from the ‘lower’ classes […]. It despises the upper middle class, yet clings to it as the horizon of its own ambition. (72-3)

The pressure to conform to a higher social expectation in taste, knowledge, and supposed cultivation is one of the historical reasons why the lower middle class invested so heavily in self-culture. Many adherents to and targets of self-culture came from tenuous positions of economic and class fluctuation, spurred by new opportunities in the office and civil service as well as more established lower middle class occupations like small shopkeeping and shop assistantship.

4 See Lawrence Rainey’s work on typists, including “From the Fallen Woman to the Fallen Typist, 1908–1922” (*English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 52.3 (2009), 273-297) and Sean Latham’s “Am I a Snob?: Modernism and the Novel” (*Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003*).

5 For more on these improvement clubs and what the working and lower middle classes read, see Richard D. Altick’s *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1998), and Jonathan Rose’s *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (London: Yale UP, 2001).

6 Jonathan Rose describes a typical mutual improvement society, which can stand for mechanics’ institutes and other similar communal modes of education: “58. “In its classic form, it consisted of a half dozen to a hundred men from both the working and lower-middle classes who met periodically, sometimes in their own homes but commonly under the auspices of a church or chapel. Typically, at each meeting one member would deliver a paper on any imaginable subject—politics, literature, religion, ethics, ‘useful knowledge’—and then the topic would be thrown open to general discussion. The aim was to develop the verbal and intellectual skills of people who had never been encouraged to speak or think. There was complete freedom of expression, the teacher-pupil hierarchy was abolished, and costs were minimal: about 2s. per member per year in the case of a Gallatown society in 1912” (*Intellectual* 58).

7 John Carey, with his *Intellecctuals and the Masses* (1992), first brought the lower middle classes (and clerks in particular) to the attention of scholars of modernism. More recent work such as Jonathan Wild’s *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880-1939* (2006), continues the exploration of this quintessential figure both as character and reader in this era of social and literary transition.

One prompt, betraying a dash of English smugness, asks the reader to “Compare the language of France with that of England in respect to expressiveness, &c. Instance England’s richness in synonyms, and mention its advantages in this matter, and give the law of synonyms.” Finally, the reader is asked to “Give an opinion on any book on ‘the English language and literature’ you may have consulted” (*Controversialist* 237).

For example, the American-published *The Practice of Self-Culture*, by Hugh Black, echoed a similar sentiment as the *Controversialist*’s call to self-culture, but in 1904: “At the best, self-culture of all kinds is only like the polishing and sharpening of an instrument to make it serve for the best work” (14).
Chapter 1: No Time to Waste: 
Efficiency and Self-Culture in H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett

“And the years are passing; and there are twenty-four hours in every day, out of which [one works] only six or seven; and it needs only an impulse, an effort, a system, in order gradually to cure the mind of its slackness, to give ‘tone’ to its muscles, and to enable it to grapple with the splendours of knowledge and sensation that await it!”

- Arnold Bennett, Mental Efficiency and Other Hints to Men and Women (1911)

“The bricklayers do not realize the importance of this, and must be constantly instructed […]. Careful packing of the pack so as to save all the motion possible will diminish the distance that a bricklayers’ hand travels from a quarter to a half mile of distance per day.”

- Frank B. Gilbreth, Bricklaying System, Rule #287 (1909)

Partly as an attack against sleepy Victorian traditionalism, and partly as a continuation of the nineteenth-century’s fascination with industrial and scientific practices, the Edwardian age embraced all-mighty efficiency. Jonathan Rose traces Edwardian interest in efficiency to three main historical factors: as a reaction to German
militarization, as a response to the embarrassment of the Boer War, and as a way to become more competitive in a growing global marketplace (Edwardian 118). Time, transportation, and the national workday were all becoming regularized. As Stephen Kern notes in his *Culture of Time and Space*, a traveler in 1870 America journeying from the nation’s capital to San Francisco would need to set a pocket watch over two hundred times to match the local times of each town passed (12). By the early twentieth century, the world had fully adopted the suggestions of the 1884 Prime Meridian Conference, which named Greenwich the zero meridian, determined the precise length of a day, evenly split the globe into twenty-four time zones, each separated by an hour, and fixed the start of the worldwide day (Kern 12). At the root of efficiency is the simple concept of the well-oiled machine, doing its job with a minimum of waste. An efficient operation of any kind sought to minimize energy expenditure and maximize output—the very same concept grounding capitalism’s obsession with cost / benefit relations. At this time, efficiency went beyond its mechanical roots to become a fixture in the daily lives of Westerners everywhere, but especially in industrialized, commercialized Britain. Increasingly, the machine of most interest was the human body, operated by the human mind. Influenced by Taylor’s scientific management and Ford’s assembly-line philosophy, American “motion study” pioneers Frank and Lilian Gilbreth were beginning at the turn of the century to translate ideas of efficiency through physical movement to the blue-collar work site, the white-collar office, and the house. Their work sought to maximize output by eliminating waste motion, but it also had the benefit of making tasks physically less demanding and therefore less taxing on the worker’s body. For example,
bricklaying was traditionally a task that involved stooping, walking, and reaching for each brick placed. The Gilbreths designed a system involving a series of stations where workers would never have to walk or reach more than an arm’s length to lay bricks. This saved a quantifiable amount of effort and motion, as the quotation above suggests. With Freud and psychology beginning to take hold, the mind was another arena for targeted efficiency. Like other machines, the brain could be best put to practical use by keeping its focus limited and disciplined. A helpful byproduct of “mental efficiency” would be the avoidance of mental states then being recognized as weaknesses in the superego: guilt, lack of focus, idleness, and depression.¹

Caught up in these changes professionally, middle class men and women, ranging from the lower end to the core middle, began to reflect the efficiency impetus in their private lives as well. Best practices in the workplace, mechanical or managerial, translated to best practices in social relations, physical upkeep, and cultural refinement. For a growing middle class population concerned both with a lack of time and insecure about their level of enculturation, reading the right books made all of the difference in developing apparent and authentic taste. Being mentally disciplined to do so was required, and so was being able to discern what the most edifying texts were. While compendia and collections of literature had been around for centuries, this was the era when the publishing industry targeted ascendant readers with cheap classics series and guides to the world’s best books. Joan Shelley Rubin, in *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, links American Book-of-the-Month Clubs of the later twentieth century to the core principles of the democratic pursuit of culture already exemplified by British
thinkers and ideas such as Matthew Arnold and the Oxford Classics series taking root on transatlantic soil. Likewise new literature, in its early modernist forms, responding to the various changes of modern life including the push for efficiency in all things, followed suit in its own idiosyncratic ways by variously embracing and denouncing the national and personal cult(ure) of industry.

Amid all of this busy-ness, H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett utilized their prodigious energies to become two of the most popular writers of the period. The secret to their success was no secret at all, as they made clear. By working steadily and proficiently, they were able to publish a substantial amount of literature. Self-culture and success built a feedback loop in which these two friends continued to work for decades. In his fiction, Wells features many characters of the lower middle classes who—having been shorted both in terms of education and time—struggle with just such a schematic concept of self-cultivation. Bennett goes one step further, writing “pocket philosophies” that outlined best practices for obtaining maximum culture in a limited timeframe. By appealing to busy Edwardians, especially the middle classes, both Wells and Bennett represented the age of efficiency—reflecting upon and personally employing systems of schematic self-culture. For this they would meet the criticism of modernism’s next generation, which was much more skeptical about self-development and progress as holdovers from Victoria’s reign. But Wells, and Bennett especially, would pioneer nonfiction genres devoted to self-help even as they helped themselves to became some of the most financially successful English writers of all time. Both men were concerned about what they saw as deficiencies in education and art that could be addressed by the
early twentieth century salve of efficiency. In their views, both the novel and the reader could be fashioned to become better cultural semiconductors, receiving and transmitting educational and aesthetic value with little waste. This was more than a critical stance on their parts—it was a timely contribution proceeding from and perpetuating the spirit of the age. Examining first Wells’s work, then the connections between the two in the publishing world they inhabited, and finally Bennett’s writings, we can better understand how efficiency and self-culture informed the careers of two extremely popular authors.

1. Cramming for Culture, or, Meritocracy Tested: H. G. Wells

During the late nineteenth century, educational efficiency was an issue of great pride in England. Reformers, many in parliament such as Sir Thomas Dyke Acland and Sir Ernest Gray, continued the work of George Birkbeck and Herbert Spencer in citing the importance of proper education in shaping individual, social, and national character. A well-educated public spelled the continuation of English pre-eminence in mind, body, and soul. Much discussion centered on the extension of pedagogical privileges to the historically under-served classes. Eminent Victorian thinkers, namely Arnold, Carlyle, and Ruskin, set in motion ideas that would encourage political movements related to British Idealism and Labour Party initiatives to spread education to the working and lower middle classes. This movement shaped formal government policy changes, such as the Education Act of 1870, which raised the school leaving-age to fourteen, and also inspired unofficial volunteer efforts for change. Sponsored by colleges, churches, and
concerned citizens (such as those comprising the Society for Diffusion of Useful Knowledge), extension lectures and courses aimed to supplement the knowledge of underprivileged men and women while simultaneously cultivating their taste and intellect (Altick 242). It was a time of great optimism in the history of education, when the overarching theory—tied closely to the Enlightenment, and the moral qualities of humanism—proclaimed that knowledge could and should be obtained by all who put forth the effort to pursue it. As Peter Keating notes, “Educationalists saw themselves as working towards a future in which universal literacy would effect an almost inconceivable cultural transformation of the entire nation” (4). H. G. Wells was one of those educationalists, as he was also more generally concerned with the political and social well-being of the world’s citizens, and his essays and fiction calling attention to reforming educational efficiency, including aspects of self-culture, coincided with the spirit of change that pervaded the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.

A call for reform of traditional English education was the watchword in the nineteenth century, but most of them had to do with restructuring or modernizing course requirements (for example, replacing classic languages with sciences) and eliminating time-honored rites of bullying known as “fagging” in the public schools. Not often did commentators seek to give the subjects of education more academic freedom. But at the dawn of the twentieth century, critics looked for waste and found it in inefficient customs of class requirements. Harold Edward Gorst, an educational polemicist, leveled his 1901 tract *The Curse of Education* against the state-mandated systems of stifling the intelligence of youth. The blunders of the Boer War and the inept actions of its imperial
administrators, he says, happened because the current educational system and its
Gradgrindian emphasis on facts eradicated common sense and initiative from pupils (6-7). He says, “This is not education, but fabrication. It is destruction, not development” (127). Real education, for Gorst, “would consist in assisting every individual to develop the faculties with which Nature had endowed him, and […] would encourage the utilization of the brain for purposes of thought and reflection, instead of trying to make it a warehouse for storing van-loads of useless knowledge” (127). Indeed, Gorst goes on to say, “There is only one way in which people are now able to obtain a genuine education, and it goes by the name […] of self-culture” (134). Although Gorst recognized that self-culture was a term “applied more or less with contempt” from certain traditionalist educational philosophers (134), he also saw it as the only current way for people to obtain the education best suited to them outside of academia’s stunting regulations. In the future, more educational systems should be like self-culture, allowing for more self-directed pursuits and not restricted to a limited agenda of state-sanctioned subjects and qualifications for expertise. It is precisely that “expertise” that falls flat when graduates of the schools of cram meet real-world tests in South Africa and throughout the Empire.

Philosophically, Wells supported similar ideals of self-culture as Gorst. Students would be better suited to more efficiently follow their own paths of interest and development. But here Wells mostly focuses on the benefits of physical culture in bringing up the healthiest and brightest contributors to society. In 1904’s Mankind in the Making, one of several works of his outlining social issues in the utopian New Republic, he says:
If we are to get the best result from the child’s individuality, we must leave a large portion of that margin at the child’s own disposal, it must be free to go for walks, to ‘muck about,’ as schoolboys say, to play games, and (within limits) to consort with companions of its own choosing—to follow its interests in short. It is in this direction that British middle-class education fails most signal at the present time. The English schoolboy and schoolgirl are positively hunted through their days. They do not play—using the word to indicate a spontaneous employment into which imagination enters—at all. (220)

The concept of play, whether physical, social, or sexual, was important in the development of Wells’s young New Republican. Play is the ultimate deflection of authority, and is a fundamental source of imaginative and physical development. Wells felt so deeply about the positive benefits of play that he wrote books about how his sons staged toy-soldier battles in the imaginative worlds, and how he, as an impoverished child, made everyday objects into toys: *Floor Games* (1911) and *Little Wars* (1913). Being such a fundamental aspect of development, play has its place in a proper education, and especially one with the cultivation of the self at its core.

Concerning incompetence in the Army and Civil Services, Gorst’s biggest compaint against the testing system, Wells’s solution is not *more* comprehensive exams, but exams that are more *comprehensive*. In his utopian scenario, Wells wanted to cover as many aspects of the total education of the social body and mind as possible—including, along with standardized knowledge of facts, “athletic development and moral influence”
(determined by the vote of fellow pupils), as well as “all-round worth” (*Mankind* 296). To be sure, the details of the exam’s nature are foggy (“it must be remembered that the theory and science of examinations scarcely exists as yet”), but Wells suggests that such a comprehensive leaving-school examination would be far more efficient in selecting proper all-around leaders and fewer fact-cramming misfits in the service of the Republic (*Mankind* 295). Everyone interested in education and the development of England’s youth, regardless of political persuasion, were concerned about the state of affairs surrounding the embarrassments of the Boer War. The education, training, and examination of these young men and their leaders were all causes for greater reflection. On a larger scale, other systems of qualification and public approval exemplified in the open examination form came under closer scrutiny.

Wells was concerned about uniform competitive exams in the early twentieth century, but their legacy continues today. Certainly one of the most well known was the pioneering Civil Service Examination. First devised by a Gladstone-commissioned report from Sir Stafford Northcote and Charles Trevelyan in 1853, the Civil Service examination sought to rid the expanding and modernizing government offices of the wasteful and inefficient influences of aristocratic “preferment, patronage, [and] purchase” (“Origins”). The Northcote-Trevelyan Report recommended that hiring should be based entirely on merit through public, competitive examinations and also recommended that entrants should have a good “generalist” education (“Origins”). The motivation behind the exams was to assure a standard, quantifiable quality of applicants—those who passed the exams were theoretically intelligent and prepared enough to do the job, regardless of
educational or class background. It was designed to be the epitome of efficiency, fair and unquestionable. Cambridge had public entrance exams from the eighteenth century, and Oxford had them since the early years of the nineteenth century, but both were modernizing along with the Civil Service Exam to jump on the trend towards rewarding merit (Williams 139-40). Although the term “meritocracy” was yet to be satirically coined by Michael Young in 1958’s *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, the system that term describes was fully established in the era of the public examination.

By the twentieth century, however, Gorst and others found that national tests such as the Civil Service examination were beginning to dictate methods of teaching and learning that were strictly for the test. In order to gain an edge for their graduates and for their institutional reputation, schools often prepared their pupils with facts that, above and beyond any practical application, were likely to crop up in the course of a targeted exam. Sample questions from the 1855 examination aimed at junior clerks actually resembled the Collegiate Course of *The British Controversialist*. They covered topics ranging from history (“Name the first and last of the 12 Caesars and the principal writers of the Augustan Era”), elementary arithmetic (“Find the income tax on £2382.7s.6d at the rate of 16d in the pound”), geography (“Draw an outline map showing the overland route to India”), and English grammar (“Construct sentences exemplifying the use of the relative pronouns in the possessive and objective cases”) (“Civil Service”). Gorst has a point when he complains that the nature of the exam often has little to do with the duties of the actual position in the government (except, as with the India question, an inherent sense of imperialism). The point is that all of these subjects could be “taught to” in the classroom.
and pursued by the ambitious individual. Teachers could and did fill their students with the facts necessary to pass examinations arguably without providing them a quality holistic education. In those cases where candidates studied independently, the cramming process was even more exaggerated. Success in the Civil Service examination did not necessarily presuppose a quality general education, and in many cases success in the exam actually came at the sacrifice of just that kind of education. Applicants were able to succeed despite, and perhaps because of, their failure to be the kind of well-rounded candidates originally envisioned by the Northcote-Trevelyan report.

The efficiency of the entire education-and-examination process, therefore, was under dispute. In a personal reflection from his autobiography *Over the Bridge*, the self-identifying lower middle class poet Richard Church talks about sacrificing his artistic dreams in order to please his father by passing the Civil Service exam. In preparation, he toiled under the tutelage of the day-school masters of his alma mater, Dulwich Hamlet. He says, “I plodded away at the subjects required for this boy clerks’ examination; subjects so repulsive that even now I cannot clearly recall them; vaguely I remember such things as digest of returns, commercial geography, précis writing, book-keeping.” He continues, saying, “In those desolate weeks of autumn I went, evening after evening, to my old school, having spent the days rebelliously swotting at these dreary subjects, damping down the fires of my imagination, treading out the sparks of my ambition to be a painter” (Church 212). Church passed the examination, and began work as a clerk. In Gorst and Wells’ observations, as well as Church’s more personal experience, the examination is not necessarily efficient for finding the best-suited, highest-quality
applicants. Schools misplace their efforts by teaching to the tests rather than striving to
develop the whole student. Individuals such as Church misplace their efforts by
cramming. The presence of a universal standard of examination only provides efficiency
in theory, and only in terms of the immediate need of staffing an open position. What is
disregarded in most cases is the effect on the test-takers, both as students of a school and
as individual studiers.⁵

Clearly, then, in an age when apparent efficiency dictated the process of
meritocratic examination, goal-oriented students and teachers often devised their own
systems of schematic cramming. Church’s experience was both emotionally disastrous
and technically successful, since he wound up passing anyway. This is a common
reflection on the process of cramming in the age of efficiency: it is not always desirable
personally, but it yields professional results. H. G. Wells himself crammed mightily in
order to pass the entrance examination to the Normal School of Science in South
Kensington. Several of his romantic comedies dealt with lower middle class protagonists
in uncomfortable moments of transition. He wrote one book in particular that dealt
directly with the pressures of self-cultivation under the strains of time and tests to be
passed. In the 1900 comedy Love and Mr. Lewisham, a struggling school-teacher and
aspiring science student, takes his education so seriously that it is literally inscribed into a
formulation he calls his “Schema”: a schedule engineered to the minute to maximize the
accumulation of knowledge, both humanistic and scientific. Although Lewisham
succeeds in gaining entrance to University, his life as dictated by the Schema is a
constant source of tension and is ultimately rejected for domestic security. But the
Schema is key to understanding the kind of character Lewisham is, how he reflects a significant segment of the up-and-coming late Victorian and Edwardian populace, and the empowering dream of self-culture.

The opening pages of Wells’s work focus on a man with a plan: young Mr. Lewisham, in relative poverty, dreaming and scheming ambitiously to enter university as a science scholar. The setting of Lewisham’s room reflects the all-encompassing nature of his goal: “Over the head of the bed [...] these truths asserted themselves, written in a clear, bold, youthfully florid hand: ‘Knowledge is Power,’ and ‘What man has done man can do,’—man in the second instance referring to Mr Lewisham. Never for a moment were these things to be forgotten” (3). Lewisham seeks inspiration from these maxims as he goes about his business for the day, which is always industrious. Pinned to his wall are the two elements designed to coalesce into a career—a schema, with academic goals, and a time-table by which to accomplish them: “Mr Lewisham was to rise at five, and that this was no vain boasting [...] ‘French until eight,’ said the time-table curtly. Breakfast was to be eaten in twenty minutes; then twenty-five minutes of ‘literature’ to be precise, learning extracts (preferably pompous) from the plays of William Shakespeare—and then to school and duty” (4). The narrator’s parenthetical remarks in regards to the Shakespeare extracts go to show that Lewisham is not really interested in the humanistic benefits of reading the Bard’s complete works; he is rather convinced that the power of literature is in its ability to grant cultural cachet. All things being equal, and with the appearance of literary taste as important as the real presence of it, the time-table presents abbreviation as the appropriate, logical action. It is appropriate that the Schema is
personified in terms of a diligent taskmaster, speaking “curtly” with its written directive of “French until eight.” Earlier in the passage, Lewisham temporarily loses his agency as the passive voice declares he “was to rise at five.” For all intents and purposes, the timetable, though originally devised by him, has ultimate control over the young man’s actions. The curtness of the Schema’s inky voice implies a Faustian bargain: in exchange for your soul, I will make you into a man of knowledge, a professor.

The dream that Lewisham constructs is exactly that which is promoted by the late-Victorian, early-Edwardian culture of meritocracy and the power of humanistic knowledge. It is interesting to see how much literature and languages Lewisham studies, considering his professional interest is biology. This is a prerequisite for University entrance requirements at the time, but also an indication that Lewisham is committed completely, at first, to the dream of empowering himself through schematic education. Like the Catholic catechism, a form of which Joyce employs ironically in “Ithaca” (and which I analyze elsewhere in this dissertation), Lewisham’s Schema purports to have all of the relevant answers to life’s questions in a logically failsafe setup. In this case the overarching question is how to advance to University in order to become a professor, and the answer is the Schema itself. He glories in the simplicity and grace of the whole program, the success of which is virtually assured: “In six years Mr Lewisham will have his five or six languages, a sound, all-round education, a habit of tremendous industry, and be still but four and twenty. He will already have honour in his university and ampler means. One realises that those pamphlets in the Liberal interest will be no obscure platitudes” (5). There are more than political ideas inspiring Mr. Lewisham, however, as
the notions of “a sound, all-round education” and “a habit of tremendous industry” are also tied to the increasingly-popular self-cultivation movement originally popularized through such works as Samuel Smiles’ 1859 *Self-Help*.

In Smiles we have at least the ideological basis for Mr. Lewisham’s schema of self-improvement. Emerging from an unprivileged background, Smiles himself achieved financial success with his optimistic and inspirational writing supplemented by biographical sketches of others setting and reaching goals—the so-called “Illustrations of Character, Conduct, and Perseverance” of the work’s subtitle. As Peter Sinnema notes in the introduction, this kind of work was directly in line with working-class and petite bourgeois ambition. He says, “*Self-Help* unambiguously celebrates individuality, autonomy, and civility, virtues central to the projects of other nineteenth-century institutions that actively encouraged cultivation of the intellectual and moral working-class self: the mechanics’ institutes, public libraries, people’s colleges, and lyceums” (vii). Wells never mention Smiles by name, but his influence is inherent in Lewisham’s Schema. In key catchphrases and witty mottoes, the rhetoric of success shines through. In his chapter on “Application and Perseverance,” Smiles says, “Fortune has often been blamed for her blindness; but fortune is not so blind as men are. Those who look into practical life will find that fortune is usually on the side of the industrious, as the winds and waves are on the side of the best navigators” (90). He cites Voltaire, Locke, and Diderot, among other thinkers, as relevant examples of those who worked industriously to achieve great things (91). He locates the achievements of the Scottish philosopher, historian, and parliamentarian Joseph Hume directly as a result of the construction and
maintenance of a strict daily regimen, much like Lewisham’s, proclaiming that “The amount of hard work which he contrived to get through was something extraordinary” (107).

One of Smiles’ most important points, later in the work, comes in the chapter entitled “Self-Culture—Facilities and Difficulties.” Smiles stresses that success is less a result of inborn genius than a product of concerted effort. Regardless of real or apparent mental ability, one could rise with hard work. Summarizing this point, he says, “it is not men of genius who move the world and take the lead in it, so much as men of steadfastness, purpose, and indefatigable industry” (292). The import of this idea is doubly significant to one such as young Lewisham. In the first place it allows him to dream that he can achieve such lofty goals as six languages and a professorship at twenty-four, no matter what his native intelligence. In the second it means that his upbringing—social or otherwise—need have no bearing on his education as long as he works hard. Just because members of “the uneasy class” were not born into wealth and prestige did not mean they were bound to lowly status for their lifetimes; in the same way, just because people were born without bright minds (in any class) did not mean they could not grow smarter and more successful.

So with such an optimistic outlook, adopted or at least pondered over by many, it may come as a surprise that Lewisham eventually turns his back on these ideas and the Schema itself. He does earn a scholarship to the Normal School (as Wells, a draper’s apprentice, once did). But along his career path he slips out of the discipline of the Time-Table, falls in his standing in the class, flirts with Socialism, and falls in love—twice. As
in many of Wells’s works, there are elements of the authors’ biography inherent in this miniature Bildungsroman (Smith 58); yet the purpose behind Love and Mr. Lewisham goes beyond a comedic rehearsal of the young love trope or even of a Wellsian mismatch of societies. At the very heart of the story is the Schema—and its associations with liberal idealism, Enlightenment thinking, and Smiles-esque self-culture—so much so that it figures prominently in the novel’s close, when Lewisham ultimately discontinues his dream of entering the professoriate in favor of caring for his newlywed wife and unborn child. Of the future member of the family, he says, “This will be our work now;” as for the Schema, “It was just . . . vanity!” (187). Lewisham comes to the conclusion that his disciplined ambition was merely the misguided motivation of an immature fool: he calls it “play,” “vanity,” and “a boy’s vanity” (188-9). The novel concludes with Lewisham pondering the motives behind the Schema before destroying it. “The vision of that arranged Career, that ordered sequence of work and successes, distinctions and yet further distinctions, rose brightly,” at the point of last contact with it (188). When he tears it up, “he seemed to be tearing his past self” (189). At the end of the work, Wells’ ambitious young scholar has turned maturely into a family man—much to the happiness of his wife and himself.

As we have seen, Wells is skeptical of such clear-cut, cram-based self-improvement plans, even though his own success is at least partially based on that kind of focused work ethic. At Midhurst Grammar School, for example, David C. Smith says that young “Wells literally crammed himself full of facts,” which helped him to pass “an extraordinary number of examinations, each producing its guinea or occasionally two
guineas for finishing at the top.” Yet “He hated the cramming and spoke in scathing tones on the subject as soon as he was free of it. He termed it ‘mental engorgement, learning without digestion’, describing it as like making sausages” (Smith 9). Though Wells actually constructed a schema like Lewisham’s, he later sees some of his early adolescent insecurities behind it. In his Experiment in Autobiography, he modestly admits, “Every moment in the day had its task. […] Such things—like my refusal to read novels or play games—are not evidence of an intense and concentrated mind; they are evidence of an acute sense of the need for concentration in a discursive and inattentive brain” (135). Though he treats humorously the role of such a plan of self-education in his own life, the critique may extend further to take on the culture of cram—the kind of autodidacticism that emphasized accumulating useless factual knowledge primarily for professional advancement.

As the novel shows, Lewisham is incomplete as a scholar alone. Though he achieves modest success because of his Schema, at least at first, his presence in elevated company is unsettling. As with Kipps from the eponymous novel and George Ponderevo from Tono-Bungay, two of Wells’ other class-ascending aspirants, the move into a different social setting causes discomfort and disillusion. Lewisham also realizes that his dedication to his career plans would greatly compromise his ability to devote himself to his wife and child. So in one respect, Wells is providing a comedy of manners that shows the development of a young lower-middle-class man whose objectives are misguided for the kind of life that he finally recognizes is more important. From a moral standpoint, love of people trumps love of knowledge—even the love of self that would inspire such
towering career goals. This message, aimed clearly at the middle-class reading public, would have provided comfort and encouragement to those who tried and failed at self-culture, and justification for those who never saw the point of it.

Beyond appealing to his demographic (and quite successfully so), Wells’s depiction of the fortunate abandonment of self-culture emphasizes his own disinclination to accept the rhetoric of crammed education, categorized, organized, and abbreviated by productive efficiency, rather than thought or feeling. Even when he was a student at the Normal School, Wells was disappointed with the emphasis on teaching facts and practical experimentation, rather than the more intellectually creative exploration of science in theory. A. Rupert Hall, historian of the Normal School, says that at Wells’ time “‘science’ was assigned the somewhat doubtful role of being the ‘basis’ or handmaiden of ‘practice,’ at lowest a sort of mental furniture for the otherwise vacant mind, at best a source of convenient tips and profitable legerdemain,” and that “This attitude came through in much of the teaching, as Wells perceived, though no doubt many students were more receptive of ‘facts’ than he was” (17). Whether he was personally predisposed to abhor fact-based learning or not, Wells hated all the intellectual narrow-mindedness that cramming entailed. Later he would declare in his massive Outline of History, a book he would describe in the Introduction as being “written plainly for the general reader” (v), that other practitioners of the discipline should recognize that “history as one whole is amenable to a more broad and comprehensive handling than is the history of special nations and periods, a broader handling that will bring it within the normal limitations of time and energy set to the reading and education of an ordinary citizen” (v-vi). In other
words, the broad view *can* be just as educational as the narrow one, and is certainly more amenable to the common reader whose ignorance Wells hoped to quell for the sake of preventing, by understanding the causes of, future war. Although in some ways one can respect the effort that Lewisham puts forth to better himself, his aims and technique of studying in this way mark himself and the system of cram-filled examination as shallow and self-serving.

The counter-example to Mr. Lewisham’s focused vanity is self-culture of a more naturally diffuse kind from the eponymous lower middle class shopkeeper in another one of Wells’ romantic comedies, *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910). Polly is a victim of the kind of inefficient education that Wells was critical of, and by the time he had left school at fourteen years old, “his mind was in much the same state that you would be in, dear reader, if you were operated upon for appendicitis by a well-meaning, boldly enterprising, but rather overworked and underpaid butcher boy […] that is to say, it was in a thorough mess.” (13). Because of his stunted education, Polly becomes a stunted man, losing his childlike interest in learning things about the world. He also lost confidence in his ability to learn because of his bad experience with education: “He thought of the present world no longer as a wonderland of experiences but as geography and history, as the repeating of names that were hard to pronounce, and lists of products and populations and heights and lengths, and as lists and dates – oh! and Boredom indescribable” (13). His education is incomplete and is based on factual cramming. Polly nonetheless exhibits a latent taste for literature, which is also somewhat twisted and confused. He fills his leisure time with books and novels of all sorts. Polly places his own
imprint on the literary world by characteristically mispronouncing the names of Continental writers (“Bocashieu” and “Rabooloose”) and encountering the Western canon with a refreshing lack of intimidation and ambition (19). This little man is well-remembered as a noble savage of the efficiency age, who comes to a series of minor Wellsian epiphanies concerning the unjustness of marriage laws and the restriction of state education as cramming. If Wells is instructing his readers about how self-culture is best (or most efficiently) undertaken, Mr. Polly’s un-schematic honest interest is the lesson. Unlike Lewisham, Polly reads for no concrete gain in knowledge, skill, or applicability. His efforts are, ironically, more efficient for their lack of practicality. Mr. Polly’s is production by play, befitting his childlike disregard for social conventions.

Much of his self-educational efforts stem from his primary interest in words, which will come to define Polly as a character with a unique voice in Wells’s work. Early on, with his self-improving friends Platt and Parsons (altogether comprising “the three P’s”), he is taken up by the magic and mystery of words. After viewing a local production of Romeo and Juliet, for weeks “He walked as though he carried a sword at his side and swung a mantle from his shoulders. He went through the grimy streets of Port Burdock with his eye on the first-floor windows – looking for balconies” (19). Shakespeare’s words evoke an imaginative romance in Mr. Polly’s otherwise dreary day-to-day life, and elsewhere he finds more escape in the supple nuances of language. As the narrator says, “Words attracted him curiously, words rich in suggestion, and he loved a novel and striking phrase” (24). Part of this is due to inborn curiosity, but some of it is due, ironically, to his inadequate schooling and poor experience with teachers, which gave
him no technical mastery over formal pronunciation. Because “New words had terror and fascination for him,” and he could neither acquire nor avoid them, “he plunged into them. His only rule was not to be misled by the spelling” (24-25). Polly “mispronounced everything in order that he should be suspected of whim rather than ignorance” (24-25). Language, for Polly, is both playful by his own idiosyncratic nature and propped up in defense of his own educational shortcomings.

Starting as a character sympathetic in his charming innocence, he grows into being one of Wells’s standout representatives for the unguarded, self-directed soul. Polly achieves happiness because he follows his own instincts in matters of literature, love, and life. He avoids the prescriptive in all of its social and state-mandated manifestations, schematic reading lists and marriage contracts alike. “His is an ordinary life of frustration and defeat which culminates in a magnificent rebellion,” Patrick Parrinder says. “But although he fights a lone battle for spiritual independence, his triumph is not purely an individual one. Wells broadens the significance of the comedy, using the interpretative narrative to show him as a socially representative figure,” representing the lower middle class, rather like Lewisham and the other little men in the Wellsian genre Parrinder calls “The Comedy of Limitation” (78). It is fitting that one of Wells’s most eloquent spokespeople for self-reliance exhibits such idiosyncratic pronunciation and practices such cheerful misuse of the English language.

Despite their differences in approaches to self-education, both Lewisham and Polly are undeniably victims of an educational system that has stunted and underserved them. Lewisham is driven to schematic cramming in order to meet the college’s standards
of entrance, and Polly is left to languish with a great taste for classic literature but without the instructional support to recognize the historical, cultural, and artistic significance of it. Lewisham, Polly, and two of Wells’s other little men, Mr. Kipps and Hoopdriver, represent in John Carey’s words “the wastage of the English educational system at the start of the twentieth century” (141). Wells railed against a government that was willing to spend so much on national defense and the costly upkeep of Empire while neglecting its own youthful self-development in national education. This is not simply a matter of spending more money or developing the proper agencies, however.

With education and personal development, contrary to almost every other category in his Fabian society, Wells has no strict rules and guidelines in place for maximizing bureaucratic effectiveness. From his directives on the importance of play, to his ideas for a leaving examination covering the all-around student, to his sympathetic treatment of Mr. Polly, Wells shows that self-cultivation is still highly personal despite (or perhaps because of) its direct impact on the rest of the society. He also stresses how everyone learns differently, so that a universalized apportionment of education would not work. Self-culture places advancement of the self first, with larger society, logically, to follow.

The same paradox of efficiency that informed Wells’ opinions on self-education informed his writing style. Just as less formal education could be more educational, in terms of the whole person, an abundance of words could be more efficient than a dearth of them, in terms of novelistic representation. It all depended on one’s view of the role of literature, as the famous dispute between Wells and Henry James outlined. James was of
the viewpoint that art was a separate construction, filtering aspects of the world into autonomous aesthetic artifacts. Wells believed that art and the world were inseparable, and his novels reflected the idea that they should “engage actively with the world, and should reproduce as much of its multifariousness as possible within their pages” (Raitt 839). Wells’s aim was to “reproduce life in all its extensive variety,” and he saw this not as wasteful but as an efficient conduit to social change (Raitt 839).

Later modernists would have their own opinions about novelistic efficacy and the virtues of “efficient” writing, including Virginia Woolf on the “materialistic” writing of the Edwardians Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy. Woolf thought the extensive details of the previous generation’s novels were actually highly inefficient, at least when it comes to the core problematic of presenting a character such as Mrs. Brown. It is interesting to note, however, that the much-vaunted high-modernist stream of consciousness, used by Woolf as by Joyce and others, was seen by its inventor Dorothy Richardson as the very stuff of efficiency: a way of transcribing directly, without waste, the inner thoughts and feelings of characters. Earlier Ezra Pound sought to purify poetry into its most efficient form in Imagism’s le mot juste: hard, pure, and direct. Paradoxically, both Imagism and stream-of-consciousness were recognized for their efficiency. As Suzanne Raitt says, “Practitioners and critics of both techniques emphasized the thrifty nature of each form, arguing that the successful representation of the processes of perception required every word that arrived on the page” (835-36). The underlying motivation for both of these was in responding to modernity itself: “Art had to be modern and to be modern meant to be accurate, stream-lined, and efficient” (Raitt 836). It is difficult to see how both forms
could co-exist as exemplars of efficiency at the same time, but the emphasis which both sides laid on their chosen style’s lack of waste tells us just how important the concept was to the artists and to the public at large.

How a seemingly simple concept can take so many different shapes and forms—from the Edwardian social novel, to the Imagist poem, to high modernist interior monologue—also goes to show how riddled with paradoxes the very notion of efficiency was to modern writers. Like one of the other great watchwords of the bygone era, “progress,” efficiency was insidious and tempting, a target and a tool. For the modernists, it was possible to be progressive by writing against Victorian notions of progress. In fact, there was no better way to move past the previous era’s influence than to use its own assets to break it down entirely. The same was true with efficiency, which became associated with two other great Victorian values, self-improvement and standardized schooling. For Wells, eliminating wastefulness and weakness of all kinds was the mission of the New Republic. Often this meant establishing bureaucracies which would in turn establish fair universal standards based on reason and good fellowship. One important area where Wells differs in this conception is education. As he saw it, the roots of proper development go beyond the memorization of facts and cramming for a standardized test. More self-directed pursuits, including mental and physical play, were essential for the education of young girls and boys into college age. Although he was not against the philosophical egalitarianism behind standardized testing, per se, he was skeptical of the long-term benefits of examinations that measured primarily short-term factual retention. At its worst, self-directed education resulted in the schematic vanity of one such as Mr.
Lewisham. At its best, self-directed education succeeded in freeing the mind of one such as Mr. Polly. Wells was a titan of efficiency in terms of his social ideology and in terms of his output in print. Having achieved so much success by dint of organized personal industry, it is no wonder that he advocated for the rest of the rational world to follow suit. Where he appears to divert from his path of efficiency in his romantic comedies are actually sites where the concept’s chimerical modern nature can be exposed. One may understand efficiency as the tightening of loose screws. With education and fiction, Wells favored keeping the screws loose as the most efficient method of living and learning in a mad modern world.

2. Friends Writ Large

Of course, efficiency is not the same as quality, and in general terms of mechanical output the two often exist in an inverse relationship. Later critics applied this concept, often without nuance, to directly equate extensive literary production with poor artistic quality. In this line of thought, Wells and his good friend Arnold Bennett have been categorized pejoratively as “the Edwardians” at least since the academy warmed up to Virginia Woolf’s essays, including “Modern Fiction” and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” Both essays lump Wells and Bennett in a group as the worst examples of extant writing in the early twentieth century making use of a bygone style from a bygone era (the other culprit mentioned by name, John Galsworthy, has nearly been forgotten). For scholars of modernism, Woolf’s essays are frequently cited as lines of demarcation
between the old style and the new. Elsewhere in this dissertation, I treat Woolf’s perspective at length. Several critics, including Robert Squillace with his *Modernism, Modernity, and Arnold Bennett* (1997), have tried to push one or several of Woolf’s targets from her crosshairs. Squillace even turns the tables on Woolf when he says, “that Bennett piled up disconnected physical details in order to achieve a pointless ‘realism’ can be so readily exploded that many critics have preferred to discuss what her essay reveals about its author, rather than the justice of its conclusions about Bennett” (28). I will continue Squillace’s efforts to rethink the contributions of a writer who has been too easily boxed in by another, now more famous author. Ultimately, neither Wells nor Bennett took Woolf’s opinion too seriously at the time, or afterwards, and continued what they had done long before the next generation exercised its upstart critical swing. Wells and Bennett were friends who grew rich giving the public what it wanted, and did so while developing themselves to the highest capabilities of artistic and social thought they believed possible. Writing was more than personal expression for the two, but a practice in private discipline in order to increase public dissemination of their works and ideas.

Both friends came from a world in which writing could be an escape from the narrow options of lower middle class life. As such, they wrote for their lives in order to write for a living. Wells recognized, and detailed in some of his fiction, how freaks of chance could disrupt even the most steady of plans. Bennett saw more plainly that hard work reaped rewards as his father ascended the legal ranks. Even his upbringing in the Five Towns gave testimony to the virtues of diligent effort, as “‘Self-help’ was a demonstrable reality in Burslem” (Wilson 15). Both men sought to maximize their output
for personal gain, and, for Wells especially, spread the gospel of social justice that lay at the heart of most of his novels anyway. His choice of subject matter shows that after 1916, Wells turned his back on the novel as a primarily aesthetic art form. Bennett kept chugging away, though, to continue telling his stories and elucidate his view on mankind and art. The landscape of the literary marketplace around the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century shaped their attitude towards writing. Harris Wilson provides a succinct barometer of just this environment, which benefited the two young men looking for careers as writers:

The Education Act of 1870 was just beginning to have its full effect.
During 1870 the number of new novels published in England was 381; during 1900 the number of “juvenile works, novels, tales and other fiction” had increased to 2109. Harmsworth, with the massive circulation of Tit-Bits, Answers and the Daily Mail, had demonstrated the lucrative market for sensational newspapers; and periodicals were springing up almost daily. Both Bennett and Wells began their careers, not as serious, dedicated literary artists, but as contributors to this journalistic ephemera.

It is interesting to note that charges against these writers, even from modernists themselves, assume that they have somehow failed to move beyond the commercial, ephemeral basis of journalism and have simply grafted sub-literary writing into novelistic form. It is true that Bennett’s first display of public writing was the winning entry to a
short story contest in *Tit-Bits* in 1899 (Hepburn x). He continued on submitting pieces to *Tit-Bits* and other periodicals because it was a good way to make a living by the pen.

It is also true that Wells and Bennett never gave up their interest in journalistic aspects of writing, but for slightly different reasons. For Wells, novels opened avenues to explore social issues often reported upon in periodicals with considerably more range, depth, and personality. In a letter to Bennett from June 1900, he claims his desire for and defense of novel-writing: “I want to write novels and before God I will write novels. They are the proper stuff for my everyday work, a methodical careful distillation of one’s thoughts and sentiments and experiences and impressions” (Wilson 45). The “everyday work” ethic that journalistic writing is based on found an amiable outlet in novel-writing for Wells. That kind of writing allowed him to exercise his discipline and speak his own voice, very often with a political bent. For Bennett, who was also informed by issues of social justice, the lasting effect of journalistic influence was as much about punching the clock as it was about informing readers. Speed, decisions, rapid writing, deadlines—these were all familiar to a man who edited a periodical at a young age. And to do so successfully, he had to target a public which he was keenly aware of and eager to reach. As he recalls, “four or five years in weekly journalism forced me to learn how to capture by words the attention of the average man – a personage, let me say, whom I deeply respect” (Bennett *Sketches* 12). Well-schooled in journalism’s timeliness and broad appeal, Bennett flooded a largely-appreciative British public with ink and ideas.

Fiction, drama, plays, essays, journalism, reviews—these are what Arnold Bennett consistently contributed to the world of letters. His output yielded, in total, 36
finished novels (and one unfinished), 16 plays produced, 7 volumes of short stories, 7 works of “practical philosophy,” 6 pieces of belles lettres, 5 travel books, 2 essay collections, 1 film produced and 1 autobiography. Besides that, two journals, three letter collections, and one opera (Don Juan) found audiences after his death (Barker n.p.). The exhaustive amount of writing and creation that Bennett conjured was rivaled only by his friend, Bertie. The motivation for such proliferation of letters lies primarily in a desire, shared both by Bennett and Wells, to literally and metaphorically flee their lower middle class upbringings through the universal exodus of fame and fortune. Richard Higgins has pointed out that the lower middle class has a tendency, historically, to be the most self-defeating class. This is for the simple reason that “Ambitious or successful lower-middle-class individuals no longer see themselves as lower middle class—hence the contempt they so often feel toward their former lives” (45). Wells’s ambivalence about the class he comes from can be seen in many of his romantic comedies, including Mr. Lewisham and Kipps. In Bennett’s case, however, that class betrayal does not appear to be as strong. He would continue to identify himself as much with the class he came from as against the class he was adopted into with financial success and fame (minus certain luxuries—the legendary yacht and the trips to France). Part of this is because Bennett, growing up in hard-scrabble Burslem, joined others of his class in pursuing success through the hopeful dictums of self-reliance and diligence. Even after Bennett had “gotten on,” he would, understandably for an artist as well as a businessman, never abandon the pattern of successful creation that got him where he was.
Neither would he overlook the business aspect of the trade. This was an issue Bennett was especially emphatic about—the importance of the artist to act as merchant of his or her own art, for their own benefit and for the benefit of art’s legitimacy as a traded cultural commodity. Literature was a public good, and its marketplace was the arena of the popular. Regardless of how wondrous a book might have been, it was useless if it did not reach a reading audience. Bennett worked this concept into his basic writing and promotional strategy. He often railed against the “dilettantes” who sought to distance themselves from the public due to the perceived taint of popularity. In a section entitled “The Artist and the Public,” from his longer work “The Author’s Craft” (1913), he says, “The truth is that an artist who demands appreciation from the public on his own terms, and on none but his own terms, is either a god or a conceited and impractical fool. And he is somewhat more likely to be the latter than the former.” On the other hand, “The sagacious artist, while respecting himself, will respect the idiosyncracies of his public. To do both simultaneously is quite possible” (Author’s Craft 42). Bennett proves himself quite a sagacious artist by paying attention to his middle class audience’s desires while also forwarding his own style of stories at a competitive rate of compensation.

Bennett’s work ethic and insistence on approaching the literary world as a business, primarily, earned him the suspicion of modernists such as Woolf and Ezra Pound, among other “dilettantes.” Pound even lampooned Bennett and his advice to the young writer about moving up in the world of letters in his classic “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” (1920). Bennett is characterized as Mr. Nixon, in the passage quoted at length below:
In the cream gilded cabin of his steam yacht
Mr. Nixon advised me kindly, to advance with fewer
Dangers of delay. “Consider
Carefully the reviewer.

I was as poor as you are;
When I begat I got, of course,
Advance on royalties, fifty at first,” said Mr. Nixon,
“Follow me, and take a column,
Even if you have to work free.

Butter reviewers. From fifty to three hundred
I rose in eighteen months;
The hardest nut I had to crack
Was Dr. Dundas

I never mentioned a man but with the view
Of selling my own works.
The tip’s a good one, as for literature
It gives no man a sinecure.

And no one knows, at sight, a masterpiece.
And give up verse, my boy,
There’s nothing in it.” (Pound 191-2)

Bennett was known to many for his “gilded” yacht, a symbol of his success that was by
turns inspiring and revolting to other authors, depending on their view of their work. Yet
his yacht, in real life as in the poem, came to represent the material end possibility of
self-culture. The problem for Pound and others was that to get there, one had to follow
the somewhat unsavory steps to success that Bennett’s character is recommending here—
a series of cloying and distasteful compromises, both to art and to man, in the name of
“getting on” in life.

3: Guides to Life and Literature, or, the Pocket Philosopher: Arnold Bennett
Needless to say, Pound’s negative take on Bennett’s system overlooks a number of complexities in the man himself. One needs to remember that Bennett came to London as an outsider in class, and lacking a good deal of formal education. Like Wells just before him, and like Joyce concurrently in Ireland, Bennett used the structure of his mandatory education to benefit his self-education. Never a lover of education for its own sake as a boy, his ability to cull at least the tools of learning from his school experience was even more crucial because Bennett was pulled out of middle school in order to work for his father at the law office in Burslem (in his father’s eyes, Bennett was to become a lawyer—that plan crumbled when he twice failed his legal examinations). Despite his early exit from formal schooling, Bennett was able to absorb a great deal of structural information about the process of learning and develop a lifelong passion for organized thought. Kindred personal aspects such as punctuality, diligence and focus followed suit. As he wrote in “How I Was Educated,” originally appearing in John O’London’s Weekly on June 28, 1930, “school, I admit, had taught me something more valuable than grammar and geography. It had taught me how to keep to a time-table, to be in a certain place at a certain hour, and to complete (more or less) a certain task by a certain hour – and no nonsense permitted!” (Sketches 12). With the influence of formal schooling, Bennett said “I grew more and more addicted to the organization of my time” (Sketches 12). Coupled with a burgeoning interest in art and writing fully formed after his gloomy legal clerkship, Bennett’s addiction to organization provided substance for his first and best-remembered works of fiction and nonfiction. Both featured and were targeted at a
specific demographic: the well-known lower middle class types who try to improve their lots in life, the Burslem hopeful, those much like Bennett himself.

Even when it was set elsewhere, Bennett’s fiction never strayed too far from the down-but-never-out spirit of the Five Towns. His peculiar talent was to locate human interest in the mundane. For Woolf, his materialism (and by extrapolation, his keen emphasis on the lower middle class) was a stodgy impediment to aesthetic quality. For Squillace, and other defenders of the writer, such materialism was Bennett’s counter-intuitive contribution to literary advancement. He says, “Unlike the greatest modernist works, the novels of Arnold Bennett do not create radically new languages of fiction, do not expand the fundamental resources of English. Their concern is the false adequacy of the signals by which we make ordinary, daily judgments. But they reveal the unreliability of such signals all the more powerfully because of their confinement to the sort of ordinary, daily language that least alerts us to its inadequacies” (34). In other words, rather like E. M. Forster’s modernism in David Medalie’s perspective, Bennett’s modernism in Robert Squillace’s view uses the tools of nineteenth-century novelistic discourse (namely, material realism) to expose both the limitations of surface judgments and the reader’s propensity to think and respond to the world in such terms. This chapter will continue to deal primarily with Bennett’s nonfiction, but there is plenty to cull from his works that can tell us about his literary connections to the self-cultural agenda that he subscribed to and helped to promote on a massive scale.

One representative fictional work is *A Man from the North* (1898), which shares a great deal of subject matter with Wells’s *Love and Mr. Lewisham*. In this tale, Bennett’s
first full-length novel, the protagonist Richard Larch attempts to raise himself from his lower middle class clerkship into a career as a sophisticated author. Richard, like Lewisham, is inspired to succeed at his chosen path, beginning with a schematic proposal of self-culture. In Richard’s case, that model of discipline is supplied by an article in a half-crown review called “The Literary Aspirants” (Bennett *North* 35). Its author, “a writer of considerable repute,” claims that “a mastery of the craft of words was only to be attained by a regular course of technical exercises.” After supplying some case studies of hard-working authors who worked up from poor skills to become masters of prose (including Flaubert, de Maupassant, and Stevenson), and after providing reassurance that any writer regardless of native talent could learn to write just as well, “the essayist concluded by remarking that never before in the history of literature had young authors been so favourably circumstanced as at that present” (Bennett *North* 35). With that, Richard becomes determined to make it as an author in his spare time from the office. Like Lewisham, his pursuit of this lofty goal becomes a source of vanity before it is even realized, and it makes him feel superior immediately to the kinds of people he has left from the North to land in London. Also like Lewisham, his self-education follows an orderly pattern, but it is interrupted time and again by personal distractions and flagging interest. This is a typical passage concerning the pursuit of the kind of culture Richard perceives to be essential to authorial education:

> At the commencement of the year which was now drawing to a close he had attacked the art of literature anew, and had compassed several articles; but as one by one they suffered rejection, his energy had dwindled, and in
a short time he had again entirely ceased to write. Nor did he pursue any ordered course of study. He began upon a number of English classics, finishing few of them, and continued to consume French novels with eagerness. Sometimes the French work, by its neat, severe effectiveness, would stir in him a vague desire to do likewise, but no serious sustained effort was made. (North 148-9)

Richard lays his dreams permanently aside to care for his new wife, playing the dutiful role of steady suburban husband. His epiphanic reaction to the reality of domestic lower middle class life comes very close to the loving reconciliation of Lewisham. The narrator says, “He would keep his eyes on the immediate foreground, and be happy while he could. After all, perhaps things had been ordered for the best; perhaps he had no genuine talent for writing. And yet at that moment he was conscious that he possessed the incommunicable imaginative insights of the author. . . . But it was done with now” (North 177-8). Despite his intimations of artistic talent, Richard gives up his dream to settle with the material world.

It would appear as if Bennett is critiquing the notion that culture can be simply crammed into a person, as Wells would with Mr. Lewisham. Indeed, Wells would fault both the educational system that supported cramming for test-taking, and Lewisham who invested his own vanity into the process. But Bennett’s focus is more subtle than calling for institutional reform. As we have seen, Richard is devoted and driven, at first, but inevitably suffers setbacks that are usually the result of his own fading focus. In fact, it is because he does not have a schematic approach to self-development that he fails to
become an author. Interestingly, he is the opposite of Lewisham, who invests too heavily in the Schema for guaranteed success; Richard rather has the talent but not the discipline or forethought to plan out his method of enculturation. Ultimately, though, neither Richard nor Lewisham is a total failure. They both transfer their aspirations from the unrealistic to the realistic, considering their stations and abilities. Aimed at a wide middle class audience, Bennett’s works both challenge traditionally-held prejudices of class and hold a deeply compassionate view of all walks of life. In this case, *A Man from the North* captures the spirit of the pursuit of culture that was so invigorating for many lower middle class people bereft of a full complement of traditional schooling. It also praises the grace of self-sacrifice in the name of family and hearth. Both of these aspects appealed to a mass readership that was excited about the possibility of self-improvement, but were also unlikely to rise above their stations because of it. It gave the reader a glimpse of the liberating possibilities of self-culture, such as when Richard, at the office, “tried to imagine the scene in which, at some future date, he would give Mr. Curpet notice of his intention to resign his position, explaining that he preferred to support himself by literature.” The “ineffable sweetness of such a triumph” would make all of the effort worthwhile (*North* 76). At the same time Bennett illustrates the limitations of Richard through his ambitions, he celebrates his basic decency, evolving finally into domestic service. For a typical reader, it was the best of both worlds. The reader could relate to Richard’s desire to rise in society, and be reassured by his falling back into family graces. As he says in “The Average Reader and the Recipe for Popularity” (1901), the reader of common tastes “does not care to have the basic ideas of his existence
disturbed. He may be emotionally aroused, but mentally he must be soothed, lulled, drugged” (*Author’s Craft* 57). In another context, Bennett would claim that this emotional arousing and mental soothing was in fact the priority of novels. In other words, “A good novel rushes you forward like a skiff down a stream, and you arrive at the end, perhaps breathless, but unexhausted. The best novels involve the least strain” (“Twenty-Four Hours” 66). If it is strain and challenge one wants, poetry is the place, not novels.

Even though Richard did not succeed in his pursuit, Bennett built a cottage industry upon the notion that you, the reader, can. As we have seen, when it came to educational efficiency, Bennett differed from Wells in the notion that intellectual free-play could actually help the mind grow. For Bennett, successful learning required unbroken attention to the task at hand, one task at a time. Bennett was so convinced in his own techniques, and so cunning in his business strategy, that he wrote them down for others to learn. These, in my opinion, are Bennett’s most important contribution to the era of modernism—his books on practical philosophy, personal efficiency, and self-help. By various paratextual listings in first-run editions of his books in England and the United States, they are referred to as “Practical Philosophies” or “Pocket Philosophies.” I rather like the second term, as it emphasizes the portability of wisdom which promised to educate the busy reader into a better life. Bennett wrote and published seven of these works in the U. K., with titles such as *The Reasonable Life, How to Live on Twenty-Four Hours a Day, The Human Machine, and Self and Self-Management*. These four particular pocket philosophies were combined to form the American publication of the definitive-sounding *How to Live* in 1910. In all of these works, classic Smilesian notions of self-
help are updated for the era of efficiency, and attuned to cover all of the areas of life that Bennett himself was personally interested in.

A typical example of these pocket philosophies is *Mental Efficiency* (published 1911 in the U. S.; originally released as *The Reasonable Life* in England, 1907). From the onset, *Mental Efficiency* seeks to meet readers at whatever point they may be in their lives. Like with his fiction, Bennett assumes a wide middle-class audience, pressed for time and self-conscious about their social standing. In an essay entitled “The Novel Reading Public,” Bennett names this quality of the middle class: “Chief among its characteristics—after its sincere religious worship of money and financial success—I should put its intense self-consciousness as a class” (*Author’s Craft* 76). Part of that self-consciousness, on the part of the lower middle class and the “superior stolid comfortable” of heart of the professional class, concerned efficiency as it related to knowledge. Bennett assumes a great deal in his home-spun address to the reader: “Let me take your case, O man or woman of thirty, living in comfort, with some cares, and some responsibilities, and some pretty hard daily work, but not too much of any! The question of mental efficiency is in the air. It interests you. It touches you nearly. Your conscience tells you that your mind is less active and less informed than it might be” (*Mental Efficiency* 20). Respectability’s natural enemy is laziness, and it meant fighting off one to maintain the other. The people picking up this book have done so to seek instruction and inspiration in matters of mental self-development. Highly attuned to the zeitgeist of his adoptive class, Bennett recognizes that “The question of mental efficiency is in the air”—he means that
the middle classes were especially eager to see how techniques of efficiency pioneered in the factories, machines, and even houses, could apply to their own self-cultivation.

In all of his pocket philosophies, there is a mix of audience appeal, personal narrative, and practical steps of instruction. Never does Bennett forget (or indeed, let the reader forget) that the primary audience is one pressed for time, eager to succeed without effort, and, because of the first two characteristics, at risk for a collapse and failure. The first lesson Bennett always teaches is one on pacing and realism (ironically, two of the qualities his fiction is hounded for by his modernist successors). To succeed in self-culture as he lays it out, it takes great discipline—especially not to under- or over-commit oneself. The process of gaining culture is one of baby-steps, developed little by little in similar ways to how fitness was to be achieved in the concurrent physical culture movement.\(^{10}\) Like physical training, the path to mental efficiency is in two parts: “the cultivation of will-power, and the getting into condition of the mental apparatus” \((Mental Efficiency\ 12-13)\). By the mental apparatus, Bennett literally means the brain. Popular science, while then as now nowhere near to approaching the mysteries of the human brain, was exposing the function of the brain as an organ and muscle like any other in the body to be properly developed and maintained. In “The Human Machine,” Bennett places the key to success in the business of everyday living squarely in the brain—meaning a properly functioning and disciplined mental apparatus. He says, “the brain must be put into training. It is the most important part of the human machine by which the soul expresses and develops itself, and it must learn good habits” \((31)\). The best habit a brain can learn is obedience. As Bennett says, “The beginning of wise living lies in the control
of the brain by the will [...]
With an obedient disciplined brain a man may live always right up to the standard of his best moments” (32). Self-culture meant finding the time, keeping it sacrosanct, and sticking to a regimen daily. What is lacking in Bennett’s pocket philosophies is an appeal to the broader general statements of Smiles, and even the temptation to use the lives of famous self-made men as exemplars of hard work’s reward in success. Bennett chooses rather to offer his own reflections as a man who has, humbly, climbed the ladder. Inherent in that perspective are a number of personal opinions that seem to actually hinder the practical emphasis of the texts, but actually wind up reinforcing Bennett’s role as student-teacher to the reader.

For example, since he is an author by trade, one would expect Bennett would have much to say about the importance of literature in the development of the mind. To be sure, as a tool for sharpening the mind, he places literature above the logical training of math problems, saying “Perhaps arithmetic might be an effective cure [for mental laziness], but it is not a practical cure, because no one, or scarcely any one, would practise it” (Mental Efficiency 16). The knowing reader can attest to this. The more humane spheres of art, music, culture, and language are the realms of Bennett’s personal interest, and warrant his highest recommendation for study. Surprisingly, though, neither modern literature nor novels figure in his program for specifically developing the mind. While novels can be a great diversion and increase one’s knowledge in cultural ways, they do not perform the kind of sharp-thinking work that actually benefits mental efficiency. For this task, he recommends poetry. In “How to Live on Twenty-Four Hours a Day,” he says, “Imaginative poetry produces a far greater mental strain than novels. It
produces probably the severest strain of any form of literature. It is the highest form of literature. It yields the highest form of pleasure, and teaches the highest form of wisdom. In a word, there is nothing to compare with it” (67) Bennett recommends the great mental strain of poetry with the “sad consciousness of the fact that the majority of people do not read poetry” (67). Bennett does not specify which kinds of poetry to read, but elsewhere he mentions Milton, Shakespeare, and Homer as exemplars. In other words, this is classical poetry and not modernist poetry (as difficult and straining as the latter might be). It is interesting to draw connections here from Bennett’s role of democratic enlightener to the kinds of education still (then) proffered at the nation’s most elite schools. There students and teachers pursued the classics of poetry in Greek and Latin line-by-line, and fancied the gathering of taste and refinement as a necessary by-product of that quest. In a popular way, Bennett upholds the same assumptions that the public schools he never attended thrived on—if it was difficult, it must be good for the pupil. Perhaps we could ascribe a twinge of jealousy or nostalgia for a kind of education he could not acquire as a young man, but we could just as easily imagine that Bennett’s suggestions for culture-by-fire stem from the only personally proven methods of success that he could suggest: his own.

Another surprising element of Bennett’s practical philosophies is the way in which he occasionally denigrates other aspects of popular self-culture. One target is other pioneers of self-culture. Bennett mentions how he cannot stand the works of Benjamin Franklin, founding father and fountainhead of simple wisdom. Annoyed by what appears to be a pompous wolf in common-sense sheep’s clothing, Bennett comes to the
conclusion that Franklin must have primarily written his autobiography (published in its complete version posthumously in 1791) with “A desire that others should profit by the recital of his virtuous sagacity to reach a similar success” as himself. Such “dreadful virtuous sagacity” did not appeal to Bennett, who was distrustful of personal claims to moral goodness even if expressed in ostensibly humble tones (Mental Efficiency 93). This is somewhat surprising because in his autobiography and Poor Richard’s Almanack, Franklin had inspired generations of Americans with his proverbial, didactic witticisms. Behind his advice was an ego so big that it crowded out all credibility, according to Bennett.

Another unexpected target in his works was the industry of cheap, popular reprinted books. As I will show in other parts of this dissertation, these classical reprints were essential in introducing especially lower middle class readers to canonical literature. They also fed into the growing promise of self-culture that cultural capital—and therefore respect—could be acquired regardless of material means and prior education. Not so for Bennett. He says, “By expending £20 yearly during the next five years a man might collect, in cheap and handy reprints, all that was worth having in classic English literature. But I for one would not be willing to regard it as only a cheap edition of a library. There would be something about it that would arouse in me a certain benevolent disdain […].” In attempting to answer his own question of why this disdain would be aroused, he responds, “Well, although it is my profession in life to say what I feel in plain words, I do not know that in this connection I can say what I feel in plain words. I have to rely on a sympathetic comprehension of my attitude in the bookish breasts of my readers”
In this passage, Bennett’s personal snobbery and sensitivity to his audience come to a fine point. Marking his personal preference for the kinds of books that should make a library, Bennett presents himself as a bookish man. Those who agree with him can hold their “bookish breasts” high. Those, from the lower middle class, who attempt to build libraries from Everyman reprints do not ultimately have a collection worthy of a really respectable reader. One can forgive a man of letters, as Bennett so much wanted to be known, for his idiosyncrasies in taste. What is more difficult to understand is why he would preclude, even off-handedly, a significant chunk of his readership. I think the best answer to this problem is a similar answer to why Richard Larch fails in *A Man from the North*: Bennett wants to keep all of his wide middle class readership pleased, without ruffling too many feathers. Regardless of his personal preferences (which may carry the day either way), he had more to lose by outspokenly supporting cheap literature than by critiquing it. This is because, as many popular railway bookstalls demonstrated, classical reprints as artifacts were intended for portability and temporary use, not lasting shelf-life value. Claiming that these kinds of books make a library only in the basic sense of the term taps into a sense of real-world understanding of the publishing industry as well as the thoughts of the lower middle class readers who also recognize that, yes, a more lasting material object would make a better book. The idea of a proper library, like the very basis of self-culture, is always aspirational.

Modern audiences looking for straightforward practical advice from Bennett’s pocket philosophies are liable to be disappointed, despite the several works literally containing “how to” in their titles. Also, despite Bennett’s explicit emphasis on
maximizing time, there are nothing like schematic tables of the kind Mr. Lewisham exploits. Rather, these tools for self-culture rely on trusted formulations of success which are updated to include an added emphasis on efficiency. The author was a committed autodidact, with interests extending into his writing ranging from language to music, with many other hobbies filling the leisure time he earned through lifelong effort. Although the pocket philosophies vary in their own subject matter and emphasis, the overall lesson is that any task worth doing is worth doing with the utmost commitment and diligence. Inherent in the larger concept of efficiency, mental or otherwise, was the notion that a task (or study, or project) was only efficient if it was seen through from beginning to end. As he says, what that task was did not matter: “Too many people fancy that self-development means literature. […] The higher life may just as well be butterflies, or funeral customs, or county boundaries, or street names, or mosses, or stars, or slugs, as Charlotte Brontë or Shakespeare. Choose what interests you” (Mental Efficiency 31). Coming from someone who bases his own successes on his skills in reviewing and writing literature, it is significant that he suggests the road to culture and mental efficiency can and should be a wide thoroughfare. This notion also connects to Wells’s concept of free play, where the best education necessarily adapts to the student’s own interests, rather than the student adapting to the schematic requirements of the education. Again, one should consider Bennett’s audience, which was likely comprised of as many professional office managers as lower-level clerks. Needs change depending on personal interests as well as social station. There is a great difference between studying Shakespeare to learn the intricacies of his language and studying Shakespeare to bolster
one’s belief that social respectability from the class above rests at least in part on familiarity with his works. Bennett’s advice is reassuring to the concerned autodidact of any station: “An accurate knowledge of any subject, coupled with a carefully nurtured sense of the relativity of that subject to other subjects, implies an enormous self-development” (Mental Efficiency 31). The most important lessons that Bennett teaches in his pocket philosophies are to take time, choose battles wisely, and stay the course. As with Smiles’s original depiction of self-help, personal enculturation comes more from perseverance and determination than from genius and inspiration. Anyone can be inspired to start a project of self-improvement, but only the most diligent will finally make that project efficient by actually sticking with it. Befitting Bennett’s audience, this lesson includes all people, from all social circles, regardless of educational background, who have caught the bug of mental efficiency in the air and want to make something of it—and themselves.

Bennett in his pocket philosophies was just as eager to grow a broader readership for himself as to spur the individual cultivation of any particular readers. His willingness to do so sometimes met the bewilderment and exasperation of Wells, who, despite his own commitments to efficiency and frequent use of didactic techniques, never pandered to the audience in such a direct, non-literary way. Wells wrote to him about 1903’s How to Become An Author, saying, “It’s quite the best book in its way and it’s a orrible way [sic]. It will, thank God! be not of the slightest use to any human being. And no end will buy and read it.” Wells even drew one of his “picshuas” of a devil’s tail, saying to Bennett, “I believe, somewhere about the seat of your b------s, you conceal a caudal
appendage of this description” (Wilson 98). Devilish or not, Bennett’s philosophies contained instructions and opinions from a man who, like Smiles (or Franklin), had achieved a rise in society due to personal commitment to his self-education. The books themselves may have been overlooked then and since by critics of literary fiction, but they deserve to be thought of in the context of efficiency that shaped Bennett’s life, work, and so much of the era. In their little aims to increase the cultural productivity and happiness of the average middle class working person through individual experience and audience-appealing exhortations, they effectively bridge the gap between Smiles’ original conception of self-empowerment as hard work to a more contemporary understanding of self-help as exploring oneself, recognizing personal strengths and weaknesses, and trying to improve upon both. There is also a pseudo-spiritualist aspect to many texts under the category of self-help today that would have been mostly irrelevant to Bennett, except for the few times when he talks about the power of meditation and the concept of contentment as the individual being plugged into the general well-being of society.¹¹ As is always the case with books specifically written to encourage and educate the reader towards personal betterment, a keen attention to audience and the spirit of the times is necessary for successful rhetoric. Bennett’s audience was the same he targeted with everything he wrote—the lower to solid middle class—and his message matched the watchword of his career and of his era: efficiency.

4. Conclusion
Critics such as Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton have connected early twentieth century literature and culture to the resonant image of the English house, specifically the country estate. Even Wells used the figure of Bladesover in *Tono-Bungay* as a metaphor for class relations and the old-fashioned system that was about to change. I suggest an alternative image for the era and its connections to efficiency—not a house of brick and mortar in a traditional sense, but a house made of glass. The Crystal Palace from 1851’s Great Exhibition was still standing at the turn of the century. Designed by the gardener-architect Joseph Paxton, who based his plans on greenhouses, the building caught in its window-walls sunlight and the optimism of the Victorian age. Prince Albert asserted that the Exhibition was to promote appreciation of the arts and economic contributions by other nations under the Empire’s reach, but no curious spectator after seeing it could deny that England itself was on display. Certainly the Prince took pride in the building that housed these international inventions, exhibits, and curiosities. It was, after all, a structure that was also an exhibit, designed to be built as quickly as possible using exact, prefabricated pieces. Evelyn Cobley says, “In its dazzling elegance, the building fused aesthetic taste and industrial functionalism. But as a feat of engineering, it was also a model of exact planning and regimentation” (33). Every aspect of the structure was designed and built to shed the best light (literally and figuratively) on the innovations within, rather like a greenhouse nurtures the growth of its plants. There was no wasted space, material, or decoration. Ultimate proof of the Crystal Palace’s efficiency in design resides in the fact that the entire structure was transported and rebuilt, piece-by-piece. In
an expanded form, the Palace took up permanent residence in Sydenham Hill, 1854. There it would stand until taken by fire in 1936.

The Great Exhibition and the Crystal Palace stood for efficiency, and marked a spirit of the age that would continue as the science of industry in the nineteenth century gave way to the science and art of commerce in the twentieth. Those most affected by these changes were the kinds of readers that made both Wells and Bennett famous authors: the wide middle class. That class, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, was the most anxious about both efficiency and self-improvement. Inspired by the increasingly scientific management of energy and time on display on the factory floor and in the office, the middle class began to think of their own lives in terms of efficiency. Much anxiety about efficiency came from the fact that the lower and the core middle class were both so aware about their own prospects for fluctuation, socially-speaking. The lower middle classes, expanding with clerkships and the boom of offices supplying modernized white collar work, needed to always keep themselves in the appearance of respectability resembling the stations above them, or else risked falling into being categorized with the working classes below them. The true middle class was most intensely self-aware, and sought to maximize the time allotted to them outside of busy work schedules to devote to building themselves culturally. Self-culture, delivered through methods of efficiency, sought to maximize aesthetic, social, and personal development working against the autodidact’s most precious resource: time. Successful self-enculturation meant eliminating wasteful thoughts and actions and staying the course toward betterment.
It is worth noting that, unlike with Smiles, the promise for ascending social rank is lost in the efficient mode of self-culture, popularized by Bennett’s pocket philosophies. There never was a guarantee for such a difficult bounding, but here the idea of “moving up” is replaced with the idea of “getting on”—that is, making the best of your situation as it currently is, without the notion of ever really getting to a new place. Bennett targets those who have realized that they are not likely to progress much further on a career track. In “The Human Machine,” he levels with the reader: “Perhaps you know [...] the moment when it suddenly occurred to you that you had ‘arrived’ as far as you ever will arrive; and you had realised as much of your early dream as you ever will realise, and the realisation was utterly unlike the dream [...] In a word, the moment when it occurred to you that yours is ‘the common lot’” (9-10). He reaches out to readers who have had this realization, in order to encourage them to work hard to be the best at where they are now, not to offer promises for where they can be vaguely in the future. One’s social class, and one’s ultimate prospects for success, for the most part, are beyond one’s control. What is controllable, however difficult, are one’s mindset and diligence concerning self-enculturation. And like many other aspects of Edwardian England, efficiency had a central place in this scheme.

Both Wells and Bennett showed throughout their writing lives that hard, efficient work paid off. They were able, unlike many of their readers, to transcend their lower middle class upbringings into fame and fortune. Their lives prove the self-improvement guidebooks correct, but as artists and thinkers they differed on what made proper efficiency, and how efficiency should be utilized in education. In his work, Wells
believed that materialist realism was the most direct form of transcribing society into art. With this notion, he would come against competing notions of efficiency in writing proffered by later modernists who sought to prune language to its fruitful core or imitate the direct language of thought as it occurred in the mind. Wells carried over his concern with efficiency to educational reform. Although he crammed to pass his University entrance exams, he was intensely critical about the process of examination that encouraged useless memorization at the expense of more holistic approaches to education. His ideal system of education included free play (both physical and intellectual) as an integral element of “efficient” self-development. Bennett also utilized materialist realism in his novels, but went further than Wells with his insistence on disciplined self-culture as the cure for the middling state of the modern middle class.

Efficiency was both cause of and solution to the kinds of slacking that Bennett saw in his middle-class cohort: having been relieved of certain types of work due to the effectiveness of the machine, it was up to men and women to harness the power of their own “human machine” to (re-)develop themselves in turn. To this end, fanning the flames of self-improvement that were already in the air, Bennett published a series of pocket philosophies which offered homespun wisdom in the daily business of living life without wasted thoughts or actions. Like Wells, he garnered a massive, appreciative audience. Although later modernists, particularly Woolf, would attack their views on efficiency in writing as being counter-productive to artistic sensibility, that critique likely stems as much from her suspicion (and jealousy) of their widespread commercial success, built on
personal ambition, than purely aesthetic concerns. Not that Wells or Bennett minded too much—there was simply no time to waste.

2 The embarrassment of the Boer War was a common case study for both critics and defenders of imperialism. For the critics, England’s trouble with the South African rebels was further proof of colonialism’s folly. For the defenders, such difficulties rang alarm-bells about degeneration, administrative efficiency, and the overall “fitness” of the British army—supposed to represent the epitome of muscular Christianity and *noblesse oblige* to the world.

3 The former, with its emphasis on the value of free-form play, inspired the later movement in child psychology known as “sandbox therapy,” where children are left to their own creative devices to construct scenarios of play in a sandbox setting that are therapeutic to them and revelatory of their emotional states. As often happened with Wells, his hunch of free-play’s value was prophetic.

4 Of Wells’s comprehensive exam, he says, “It would throw out the worst of the duffers and louts all along the social scale. What is to become of the rejected of the upper and wealthy class is, I admit, a difficult problem as things are to-day” (*Mankind* 296).

5 Needless to say, such issues of fairness and efficiency are still around with entrance exams today. Most notably, in America, the SAT and the ACT, as well as graduate entrance tests (GRE, LSAT, GMAT), have produced cottage industries with companies operating on the sole premise of providing test preparation for higher scores. For well-meaning parents and ambitious students, such practices have become a matter of course. It is not surprising that few involved think twice about the original purpose of such exams, or the premises of efficiency on which they were originally based (and in critics’ eyes, which they quickly lost).

6 Smiles’ description centers on schematic efficiency as a pathway to success: “He rose at six, wrote letters and arranged his papers for parliament; then, after breakfast, he received persons on business, sometimes as many as twenty in a morning. The House rarely assembled without him, and though the debate might be prolonged to two or three o’clock in the morning, his name was seldom found absent from the division” (Smiles 107-8).

7 The term is from Woolf’s famous “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” which distinguishes her own Georgian writing style from that of the Edwardian generation before her. For more on this, see my chapter “From Aesthetic Sympathy to Aesthetics, Simply: Social Ideology and Literary Representations of Self-Culture in Virginia Woolf.”

8 See Chapter 2 for more on Forster’s modernism.

9 Visiting Littlehampton, the narrator shares Larch’s disdain for the place: “It was unpicturesque as a manufacturing town, and its summer visitors were an infestive, lower-middle class folk, garishly clothed, and unlearned in the fine art of enjoyment.” Yet, looking down on the setting and the people, “Richard forgot that he was himself a clerk, looking not out of place in that scene” (*North* 113).

10 See my chapter “Joyce’s Autodidacts” for more discussion on the early twentieth-century bodybuilder Eugen Sandow and the popular physical culture movement he pioneered.
A full history of the self-help genre is outside the scope of this chapter, but it is interesting to see what tends to stay the same across time, such as the emphasis on diligence over brilliance, and what tends to differ, such as the current implementation of vague new-age spiritualism as in, for example, *The Secret* (2006).
Chapter 2: Leonard Bast, Clerk-Autodidact

“Within his cramped little mind dwelt something that was greater than Jefferies’s books—the spirit that led Jefferies to write them”

– E. M. Forster, Howards End (110)

Ostensibly a minor character squeezed between the sturdier houses of Schlegel and Wilcox in Howards End, Leonard Bast has been the subject of mixed responses from critics since E. M. Forster published the novel in 1910. A conventional reading of the work, popularized by Lionel Trilling, locates Leonard, an insurance clerk, as symbolizing both the lowest common denominator of middle class England and supplying the increasingly white collar elbow grease that holds the rest of the nation together. Throughout a series of events spearheaded by chance (a misrecognized umbrella) and centered on inheritance, Leonard becomes the plaything of the eager-idealistic Schlegel sisters while also succumbing to Charles Wilcox’s capitalist insensitivity. At the end of the novel, so the reading goes, Howards End becomes a site of reconciliation and a microcosm of the “condition of England” as appropriate as anything C. F. G. Masterman could conjecture. This changing of hands, or rather joining of hands, is partly achieved by the two-fold continued presence of Leonard’s spirit—in his death, which occurred on the
grounds, and in the life of his un-christened boy with Helen. The result is a synthesis of disparate souls marked by familial succession and a mystical connection to the agrarian hearth: “all the time their salvation was lying round them—the past sanctifying the present; the present, with wild heart-throb, declaring that there would after all be a future, with laughter and the voices of children” (272). The transition is neither simple nor complete, but the symbolic significance of Leonard to the changeover is unmistakable. In addition to being a catalyst for change, Leonard at the end of the work is the character most symbolically associated with the tensions the novel’s conclusion fails to resolve.

But if *Howards End* is about attempted reconciliations of realist-idealist viewpoints among the well-to-do middle class, then why does Leonard, who desperately struggles to remain above the proletarian cut-off, remain so integral to the story and its patchwork resolution? Critics have disagreed over the value of Leonard Bast in *Howards End* nearly as much as they have failed to reach consensus about the “meaning” of the novel itself. In 1970’s *Exiles and Émigrés*, Terry Eagleton reads Leonard as a cipher for the realm of material experience from which the Schlegel sisters are comfortably removed. However, Eagleton criticizes Forster’s apparent positioning of Leonard, saying “What is most questionable about his presentation in the novel […] is the implied equivalence between him and the Wilcoxes, from the viewpoint of the Schlegels. Both Leonard and the Wilcoxes stand for ‘real’ life, in contrast to the Schlegels’ contemplative world; yet it is only, once more, by a formalist attention to ‘quality’ rather than ‘content’ that such an attitude can be credibly maintained” (39). In other words, Leonard’s supposed opposition to Schlegelian idealism works only if we tend to ignore his own
deeply-held if not well-understood idealism; yet that is exactly how we come to know him, as Leonard’s efforts at self-improvement tumble him into the coddling arms of Helen and Margaret. How Forster presents, and how we should see, these efforts is another issue for critical debate. Lionel Trilling follows the narrator in suggesting that Leonard’s efforts at self-improvement are merely a veneer over a shallow and uninteresting persona. Trilling actually sides with the Schlegels over Leonard, saying, “What the Schlegel sisters cherished in Leonard was the solid grain of honesty under the pitiful overlay of culture.” Leonard, however, “cannot be interested in the Schlegel girls except as sounding boards for his culture; in this he is like the Wilcoxes, for, like them, he is not aware of people but only of their status and function: he is obsessed by class” (xxxiv). Mary Lago takes the opposite approach, distancing Leonard from the Wilcoxes and their class obsession due to what she sees as a commendable moral uprightness on the part of the young man, honed in part by the exercise of character-building and self-improvement:

But Leonard is not useless, for he is honourable. His marriage is his honourable action to regularise his relations with the deplorable Jacky: as an Englishman, he will ‘never go back on my word’. This is the sturdy, virtuous side of the English character that Forster valued. Self-educated young men like him were legion, who tried without background or context to achieve a little of the advantage that the educational system gave to the privileged. But the Schlegel sisters are the wrong mentors for him. (45)
Finally even James Ivory, the director of several E. M. Forster film adaptations, takes umbrage with the author’s apparent lack of respect for his subject. Ivory says that he and the screenwriters had to do much with building Leonard up into a full character for the 1992 motion picture, claiming that “There is something patronizing, even intolerant, in [Forster’s] portrayal of the poor bank clerk Leonard Bast, and his poor and poor-spirited wife, Jackie. It is almost as if somehow they were lesser beings, for whom Forster could not feel the same empathy or sympathy he felt for those nearer to his own social background” (xviii). Whether he is respectable or a poseur, an honorable man or a loser bandied about by more powerful agents (including the author), our interpretation of Leonard’s role in the construction of *Howards End* makes a considerable difference. Indeed, as Frank Kermode has recently remarked, “To a surprising extent one’s attitude to *Howards End* depends […] on one’s response to Bast” (94).

I wish to enter the debate about Leonard’s relevance and value by proposing that it is precisely his self-improvement ideals, class-bound as they are, that make him the kind of character who causes readers—and indeed Forster himself—difficulties in interpretation. This is partly because he is one of the only characters who is in the process of becoming. Leonard pursues self-culture because of a recognized lack. He does not have the characterizing marker of a clearly-defined family philosophy encompassed in a motto like “Only connect” or “Concentrate.” Rather, his ideology is a piecemeal collection of rights and wrongs associated with his broad informal education and his understanding of basic English respectability. He has a loose sense of aesthetics, or at least a loose sense that aesthetics are important, but also a vague ambition to raise himself
above his current circumstances with the long-term goal of self-improvement and the
more pressing short-term material goal of granting Jacky a happier home. Neither his
aesthetics nor his ambitions are properly established, however, in the straightforward
manner of his social betters. Readers may be tempted to disregard Leonard since his
“half-baked mind” and evidence of physical enfeeblement suggest a long process of
metropolitan degeneration in Max Nordau’s vein that should, on the surface, bar him
from the table of gentility (45). Leonard’s ideas are not fully conceived, his ambitions are
vague, and he tends to crutch onto platitudes about the noble Englishman; yet it is
precisely his complexity and lack of clear ideological formation that makes him such an
interesting character and a catalyst for development in the novel amongst its other, more
clearly demarcated figures.

It is easy and inviting for one to draw sharp distinctions between Schlegel
idealism and Wilcox materialism, the liberal intelligentsia and the conservative
capitalists. But where Leonard stands as a character is a much more nuanced issue, and is
every bit akin to the loose footholds and slippery ground he gains and loses over the
course of the text. I would suggest that casting Leonard too easily, as critics have (victim
of class warfare, example of Forster’s Bloomsbury snobbery, possessor of a faulty and
shallow persona), ignores the historical complexities that are inherent in his self-
identification—as an office clerk and as an autodidact—and which are directly connected
to Forster’s own ambivalences about the growing Suburban class. Far from being
marginalized, Leonard’s complexity affords him the distinction of being a cornerstone to
this novel, as Pat C. Hoy contends: “Leonard’s centrality, as well as his helplessness,
keeps the novel alive today; he affords a study of contrasts. He is the unsung anti-hero” (221). He, like Howards End at the novel’s conclusion, is complex, compromised and vulgarized. He is also far more of a work-in-progress than any other character, most especially underscored by his commitment to self-culture, and as such anticipates the changes ahead for England even as he characterizes the current trend of lower middle class expansion. As anticipated by Masterman’s classic study, his “Suburban” and specifically clerk-centered culture force is one to be recognized as integral to evolving English society, and one which Forster himself was well aware of, even if he was uncomfortable with presenting a complete class-transcending success story in his novel.

1. “I look at the faces of the clerks in my own office, and observe them to be dull”

Leonard’s position as an insurance clerk would immediately relegate him to second-tier status in the contemporary popular imagination of Edwardian England. Ford Madox Ford (then Hueffer), writing his own impressionistic piece five years before Howards End, includes this depiction of the mundane boredom of lower-level white-collar work: “in offices, a partner mentions the drift of a letter to a clerk, he dictates it to a shorthand-typewriter, she writes and addresses it, a boy posts it. And the clerk, the typewriter and the boy go on doing the same thing from the beginning of the working day to the end without interest and without thought” (87). To take a passage from The Condition of England, Masterman lumps the “Suburban” clerk class together into a group known for “adding up other men’s accounts, [and] writing other men’s letters” (57). In
English literature, the clerk makes his presence felt from the mid-nineteenth-century onward, carrying two prevailing situational and character qualities: first, that they were bound in a tight hierarchy relegating them to menial tasks for not much pay (the “pencil-pushing” aspect of white collar work that Hueffer and Masterman describe); and second, despite or perhaps because of, the first stereotype, they held ambitions for “getting on,” whether inside or outside the office, which often connected to a program of self-betterment harboring the goals of professional, personal, or artistic advancement. One can recognize Uriah Heep as a slightly sinister early example, or any number of struggling but artistically-aspirant white collar characters crafted by former clerks George Gissing and Arnold Bennett (most famously Richard Larch in The Man from the North).² Leonard Bast fits both criteria, but manages to complicate the stereotypes of the time.

Despite the boredom and subservience inherent in their positions, the real-life clerks represented by these characters were in high supply around the turn of the century. They comprised the most representative and most rapidly expanding section of England’s fastest growing social order: the lower middle class. The reasons for this are manifold. They primarily have to do with increased literacy, the growth of national and international trade, and the sprawling affordable houses in greater London’s suburbs. This last reason was a great stumbling block for Forster, ever affectionate towards rural England. Part of his romanticism for the agrarian lower middle class, epitomized by Stephen in The Longest Journey, is partially lost in the urbanized Leonard Bast. In reality a great many young men and women flocked to the metropolis in search of more secure and regulated (if not more lucrative) career opportunities away from the dangers of the
mine and the caprice of the harvest. As the narrator says of Leonard, “One guessed him as the third generation, grandson to the shepherd or ploughboy whom civilization had sucked into the town; as one of the thousands who have lost the life of the body and failed to reach the life of the spirit” (105). Inherent in this lower middle class movement towards the city and within the expansion of the clerk population was a forward- and upward-looking optimism couched from an uneasy position: “The clerk, less than a master but more than a hand, was poised precariously between the middle and working classes proper. Yet everything in his environment contrived to strengthen his attachment to the sentiments and way of life of the classes above him. His economic position made him forward-looking, striving and individualistic” (Lockwood 99). These terms certainly describe Leonard’s initially positive outlook, but the harsh truth is that the office did not often return to its workers the cheer brought to it. Modern business was rather ruthless, and in moving towards post-industrial capitalist methods it was seldom fully understood by even those who were essential to its day-to-day operation.

One of the most telling moments of how Leonard envisions his occupation comes when Margaret attempts to warn him of what Henry surmises to be an impending bankruptcy. Leonard is so deeply and loyally mired in his tasks that the possibility of a smash, for him, is inconceivable. The company in his mind is simply “too big to fail.” Forster’s narrator describes the clerk’s perception of his firm, the fictional Porphyrion Fire Insurance Company:

To him, as to the British public, the Porphyrion was the Porphyrion of the advertisement—a giant, in the classical style, but draped sufficiently, who
Porphyrion is a Giant from Greek mythology—one of the original sons of Uranus (heaven) and Gaia (or Gaea, meaning earth) (Smith 498). To cast the company as a Giant is to minimize a clerk like Leonard, who “understood his own corner of the machine, but nothing beyond it” (Forster HE 126); still, it is precisely in this corner that Leonard understands his work and obligation to the corporation. He is subject to—not necessarily victim of—the historical movement away from the mid- to late-nineteenth-century counting houses towards the modern office and all that shift entailed: depersonalization, scientific management, more workers and less skilled labor at the lower end of business (Lockwood 20) These combined factors allowed more semi-skilled workers like Leonard into the white collar work force, but at a cost of further severing the workers’ connection to the control of the company and limiting their opportunities for setting up as independent small merchants. The prospects for a clerk’s independence in
business were ironically undercut through a more modernized and reliable structure of trade. In the time of Forster’s writing, a clerk like Leonard could scarcely imagine employment outside of a large company.

Big business is so apparently rock-solid to Leonard that he primarily imagines his company through the image of power it presents to the public, “the Porphyrion of the advertisement.” The advertisement the narrator is describing is very similar to print advertisements designed to inspire confidence in the ability of the insurer to cover claims. In 1910, the year of the book’s publication, prominent fire insurance offices tended to carry the names of their places of origin (e.g. London and Liverpool and Globe, London and Lancashire Fire) or vaguely mythological figures (e.g. Guardian, Phoenix). The Porphyrion in Howards End may be most directly based on Atlas Assurance Company, whose earnings in 1910 placed it solidly in the middle of the pack for fire insurance firms with £1.04 million in net premiums for the year (Times 17). A typical advertisement for Atlas, appearing in The Times alongside a special article about the fire insurance industry on June 12, 1911, can grant us closer insight into the narrator’s comments and Leonard’s perception of the Porphyrion:
Figure 1: Atlas Newspaper Advertisement (from the *Times*, 12 June 1911)

This is a typical example of advertisements for fire insurance at the time, as those in *The Times* and other newspapers of the era utilize a nearly identical rhetorical strategy: demonstrable strength. “The Porphyrian of the advertisement” imaginatively resembles this Atlas, whose strength is shown graphically and financially. Like Atlas, Porphyrian is in the classical style, “but draped sufficiently.” Also, as the narrator mentions, “A large sum of money was inscribed below, and you drew your own conclusions.” It was typical in insurance advertisements from the time to include what this representative example does, typically at the bottom: numerical disclosure of funds collected and funds paid. The obvious purpose is to inspire consumer confidence in the ability of the firm to cover any potential catastrophe (a purpose made even more important after the international strain on fire insurance following the San Francisco earthquake of 1906). Porphyrian’s hand
pointing to St. Paul’s and Windsor Castle can be seen as a patriotic gesture—guarding and protecting the British realm in line with fire insurance’s fundamental protection of home, hearth, and business. Fire insurance as an institution originated in London after the Great Fire of 1666, and the catastrophic loss of historic buildings during that conflagration remained an enduring appeal to purchase protection against the unforeseen. The Porphyryion’s nostalgic and patriotic strategy in associating with significant landmarks of Church and State follows is the kind of marketing utilized here by Atlas, which invokes the line of monarchs as evidence of longevity and implied endorsement by royal association. Although insurance companies were remarkably up-front about their finances in order to attract clients, much more so than today, it was what those firms did with their profits that bewildered the average consumer and Bast himself: “[Porphyryion’s] true fighting weight, his antecedents, his amours with other members of the commercial Pantheon—all these were as uncertain to ordinary mortals as were the escapades of Zeus” (Forster Howards 127). It is somewhat of a “mixed myth” metaphor (Giants were not gods) but the implication is clearly that insurance companies stand to make a fortune from the anxiety of the prudent. The amours with the other members of the commercial Pantheon have to do particularly with investing in the stock market—the great Wilcoxian game, played by banks, industries, and other big businesses—aiming to benefit from the success of other companies in higher share prices, dividends, and capital gains. During the early twentieth century, investment by insurance companies was a piecemeal but profitable affair. The Fire Offices Committee was an early trade association composed of fire insurance firms pooling their money for additional investment revenue. The
Association of British Insurers, or ABI, is the logical outgrowth of these efforts: a collection of over 400 insurance companies that since 1985 has proven a formidable force in lobbying and investment, and whose current holdings, by its own disclosure, comprise almost 15% of the London Stock Exchange (“The Role of the ABI”). The ABI is transparent about its basic commercial clout just as the insurance companies were in their advertisements around 1910. Yet from the perspective of a clerk working in one of those firms, the financial complexities of the assurance industry are not as decipherable or important as the day’s ledger. As long as he has faith in the solidity of the enterprise, symbolized by the strong public image it bears (like the Atlas of the advertisement), his task of writing and arithmetic in the corner of the office is secure—unquestionable to the last.

By this passage’s associations, based on a marketing rhetoric of gigantic institutional security, Forster is surely commenting on the colossal venture of modern commercial enterprise but not necessarily to place Leonard as victim of its dehumanizing force. In other words, the Porphyrian of Howards End is not the Moloch of Fritz Lang’s Metropolis. Leonard is no more poorly informed than the rest of the public (who also think about the Porphyrian of the advertisement), and as a worker of the company he understands his tasks, does them well, and has faith in the integrity of the company as long as he continues to do so. There is even a quasi-patriotic assumption that the rest of the company is following the pattern he is a part of: every day, in each corner of the office, every Englishman is doing his duty. It is only when Henry, then Margaret and Helen, raise red flags about the Porphyrian that Leonard questions the stability of his own
position, after first wondering (as he did with the umbrella) if these solidly middle-class people were trying to lift something valuable from him. In this suspicion he is not too far from the truth, but without their full understanding of the situation.

Henry’s dismal foresight and the Schlegel sisters’ support of it are remarkable for two reasons. The first is another comment on the gigantic nature of the Porphyrion and its constellation of associated companies of which Leonard is a small but necessary part: if Henry, who is a man of property and a titan of industry cannot predict accurately the fate of companies on his market, then how far is a rapidly globalizing economy fueled by Imperial coffers outpacing the understanding of even its most involved participants? That is the very same market and economy, importantly, which assures the Schlegels of their independent income and livelihood. The second reason is that no side of the middle class property-owning coin, Wilcox or Schlegel, seems to understand just what kind of problem is inherent with Leonard picking up stakes at the Porphyrion in search of work elsewhere. Even after his suggestion to leave, Henry calls it folly to abandon one position before securing another. Margaret and Helen are optimistic that Leonard can catch on with another insurance company, an indication once again that they are disconnected from the working lives of the commercial lower middle class, and which also highlights a certain misunderstanding of basic economics that has no doubt been tainted by their reliance on steady inheritance. Leonard says to them, “I shall never get work now. If rich people fail at one profession, they can try another. Not I. I had my groove, and I’ve got out of it. I could do one particular branch of insurance in one particular office well enough to command a salary, but that’s all. […] if a man over twenty once loses his own
particular job, it’s all over with him” (206-7). The illusion for the Schlegels is that semi-skilled white collar work like clerking is the same across all commercial offices, and that the apparent lack of complexity in low-level white-collar work lends the laborer easy transition to his next unspecialized stint. This thinking is mistakenly unrealistic by both underestimating the complexity and specialization of the clerical task and by overestimating the opportunities available for those who possess such skills. From his position within the commercial giant, Leonard understands better than his self-appointed helpers the opportunity of steady advancement through routine work, and the kinds of problems, unanticipated by his patrons, inherent in losing that work. As Lockwood comments, “The goal of the ambitious clerk was a lifelong career of devoted effort in the enterprise of a particular employer culminating in his eventual ‘indispensability’ and ultimate recognition. This was all […] the source of high hopes and self-help. The market had little to do with it. When he was put on the market he became an unskilled specialist” (83). Losing a job means losing the stable grounds to advance within a dedicated, though mundane, scheme of everyday office tasks. Henry Wilcox and the Schlegel sisters, well-meaning though they may be, cannot understand this. Leonard’s mistake was taking their advice with no credentials other than apparent middle-class stability and an eagerness to help, but it is a mistake we can understand of him if we take a closer look at the self-improvement ideology so tightly linked to his social class and position.

2. Getting a Wider Outlook: Life Outside the Office
The self-improving clerk is a phenomenon situated precisely during the era of literary modernism, from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries. One reason, already mentioned, is the shift from counting houses to more modern offices. This move effectively phased out a smaller and more predictable system of gradual, hierarchical advancement up the ladder and replaced it with a less certain work environment where an abundance of literate clerks and larger offices made individual workers more dispensable. In Forster’s idyllic agrarian past, Leonard would be fine: “Had he lived some centuries ago, in the brightly coloured civilizations of the past, he would have had a definite status, his rank and his income would have corresponded” (41-2). But due to changes corresponding with the modernization of the office, job security and the status of workers became less certain than what it would have been in a mytho-feudal system. Gaining a promotion meant being better than your peers more than working steadily at your task and waiting patiently for a nod from the manager (Lockwood 117). The growth in early twentieth century self-culture among clerks can be seen partly as an outgrowth of competition within the office, with blackcoated workers increasingly apt to separate themselves from each other in their work with intangible qualities of self-control and keenness in improvement (though no worker interested in maintaining respectability would admit as much to his colleagues). Leonard is a prime example of this kind of pursuit, which is hardly a programmatic scheme of improvement on the job but is rather a kind of general self-betterment steeped in a tradition of gentlemanly disinterestedness—in tone if not in execution. Rather like the gentleman he imagines himself to be, his manners and deferential attitude prevent Leonard from boasting of his humanistic studies.
to anyone except his beleaguered partner Jacky: “I care a good deal about improving myself by means of Literature and Art, and so getting a wider outlook,” he says. “For instance, when you came in I was reading Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice*. I don’t say this to boast, but just to show you the kind of man I am” (49). Part of Leonard’s naiveté resides in the mistaken assumption that merely reading (or struggling to read) a text is a mark of superior character. Name-dropping Ruskin grants him a vestige of authority on the subject, though he is merely following the notion, read or heard somewhere, that Ruskin was “the greatest master of English Prose” (45). Needless to say, Leonard does not come across to the reader as worldly or *avant garde* when he talks of Ruskin, Stevenson, or Meredith—a point which is underscored by several well-timed diatribe-stifling Schlegel interruptions. Sillars concurs with the example of George Meredith’s famous novel: “to share the horizon of the original readers,” readers of *Howards End*, that is, who were much like the Schlegels, “we should be aware of the prevailing attitude to *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* as a novel at best of some worth at its publication but now outdated and read only by the petit-bourgeoisie” (35). Leonard does not seem to notice or care.

Finally full of self-satisfaction on ideas as outdated as the cut of his clothes, 6 Leonard wants Jacky, who really does not care about his interests in Literature and Art, to know that he is different from the legions of other clerks who could just as easily be sitting in his desk chair. He wants her to appreciate his unique taste for these humane studies, though it is clear to us that his ideas and tastes are second-hand and second-rate, especially as the typographical predominance of capital letters for important topics emphasizes an uneasy grasp of them and poses Leonard distinctly as an amateur. Despite
these awkward rhetorical attempts at grandeur toward Jacky, Leonard’s apparent
difference from others in his position is a question of width, not height or depth. In other
words, as the narrator repeatedly asserts, Leonard is a small man. He is born with and
into disadvantage. He is very poor, but what makes him a character to be “concerned
with” is his wider outlook on life. Even if it smacks of dilettantism, it is a mark of the
desire for improvement that coincides with the rest of the middle class, along with the
Schlegels’ progressive liberal politics and the Wilcoxes’ staunch fortune-building
capitalism.

In trying to be different, Leonard is earnestly trying to be better. This attitude is
further developed as Leonard makes his way home in Chapter 6—opening with “We are
not concerned with the very poor” (41). This is the only sequence in the novel to feature
other clerks. Crossing Westminster Bridge, Leonard runs into another who follows the
same paths and is part of the same routine daily routine as he is. Seeing Mr. Dealtry on
the bridge anticipates Eliot’s famous depiction of the so many walking undead (or rather
“undone” by death), a fitting depiction of a class occupation mired in monotony.
Throughout the novel, as many critics have remarked, Forster carefully filters his
characters from the bodily presence of the London crowd, despite the many possible
opportunities for their immersion. Like so many other ideas within the novel, the
indication of a city swarm receives a physical, architectural presence. The desperation of
lower middle class life is manifested in the narrator’s description of depressingly redbrick
Camelia Road: “A block of flats, constructed with extreme cheapness, towered on either
hand. […] It was the kind of scene that may be observed all over London, whatever the
locality—bricks and mortar rising and falling with the restlessness of the water in a fountain, as the city receives more and more men upon her soil” (42-3). At work or at home, Leonard is always subject to a giant, fully dependent on elaborate systems of impersonal economic connections. His rooms in unfashionable Camelia Road are connected to those above and beside him in a material reminder that he has not and just as likely will not achieve financial independence.

If elements of Leonard’s walk home establish him as predictably part of the influx of lower middle class clerks in the city, there is at least one moment in this scene where he subtly transgresses that characterization. It may seem a minor point, but when Mr. Cunningham brings up the topic featured in the Sunday paper, Leonard quietly goes along without committing too much of a response (43). The issue is one of declining birth rates in Manchester, a typical representation of the Sunday papers’ general interest stories aimed at the lower middle classes and designed to manufacture dialogue akin to a “water-cooler” conversation. Other tidbits of office chatter based around the popular press would include football scores and fixtures, sweepstakes contests, and true crime. This time, Leonard did not buy a Sunday paper and therefore failed to read the story about Manchester birth rates. Though he is polite enough in his deference towards Mr. Cunningham’s airings and would perish rather than let his negligence be known, this is a moment of polarization between the two symbolizing Leonard’s self-perceived distance from his colleagues and fellow members of his class. The polarization centers on choices made with money. Leonard could not afford the paper, even if he had wished to buy it, because he had spent two shillings at Queen’s Hall for the symphony. In this case he
made a choice to improve his mind at the cost of maintaining a cordial and predictable relationship with his colleagues as established through the ubiquitous accessibility of the light Sunday press. Mr. Cunningham cannot know this however, for the two-fold embarrassment it reflects upon Leonard: 1) he could not afford the paper, and 2) he could not afford the paper because he chose to experience something “better,” outside of the accepted Sunday formula of which Sunday at Home on the respectable Christian family side or News of the World on the tabloid-gossip side were mainstays. Therefore Leonard’s wider outlook costs him in financial as well as potential collegial expenses, but he gains in his own perceived cultural capital. It was not uncommon for clerks and the lower middle class to profess an interest in self-improvement, but the shape of that pursuit often did not extend past the general interest stories of the Sunday papers or the popular press. Leonard’s passion appears to burn more deeply and more discerningly for culture, at the cost of potential ignominy in front of his colleague. Nevertheless, as he often does during the novel, Leonard finds a way to carry on like a gentleman even if his income and labor preclude him from that status. Mr. Cunningham is no more the wiser to Leonard’s schemes, though we as readers are, in a touch of dramatic irony that reveals the clerk’s unwillingness to expose his broad plans for self-improvement because of his desire to avoid embarrassment and causing offence to his colleague in public. The very same plans, in broad, capitalized strokes, are cheerfully announced to a more private and less socially threatening recipient, Jacky, shortly afterwards.

It is arguable that the other families in Howards End work on their own self-improvement projects. The Schlegels certainly do their fair share of attending concerts,
readings, and progressive social gatherings. The Wilcoxes, too, though they are not concerned about art, are driven to succeed in the business world—the kind of professional success that Samuel Smiles is most impressed by, chronicled extensively in his *Self-Help*. The difference between these families and Leonard is that they need not worry about what others think; the incomes they have more than keep them afloat socially, so much so that taking an interest in the less fortunate (as the Schlegels condescend to do) can be admired as a gracious consideration or at the very worst a passing fad. Leonard does not have the stability of his own work to keep him securely respectable, not even when he does have work with the Porphyrian. In his mind, it takes an extra effort to become a person worth noticing—even if nobody else is noticing and it is actually his attempt to convince *himself* that he is, in fact, worthy of respect.

All of these moves toward self-improvement can be interpreted as Leonard’s desperate hold on something he cannot risk losing if he is to remain above the abyss. Again, the occupation of clerk relies on a sense of respectability being upheld when wages and job security are not necessarily certain. Lockwood says of the clerk:

“Occupationally his future was tied to a particular firm and employer, economically he was almost on a par with the labouring classes, and socially he took his pattern of life and standard of values from the class above him. All contributed to form a ‘gentleman’ as different from the aristocratic gentry culture above him as from ‘nature’s gentleman’ below him. His distinguishing mark was respectability” (32). Just as the average clerk understandably hopes to uphold a sense of self-respect that breeds respect in others, so, in a related way, does the autodidact. But what is more interesting than the pursuit of
respectability through self-culture is how that project is paradoxically undermined by its own success in Leonard’s case. It is true that Leonard does not have specific career goals inherent in his education: his aims are rather more abstract and expressive. He seeks to become a more educated, more experienced, and more artistically sensitive person capable of keeping up with the drawing-room talk of the Schlegels, for instance, and other cultivated people. After all, Leonard is part of the class whose schooling in early years was particularly lacking; many working and lower middle class parents in Victorian England expected their children’s education to be composed primarily of child-minding time, manners and discipline, practical job preparation, a smattering of polite knowledge, and solid Christian principles (Thompson 147). Leonard may not be undereducated by class or familial expectations, but he is by his own. The concern for a wider outlook makes sense for one who is aware that he has more to learn. For many in the abyss, that revelation never comes and also never leads to the heartbreaking insecurity Leonard develops. In life, as in work, he is one step away from success but cannot take it. The suggestion, once again, is that the pursuit of self-culture for those who yearn for respectability is a noble project destined for incompletion.

What makes his efforts so unusual is that Leonard does not seem to capitalize on any of the apparent progress he is making. He buys into the mystique of self-culture so completely that he does not or cannot allow it to improve his actual social standing directly or indirectly. If self-improvement inherently holds rising in social status as one of its goals, then it would make sense for Leonard to go along with the supposed good fellowship of the Schlegels, taking it as a sign of acceptance. Rather than doing so,
Leonard’s insecurities prevent him from viewing the patronage as anything resembling, as the Schlegel sisters idealized, a friendship of mutual beneficence on level grounds. There is something ingrained in his personality, no doubt inscribed in his upbringing and socialization, that is distrustful of anyone doing him a good turn without expected recompense. Ulysses D’Aquilla is mostly correct when he says that Helen wants Leonard as a special project, saying “she sees in him the potential natural man,” but perhaps he goes too far when he says Leonard “needs [Helen] as a link to a desired social and cultural life” (69). This is always the implied goal of self-culture among the lower middle classes, but I would assert that there is nothing in the text to suggest that moving in the Schlegels’ social circle is quite what Leonard wants—at least, not what he wants in practical reality. He is certainly drawn to the allure of effortless sophistication that the sisters’ drawing room emanates. But that intoxication which first overtakes him in the presence of the Schlegels wears off over time into a bitterness borne from fundamental difference: “They had all passed up that narrow, rich staircase at Wickham Place, to some ample room, whither he could never follow them, not if he read for ten hours a day. Oh, it was no good; this continual aspiration. Some are born cultured; the rest had better go in for whatever comes easy. To see life steadily and to see it whole was not for the likes of him” (50). While Leonard dreams about and pursues the cultured life, it is a project that is still starkly independent and marked with class-conscious self-reliance: refusing, at first, to accept hand-outs of any kind from his social superiors. He has found allies for culture in the Schlegels, but the pursuit of his own self-improvement does not match their project for his “other”-improvement. His self-culture is outdated, unfashionable, amateurish, but
his own. It is when the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes interfere too deeply that his livelihood is lost and the program must be dropped along with the daydreams that accompany it. After losing his position, “Leonard […] become[s] more pragmatic, realizing that he must secure a job and an income before he can again think about pursuing ideals. […] Cruel circumstance has changed Leonard from a dreamy ineffective romantic into a more pragmatic materialist” (Pinkerton 240). His subsequent decline into asking family for money is that much more profound when we consider how he was once in a primary position to receive it from maternal donors. This is the kind of acceptance that self-improvement usually strives to obtain: an audience and respect from social classes above. Leonard fails to realize this, or fails in some ways to realize the inherent social agenda of his aesthetic education, and believes wholeheartedly in the development of the man for humanity’s sake—not anyone else’s project. All of that is lost, but one surely cannot blame Leonard for his lack of cunning, or for upholding his class pride when he could have easily become the Schlegels’ pet.

Ironically, though he is the closest to the abyss, Leonard pursues his own self-culture with a twinge of disinterestedness tied closely to the clerk’s faux-gentlemanliness. Certainly he enjoys promoting himself in front of Jacky, and he has a secret desire to be more cultured than his fellow clerks, but when it comes down to the issue of ambition Leonard is not willing to allow his pursuit of self-improvement fashion him into a charity case for the Schlegels. His project exists seemingly out of time and space, and through ignorance or idealism is isolated from political and social causes, even concerning himself. Rather, as a gloss of Arnold might suggest, Culture is there for the taking
regardless of social class and is valuable for its own sake. Leonard, after all, “believed in a sudden conversion […] he hoped to come to Culture suddenly, much as the Revivalist hopes to come to Jesus” (45). Leonard is convinced that this conversion is possible, because the apparent proof was directly in front of him: “Those Miss Schlegels had come to it; they had done the trick; their hands were upon the ropes, once and for all” (45). It is important to distinguish here that what Leonard is after is indeed Culture, and not Class. Though the two are connected, as Leonard bemuses when considering the greater opportunities the Schlegels have had, class advancement is not the only, nor the primary, consideration for self-improvement. Their hands are upon the ropes of Culture, not Property or Finance: that is the Wilcoxes’ department. Leonard is idealizing the Schlegels for their perceived wealth of culture and not their material possessions. It is not, then, that Leonard is in search of an opportunity for advancement into polite society. Again, with his program “He felt that he was being done good to, and that if he kept on with Ruskin, and the Queen’s Hall Concerts, and some pictures by Watts, he would one day push his head out of the grey waters and see the universe” (45). He romanticizes the Schlegels for their “wider outlook”; at first, as much as they idealize him. Quickly becoming sensitive to the transgressive nature of the relationship, though, he simply wants to break it off. The more level-headed Margaret realizes soon after what Helen cannot: in the words of Masterman, “All that the poor want […] is to be left alone. They don’t want to be cleaned, enlightened, inspected, [or] drained” (92). Leonard’s pride and well-honed sense of suspicion starkly oppose the practicalities of arranged patronage. He may have romantic feelings for Helen, but it is pretty clear she seduces him. There is therefore no
reason to stay in contact with the Schlegels except for sheer desperation after losing his job because of them. By this point Leonard’s idealism has vanished along with his self-culture, and there remains only disillusionment and regret, though tempered with a strong sense of good moral form, until the clerk meets his end. “As a lady’s lap-dog Leonard did not excel,” the narrator states (125); and nor did he excel in his program of study once he came into contact, ironically, with the people best equipped to encourage his social rise. This is not to say that Leonard missed or blew his chance, but rather it is to raise questions about the efficacy of class-based self-education and the assumptions behind it which were seemingly shut down in the modern era though its most fervent practitioners were part of the most rapidly expanding class sector of society.

3. Teaching the Boy

With all of his complex influence in the novel, Leonard Bast should rightfully hold a strong presence in the critical attention as much as he surely held in Forster’s conception of the project. Leonard has as many stumbling blocks as the other characters in Howards End—inexperience, naivete, misplaced affection in Jacky—it is true, but these are partly the result of sheer youth. Leonard is known throughout the novel as a boy; although his actual age is unknown, he is apparently not old enough to marry his sweetheart at the beginning of the novel. As such he is in the liminal position of indeterminacy, not a child and not quite a man, that was so intriguing to late Victorian and Edwardian writers. The fact that Leonard’s youth is foregrounded so prominently has
lead critics such as Gregory Castle to read his story as a Bildungsroman. The explicit exercise of self-culture would suggest that this is a good reading, but perhaps not complete. Whether or not Leonard learns anything or develops beyond the physical growth into maturity is questionable. I believe Forster suggests that the abandonment of Leonard’s book-based romance when he loses his job is in fact the end of his development, rather than the beginning of it. Henceforth he is neither concerned with culture (as he already loosely understands it) nor as much with other people, most dramatically with members of his family becoming the grudging benefactors of his existence: “Without a generous thought on either side, pounds and pounds passed. The donors disliked Leonard, and he grew to hate them intensely” (289). Not until his final hours does he gain a steadier and more secure sense of self, preparing for confession to Margaret and quite possibly foreseeing his own death. That he never resorts to drowning his sorrows in spirits or withholding tenderness from Jacky are the two bright spots of his decline, and with his death at Howards End the question of how Leonard’s life might have been becomes more profound.

Forster himself may have been moved by Leonard over the course of writing the various versions of the novel. According to Mary Pinkerton, much of Forster’s revisions at first show a pattern of alienating Leonard and Jacky from the rest of the characters and their society, even grammatically, through the elimination of personal pronouns (“his commercial training” becomes “a commercial training,” for example, and after revisions Leonard is repeatedly referred to as “the fellow,” “the victim,” and “the boy”10) (239). Near the end of the novel, though, Forster’s writing grants Leonard reprieve from
narrative estrangement. Pinkerton says, “the published text presents his strength of character unequivocally. In addition to his newly acquired tenderness for Jacky [...] Leonard is presented as ‘alive’ and unmuddled. Leonard grows as a character in these few pages of the published text. He is able to rise above his circumstances in a manner that would have been beyond the character presented in the draft version” (241). Despite all of the obstacles against him, Leonard finishes as a respectable person, ironically achieving in his death the yield so desired from his efforts in life. He has achieved, in other words, a connection that self-education and its pitfalls did not proffer him.

Forster’s ambivalence about Leonard’s tragedy is more understandable in light of the author’s role in actively administering improvement and education for the working and lower middle classes. After University, and his vigorous participation as an Apostle in the Cambridge Conversazione Society, Forster obtained part time work teaching Latin at the Working Men’s College in London. This was to lead to a position at the Cambridge University Local Lectures Board (forerunner of the Workers’ Educational Association and the Local Authority evening classes) through which he was to lecture part time, traveling as necessary to such places as Harpenden and Guildford. There he spoke on the art and history of the Republic of Florence—a favorite topic from grand tours with his mother Lily and one connected closely to Where Angels Fear to Tread and A Room With a View (Beauman 129, 140). The topic may have been relatively high-brow, but Forster received a fair share of interested attendees from the lectures’ target demographic. His last lecture at Harrow in 1911 featured a typically mixed audience of small tradesmen: the list included men and women who self-identified as “woolsorter, organ builder,
clicker, engineer, compositor, carpenter, lithographer, shipwright, boilermaker, railway porter, painter, baker, blacksmith, carrier, [and] brushmaker” (Beauman 239). The purpose of the Local Lectures Board was to extend to the community a vestige of University education to those who would otherwise not have the opportunity, but doing so for Forster often meant drawing out compromise on both sides of the lectern. The man or woman in the audience would need to extend his mind beyond everyday cares into a more abstract realm of Italian history and culture, and Forster would need to provide a succinct, entertaining, and informative lecture for a general audience. At first this was difficult for the brainy and shy recent graduate, but over time he developed a style of plain speaking that is most clearly recognized in his BBC talks and *Aspects of the Novel*. Beauman says of his extension lectures over the years, “he would place more and more emphasis on accessibility and would have been embarrassed by charges of complexity. Subtlety, fidelity to the individual voice, spontaneity: these would be the qualities that would interest him in a reader or an audience. He would shrink from displaying his own learning; and he would shrink from undermining others by demanding too much of them” (140). Forster’s adherence to regularity in everyday life made lecturing to the working classes—always on Florence—an exercise in verisimilitude undergone without extending himself or his students very much intellectually or politically. Rigor was not the point, neither in Forster’s lesson plans nor in the philosophy of the Local Lectures administration. Rather it was to nourish minds in the best traditions of the liberal arts, to create freethinkers and generally well-rounded people on their own terms.
It is important to note that these University extension courses targeted working people, hence their evening hours, and lead to the models of adult education and “lifelong learning” still prevalent today in the extant WEA. The easy-going mentality on Forster’s behalf also reinforced the separation of distinction between the learned and the learning and also clearly grounded the fact that workers who attended Forsters’ lectures were not aiming for a degree or the kind of cultural capital Oxbridge could provide (even though they were dedicated to self-improvement). Such was the case at the Working Men’s College, Forster’s first foray into administering improvement efforts:

Its founders knew that they must deal with the academic assumption, from which Forster himself was not exempt at the time, that the good life was not really possible outside Oxford and Cambridge. But they would do their best to combine university ideals and social life on the university pattern with teaching to fit the abilities and aspirations of working men (and, as much as possible, women). It would not insult them with a juvenile curriculum warmed over. The atmosphere would be collegial: a community, a club, a centre for friendship and leisure activities as well as for study and some practical training. So far as was humanly possible, there would be no artificial social or professional barriers. (Lago 19)

These extension lectures were not, in other words, following in the case of Ruskin College—an accredited institution for higher learning that was attended entirely by worker-students, often carrying radicalized support for socialist politics. Rather the understood intellectual distance between teacher and student made the actual lectures
enjoyable because they were safely contained in the communally-perceived world of knowledge and did not portend any struggle to throw off the elitism of a Cambridge graduate imparting culture to the unwashed masses. As much as Forster sought to make connections with his students, and therefore emancipate them, it was to do so in the sphere of cultural curiosity and not political enlightenment (except via a billowy classical liberalism). Perhaps Forster enjoyed doing his lectures so much because he set the stakes so comparatively low: his was a cultural crusade, and had little to do with improving material circumstances. Indeed, given the choice, it is safe to assume that for him the cultural improvement project was much more vital to the health and well-being of the whole person than a shorter work week and a raise. This is not to downplay Forster’s educational efforts, but to divorce them strictly speaking from the kinds of political connections that even the Schlegel sisters possess. Forster was rather interested in his students’ intellectual labor as a path to greater humanity or understanding of the world that was not necessarily linked to social betterment.

His attitude towards the aesthetic education of the working classes is likewise reassuring, optimistic, and lenient. Mary Lago paraphrases: “Relax, is Forster’s message: you have no time to waste in fruitless intellectual byways. Do not be discouraged if an understanding of beauty seems to come only in scraps, not in some dazzling vision. Scraps are a perfectly good way to approach beauty, which is timeless and omnipresent and waits patiently for our eyes and ears to be opened to it” (23). Furthermore, “he offers a rule: a workman’s spare time is precious. Therefore, never force yourself on a subject that has become only a chore. Choose what appeals most and pursue that subject with all
your mind and heart” (23). For Forster, having his students engaged with some subject of interest was to ward off the working-day doldrums and set off on a path toward better self-understanding (but not necessarily social improvement). That the students were statistically unlikely to use their thoughts on Florence to find a better position, for example, did not crush Forster and his pedagogical philosophy. In fact, with all of his humanism, he was able to see beyond the material circumstances to advance the cause of working-class autodidacts in a rather socially mature way.

Respecting the physical and mental toll of daily work, Forster cultivated a style of lifelong learning that met students halfway, with an easy yoke and a light burden, and avoided in theory if not in practice the faux-pas of handing down cultural commandments from on high. This is precisely the mistake which Howards End highlights in the debate, made ridiculous in its array of competing suggestions, between the Schlegels’ friends of what “must be done” with hypothetical money for a cause like Leonard: “his conditions must be improved without impairing his independence; he must have a free library, or free tennis-courts […] he must be given food but no clothes, clothes but no food, a third-return ticket to Venice, without either food or clothes when he arrived there. In short, he might be given anything and everything so long as it was not the money itself” (HE 115). The narrator pokes fun at the middle class do-gooders because despite their best intentions they have a basic failure to understand the reality of working and lower middle class life. It operates on completely different standards of money, time, and taste to such a point where the suggestions of tennis courts and a trip to Venice are so wildly class-centric that they strike the reader as remarkably off-point in what could have been a
practical discussion of poverty. The Schlegel friends are here missing the point that Forster implements in his teaching philosophy and that Henry Wilcox reprimands Margaret for ignoring: “Your mistake is this, and it is a very common mistake. This young bounder has a life of his own. What right have you to conclude it is an unsuccessful life, or, as you call it, ‘grey’?” (HE 133) The assumption that the working classes need assistance to achieve a material level of security is unmistaken; the mistaken assumption is that real progress can be meted out from beneficent helpmates without serious regard for the personal and cultural complexities of the individuals in need and regardless of their lives’ apparent disarray.

Considering Forster’s viewpoint, this assumption is worth dwelling on in terms of cultural capital. At the heart of classical liberalism is a dilemma of which Forster was well aware. As Widdowson summarizes, “Educating those without the material base to support the values of liberal civilization is futile, and yet how does one offer everyone the opportunity for ‘culture’ without destroying precisely that material base which makes possible all the values one wishes to propagate? Doesn’t the civilization of liberal-humanism – even at its most brilliant or benevolent – necessarily rest on the fact that other people produce goods and remove the garbage?” (40) Any liberal guilt that Forster felt from his independent inheritance does not prevent him from acting as a positive force in laying the grounds for self-improvement for the less fortunate. Herein is the key to the dilemma of the liberal-humanist project: idealism first, materialism afterwards. Culture was the key to instilling the values that would become emancipatory and uplifting, if personally and not professionally at first. This viewpoint is what allows Forster to carry
on 11 years’ worth of lectures on Latin and Florence to diligent seekers of useful knowledge, but still pen the tragedy of Leonard Bast. It is true: Leonard is alone in his idealistic scholarly world, whereas Forster’s students work together with him. Yet Leonard’s efforts match the kind of heart put into self-education by hordes of others in the working and clerk classes. Hoy places the conflict in light of the “culture and civilization” promise of Matthew Arnold:

The complexities of modern life simply militate against an “intellectual deliverance” of the sort Arnold imagined. It is Forster, of course, who sees life steadily and whole, and the deliverance he suggests in *Howards End* is less intellectual than Arnold’s was in 1857. Forster’s plan is educational but does not depend on a complex, formal educational system; its target is the imagination of the middle class, and, like Arnold’s plan, it seeks to recapture the classical past. (229)

Forster’s emphasis on education with his lectures, broadcasts, and lessons, never put academics or aesthetics above a general popular reconciliation. The “classical past” he seeks to summon among the middle class imagination harkens to an English mythology of which the spirit of Leonard’s agrarian ancestors, still present in his efforts, shines through. This was enough to earn him respect by the end of the novel and a spiritual place in the family gathering at Howards End. Leonard is Forster’s boy, Isaac to his Abraham: a sad, memorable character in a story of unavoidable conflict. He is above all a sacrifice to a philosophy at pains to be upheld—a liberalism that carries through the love of its tenets even at the brink of sacrificing them entirely.
4. Conclusion

The poignancy of Leonard’s misguided attempt to achieve culture on his own and his subsequent decline through the influence of others is a reflection of Forster’s ambivalence about the school (of thought and of learning) he was caught up in at the time of writing *Howards End*. Well aware of the difficulties inherent in lower middle class life through his own students and interactions with Suburbans, Forster writes the dreams and frustrations of a boy—not yet a man—searching for the one quality that never comes automatically for one of his situation: respect. Mostly unambitious in direct political ways, his is a pursuit of culture on solidly Arnoldian terms. He seeks to become an “alien” in his own class, and to achieve, in his own words, “a wider outlook.” In classical liberalism, he is the ideal subject. Problems arise, though, when theory meets practice and another facet of liberal progressivism actively undermines the original project and imbues it with stumbling blocks based around class-crossing relationships. In one sense, these relationships lead to the uneasy optimism of the ending; in another sense, they spell a deep uncertainty about the project of liberal humanism in theory and in practice. Self-culture is good; trying to help others is good; when the two collide, it produces a negative result uniquely situated in an era, complicated by the shifting socioeconomic forces of modernity, when two rights can make a wrong. Nevertheless, Forster is able to maintain Leonard’s respectability when the character himself is not. At the “fag-end” of liberalism, the quality that endures is one distinctly of self-respect, honor with contradiction.
In “The Challenge of Our Time” (1946) Forster writes of post-World War II England: “I cannot free myself from the conviction that something irreplaceable has been destroyed, and that a little piece of England has died as surely as if a bomb had hit it. I wonder what compensation there is in the world of the spirit, for the destruction of the life here, the life of tradition” (59). Something similar could be said for his mindset nearer the turn of the century, when the recognition of a shifting way of life began to sink in. Before the widespread terror of the World Wars, there was already suspicion of anti-humanist forces creeping into public attention. Forster’s response to the influences of international capitalism, city life, and the annexation of rural England—all of which bring clerks represented by Leonard Bast to the greater metropolitan area—is one of rueful nostalgia tinged with hope. Something irreplaceable was being destroyed, and what was replacing rural tradition was an army of new urban men and women, rootless, restless, and ambitious for culture and respect. That culture was often as unsystematic and piecemeal as any collection of Sunday press stories, pursued during the rare moments away from work, or better yet at the local lecture hall with fellow self-improvers.

Forster’s ambivalence about the kinds of autodidacts that Leonard represents is clear from his characterization of the boy himself. With all of his intellectual shortcomings and amateurism, he still seeks an independence and respectability that other characters in more well-established families cannot match. He earns the affection of Forster himself, as well as many readers.
This is the ultimate paradox of Leonard Bast: he is both part of and opposed to the forces of modernization that made clerks and self-culture so prevalent at the time. Coming along with the waves of lower middle class people joining the white collar office ranks made available through the expansion of international trade and literacy programs, Leonard also believes in the efficacy of self-culture for its own sake. This is in contrast to the popular self-help programs that were targeted towards development in specific areas for the goals of professional and social advancement. Certainly, Leonard lacks interest in development that is not primarily aesthetic. This puts him at odds with his colleagues and places him squarely in the spirit of classical liberalism and the kind of culture that Forster still wanly propagates in his BBC talks after World War II. The problem of course is that Leonard lacks the material means to carry through his program and becomes caught up in the complicated class interactions that eventually eradicate him physically and almost destroy him ideologically. Finally it is Leonard’s spirit of chasing perfection despite the inevitability of falling short that makes his influence so lasting at Howards End. The other families pursue property for financial stability or political change for social improvement, but neither with the disinterestedness and kenosis of Leonard. His is an honorable pursuit in a time posing hard questions about the value of honor, disregarding the numerous other obstacles against it. Leonard’s self-culture permeates the rest of his life, making him a sheep in the company of wolves. And despite the considerable pitfalls concerning liberalism as a philosophy and a practical way of life after World War I, Forster is still able to summon the influence of one like Leonard to stand up against total war and its cohort: totalitarianism, propaganda, censorship, paranoia, and restricted
personal freedoms. There is always recompense in the life of the spirit—the fall and rise of Leonard Bast, clerk-autodidact, is testament to such.

The rest of the definition from William Smith’s Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology briefly chronicles Porphyrion’s existence: “During the fight between the giants and the gods, when Porphyrion intended to offer violence to Hera, or, according to others, attempted to throw the island of Delos against the gods, Zeus hurled a thunderbolt at him, and Heracles completed his destruction with arrows” (498).

“The pre-1870 trading world was one in which technological backwardness in transport, uncertainties in the speed and reliability of information regarding markets and sources of supply and, consequently, high costs, combined to create a commercial transaction in which a number of intermediaries intervened between the producer and the final consumer in order to spread the risks. In this situation many brokers and small merchants grew up […]” (Anderson 118). In other words, opportunities for clerks to become independent diminish when trade reliability improves.

Here is a good example of what Jonathan Rose notes as the lag in time and taste from when the literary elites favor certain texts to when the self-educating masses become aware of them: “At the dawn of the twentieth century, when literary modernism was emerging, the self-educated had only just mastered the great English classics” (Intellectual 126). No doubt much of this early-twentieth century awareness can be attributed to widely-circulating collections like Palgrave’s Golden Treasury and the publication of such canonizing compendia as Sir John Lubbock’s list of hundred best books in 1886 (Rose Intellectual 128-9).

For an extended analysis of Leonard’s outdated “bookshelf,” see the second part of the chapter “Howards End and the Dislocation of Narrative” in Structure and Dissolution in English Writing, 1910-1920 (Sillars 32-41).

Another example of subject matter in Sunday papers would be the kind of general knowledge trivia offered up by officemates (“The fellows there said one steers by the Pole Star”) which actually fails to help Leonard during his disastrous nocturnal ramble: “I looked it up in the celestial atlas, but once out of doors everything gets so mixed” (Forster Howards 108).

Alfred Harmsworth (Lord Northcliffe), the newspaper baron, began his career by producing magazine that provided general interest stories such as the one about Manchester birth rates: “Answers to Correspondents […] sated the curiosity of often imaginary correspondents by replying to such questions as ‘Can Snakes Kill Pigs?’ and ‘Do Women Live Longer than Men?’ ” (Rance 121).

In a letter to Malcolm Darling dated August 12, 1910, Forster writes, “I am taking huge chunks of Mat Arnold. He’s not as good as he thinks, but better than I thought” (Letters 111).

“The boy” is a double-edged sobriquet, implying both the foolishness and attractive charm of youth, particularly to Forster. In his letters to Syed Ross Masood he repeatedly greets him as “Dearest Boy,” a salutation reserved for Forster’s close friend alone (Letters 118, 120-1).
Chapter 3: Aesthetic Sympathy and Aesthetics, Simply:

Social Ideology and Literary Representations of Self-Culture in Virginia Woolf

“[...] culture for the great majority of educated men’s daughters must still be that which is acquired outside the sacred gates, in public libraries or in private libraries, whose doors by some accountable oversight have been left unlocked.”

- Three Guineas (106-7)

Something of a time-honored critical pastime is to speculate on Virginia Woolf’s reputation, an abstract quality that seems to be in flux like the relative value of the American dollar against the pound sterling. Woolf scholarship has proven to be remarkably resilient despite these fluctuations, as her unique history of negligence and appreciation from the academy has shown. Well-known during her writing life, Woolf lacked scholastic attention at the beginning of serious study of modern British literature owing much to her gender and craft of novel-writing in an academic era dominated primarily by poetic analysis. When elitism and difficulty were high modernism’s prized characteristics, Woolf earned a place with canonical companions Joyce, Eliot and Pound. Interiority, stream-of-consciousness, and psychoanalysis assured a future for Woolf under close reading, though not without a rough patch in the 1950s and ‘60s. Beginning in the
1970s, feminist advances within the academy opened up new interpretations of Woolf’s works and new inquiries into the life of the woman herself. Laura Marcus, in the essay “Woolf’s Feminism and Feminism’s Woolf,” says that Woolf’s own feminism inspired and supported the movement in which “feminist criticism and theory of the second half of this century […] fundamentally altered the perception and reception of a writer who […] had largely fallen out of favour by the 1950s and 1960s” (209). Finally, at the current point of the so-called New Modernist Studies, there is a push to revisit the historical sites of cultural production and to re-open exploration of the line between high culture and low culture that has defined Woolf’s reputation in the first few decades of her academic legacy.

What is most relevant in light of current critical explorations is not so much Woolf’s literary works, which in her lifetime reached a broad audience, but her public (and private) views of common readers and their relation to art. This is a tricky issue to approach because of Woolf’s apparent inconsistency on the matter. For example, Woolf publicly praised Joyce’s *Ulysses* and privately denounced it in her diary as the work of a common man putting on schoolboy airs. Biographers agree that Woolf was fickle in writing across diverse outlets, often utilizing her diary’s freedom to unload thoughts that she may not have felt very strongly about except in the moment of scripting. That Woolf was idiosyncratic is not contested. But as Melba Cuddy-Keane says, the idea that her eccentricity and intellectual prowess distanced her from the ordinary reader certainly is (7). At stake is more than a simple question of reputation. To a large degree Woolf’s writings and essays build on a philosophy of social justice that depend on her relationship
to the audience that she targets, “common” or otherwise. One helpful way into the heart of the matter is through the issue of democratic education and feminist rights, approached via the promise of popular self-culture. This issue was a whetstone for testing the tensile strength of social ideology sharpened into artistic practice.

For Woolf, as for other modernists, the theme of self-culture was clouded with ambiguity. Often the issue’s depiction depended on its utilization, either in nonfiction or fiction. Ardently supporting equal access to education and rights for women in her essays, Woolf nevertheless struggled to translate the promise of self-culture into uncompromised literary presentation. The prospect of presenting characters from the lower middle class who had successfully achieved the cultivation and social rising that many programs implicitly advertised came directly into conflict with her modernist aesthetic sensibility and class-based social depictions. There is even more at stake for Woolf’s perspective, however, as she specifically appreciated the feministic potential of self-education. I argue that this inconsistency in opinion is part of a larger modernist discomfort with mass attempts at education, based for Woolf as for others around the specific issue of self-culture. I will examine Woolf’s biography and nonfiction writings to analyze her support of self-directed education before moving into the conflicting territory of her literary works, where social sensibility meets modernist skepticism and results in tragedies large and small for autodidactic characters. I conclude by showing how Woolf’s uneasy support of mass education was bolstered in defensive desperation against the oncoming war, a common move of late modernists who found the state of their world too dire to confront with ambiguity.
1. Father’s Library, Daughter’s Books: Self-Culture and Feminism

i. Father’s Library

The appeals of self-culture for a proponent of democratic education, and a feminist at that, are readily apparent. In theory, self-culture could level the playing fields of class and gender both. The most basic instrument of self-education that Woolf recognized was the book. Exposure to good, thoughtful literature promised to elevate the aesthetic (and political) awareness of the reader. Fortunately for Woolf, this was the era of cheap classics. Beginning at the turn of century, in the midst of printing advances that made books and newspapers more affordable, reprints of literary classics emerged to challenge the dominance of penny dreadfuls for the attention of the common reader. In Richard D. Altick’s view, “If millions read nothing but trash, scores of thousands, no wealthier and with no more formal schooling, devoured serious fiction, poetry, essays, history, philosophy, theology, and biography” (240). For the first time in such a widespread way, the average reader could afford to put classics on his or her bookshelf. Among other such compendia was the most popular, Francis Turner Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* (Rose *Intellectual* 128). First published in 1861, the treasury collected several hundred years of canonical English poetry into an attractive volume at a budget-friendly price. Its influence continued through the beginning of the twentieth century, reaching its sixth edition by 1911. J. M. Dent launched the Everyman Library in 1906 built on large
print runs, low prices, attractive design, and classic authors (Collini 251). Increasingly prevalent public libraries also provided an alternative to pay subscription services such as Mudie’s Select Library. Classic literature was finally able to reach the masses in a number of accessible ways.

The impact of these developments in book publishing and availability is critical to understanding the feministic appeal of self-education. With the instruments of humanistic thought well within reach, one could educate oneself in moments of leisure, privately, away from the factory, office, or for many women, the responsibilities of the household. The bookstand, unlike the University lecturer, was speechless and judgment-free. That allowed women to make their own choices without facing the intimidation of a perceived arbiter of taste in the figure of the lecturer. The books themselves represented and contained infinite lessons on infinite topics, attuned to the reader’s own interests and aims. Library patrons and book-buyers never ran the risk of being outsiders to education. For feminism, which sought equal access to every privilege granted traditionally to men (beginning with the vote), eliminating outsider status was a crucial first step to any advancement. At its core, self-culture promised two things essential to the feminist cause: equality of opportunity, and the chance for social advancement through personal growth.

Woolf was no stranger to self-culture in her own development. Not needing to educate herself for social advancement out of poverty, Woolf nevertheless grew intellectually and artistically by individual means. She considered herself one of those outsiders to University education, and placed an emphasis on her youthful self-development through books. She received private instruction at home during her
formative years, and by the time she was fifteen she began taking classes in Greek and Latin in the Ladies Department of King’s College in Kensington (Whitworth 12). One of the most important factors in her precocious literary development was her early and relatively unfettered access to her father’s library. This was granted in 1897, when she was 15 years old. Recognizing the burgeoning habits of a lifetime reader, Leslie Stephen allowed Virginia to read great amounts of literature, history, and biography from his shelves. Quentin Bell describes how this freedom exposed Woolf to a great amount of literature and began sharpening her critical tastes, following her father’s given precepts: “[she] must decide for herself what she ought to read […] She must learn to read with discrimination, to make unaffected judgments, never admiring because the world admires or blaming at the orders of a critic” (51). From this early exposure to the printed word, Woolf was to build a lifetime habit of reading and critical engagement with the artistic, social, and political worlds. She would also become a lifelong supporter of the public institutions, like the free libraries, that would open their shelves to all as her father opened his shelves to her.

Woolf was aware that not everyone could have access to the kind of quality reading she was accustomed to in the Stephen household, but that did not diminish her enthusiasm for spreading the gospel of educational discovery in all forms. She recognized that while books were the cornerstone of self-culture, it was beneficial for women and the poor to have instruction similar to what was being offered to the University elite but without the patriarchic didacticism. To this end, she volunteered as a tutor at Morley College from 1905 to 1906. At first, it was a challenge to make connections to students
without her privileged background. Young Virginia appears to have overcome this challenge by emphasizing her own exclusion from traditional education. Beth Rigel Daugherty says, “she forge[d] a link with others trying to educate themselves: they, too, are outsiders, having been excluded from a good education” (63). Since they had all been denied the education of the wealthier men, even their own brothers, they must work to achieve individual gains as outsiders, together.

For Woolf, teaching at Morley was an artistic as much as a social mission. She saw the appeal of democratic access to education, specifically aesthetic education, as a way to encourage women and those of traditionally undereducated classes to explore the potentials of art—even moreso than politics. In this stance she resembles her Bloomsbury compatriot E. M. Forster, who also gave lectures to working men in hopes of piquing their interest in art and culture for the sake of humane learning alone. Along with her interest in art over politics, Woolf appears to be more concerned with women of genius than the average woman in her support for educational access. As Mary Gordon puts it, “her plea is that we create a world in which Shakespeare’s sister might survive her gift, not one in which a miner’s wife can have her rights to property; her passion is for literature, not for universal justice” (viii). Woolf was not unconcerned with equal political rights for women; she just happened to see the practice of self-education, in its grassroots applications, as aiding the aesthetic side of feminism more than its political side.

In practice, these two concepts are not so detached. As Woolf herself argues in *A Room of One’s Own*, that coveted space only becomes available with the helpmates of money and material security. Woolf says: “Intellectual freedom depends upon material
things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom‖ (108). In this formulation, “material things” start the process through which independence provides intellectual freedom which ultimately produces poetry: the end achievement of Woolf’s woman writer, indeed any writer. “Material things” means more than the physical necessities of food, water, shelter, and clothing. It also means time or leisure which, though immaterial, can be “bought” with assets in the bank to avoid the material necessity of having to be somewhere else, doing something else, for financial support. The crucial factor behind her support of democratic education (including self-culture) was tapping the potential of women who could be, among other things, the great writers of the present and future. The appeal of the process was that it would encourage women to explore their own latent artistic and scholarly interests, regardless of whether or not they possessed the literal or figurative “room” to do so.

Another reason Woolf supported popular education was that it promised to close the gap between the traditional bastions of upper-class male power—the Universities—and the women whose access to them was still all but denied. Woolf was especially opinionated about this, as all of the men in her family benefited from the kind of elite schooling she craved. The education she did receive, though admirable and extensive in its self-directed scope, did not compare in her mind to the prestige of a degree conferred from Cambridge. Her inability to attend the Universities despite her fascination with them granted the institutions a quasi-mystical, detached quality in her work. Derided as the chauvinistic strongholds of imperial masculinity, they were also praised as the great centers of mankind’s highest intellectual achievements. “The witness of biography,” she
says, “is unanimous upon this point; the value of [University] education is among the
greatest of all human values” (TG 31). Those values were transmitted almost exclusively
to the male elite. Young Virginia, couched in her father’s library, reading history and
biography, was influenced by how often “great men,” including England’s best authors,
were cultivated at Oxbridge as a matter of course. Being barred from them produced
bitterness but also a romanticized view of their lofty academic mission—a kind of
eminence echoed in the lives of great men, past and present. There is also the case of
Thoby’s special attachment to Cambridge, which lingered beyond his tragedy to render
those grounds even more mystically significant for Virginia. Two years after his death,
she pleaded with his friends Lytton Strachey and Clive Bell to tell her what he was really
like at Cambridge. She was deeply concerned with how his personality fit the life at
University and vice versa. Quentin Bell says that in addition to the natural need of
wanting to know more about a loved one lost, Woolf’s inquiries into Thoby’s University
life sustained “an amused yet resentful curiosity about the privileged masculine society of
Cambridge” (112). These issues she would explore more thoroughly in Jacob’s Room.
Responding to her brother’s loss as connected to so many in the Great War, she would
expose in fragments a constellation of forces—including Cambridge—that bonded so
many of the young men departed.

Whether at home, in the working man’s college, or at Oxbridge, Woolf was
convinced that education bore prime importance in the development of sensibility. The
Universities still dominated this area in the popular imagination, but her hope was for
something radically different. In Three Guineas, she argues for a new, “cheap” college
that would counter the “the arts of dominating other people […] the arts of ruling, of killing, of acquiring land and capital” with “only the arts that can be taught cheaply and practised by poor people; such as medicine, mathematics, music, painting and literature” (43). Being taught cheaply is at the basis of all popular self-cultural efforts, and she emphasizes the practical aspect of what is being learned. In other words, what is taught at the college can be practiced on the pupil’s own time, with or without other people. Her description of the new college is distinctly Forsterian in its emphasis on the value of the kindly human arts, and the need to cultivate interpersonal connections: “It should teach the arts of human intercourse; the art of understanding other people’s lives and minds, and the little arts of talk, of dress, of cookery that are allied with them. The aim of the new college, the cheap college, should be not to segregate and specialize, but to combine” (TG 43). As with her Morley lecturing, Woolf sought throughout her essays on educational reform to “only connect.” That often meant throwing out old ideas, such as the masculine elitism of Oxbridge, in favor of newer ideas such as the gender-neutral, democratic potential of self-directed learning.

The timeliness of these sentiments set down in Three Guineas is worth further remark. With the Second World War on the verge of outbreak when it was published in 1938, Woolf’s thoughts on education tended to focus almost exclusively on the systems of power rendered and upheld in the ancient Universities that she blamed for continuing imperialism and warmongering from World War I. The necessary antidote to such institutions of male power indoctrination was the affordable, humane, easily-accessible realm of education envisioned in her ideal new college which had part of its inspiration
from the more diffuse arena of popular self-culture. In “Three Guineas, the In-corporated Intellectual and Nostalgia for the Human,” Sonita Sarker argues that the purpose of this new college is not to reproduce mechanically but to explore new areas of intellectual and social growth (56). She says, “In this era, both wars and mechanical reproduction,” including that kind of ideological mechanical reproduction evident in the ancient universities, “contest and transform ideas of humanness, especially of the individual human as unique and ‘uncopyable’” (38). The world of self-exploration is valuable because it affirms that human beings cannot be strictly abstracted to numerical values: for example, a tally of wartime casualties.

There is also immense value in following a curriculum that is of one’s own interest because it limits didactic indoctrination from someone else. This was a real concern for Woolf, who distrusted the aggressive-teaching and passive-learning model inherent in the lecture format both for its educational inefficiency and for its pointedly masculine qualities. For her, as for Forster, ephemeral education undergone in bits and scraps was worthwhile due to the spirit of interest behind it, more even than any practical value it might hold. She argued, in the words of Hermione Lee, for “serendipitous, random reading from the shelves of second-hand bookshops and public libraries” (408). The public library was to be the “university of the non-specialist, uninstructed reader; it is the reading room for the common reader” (Lee 408). Educating Woolf’s ideal woman writer would have to take place in a new setting. Efforts for education outside of the established degree-granting bastions would empower women to explore their own artistic sides and would lead to generations of more sensible and sensitive citizens.
In sum, Woolf recognized that self-culture supported the aims of feminism, even though it was not strictly speaking a feminist movement. Self-culture of all kinds promised to improve the individuals pursuing it, intellectually, aesthetically, and socially. Understandably, systems of self-improvement appealed to and targeted marginalized groups. Specifically, they were often aimed at the under-educated of the lower middle classes. Many from these groups desired increased respect and social standing borne from their routines of self-education, a motivation that drove the sales of cheap classical literature reprints and guides to efficient time management. And while young male clerks may have been looking for a way to brush up on their reading to garner respectability in-between shifts at the office, women were often making up for the dearth of education stemming from their childhoods. It is within this flexibility of choice and application that self-culture asserts itself in support of feminism. By definition a self-empowered action, the education of oneself is reliant only on an individualized program of study for personal reasons. Whether alone or in a group of likeminded women, the effort toward improvement constitutes a choice of action. Self-culture lives within the spare minutes unclaimed by the daily duties of work and home. It does not necessarily subvert those capitalistic or patriarchal systems at play, but rather influences the subject within those systems—with the promise of developing the reader into a more knowledgeable, sensitive, and capable person. As we have seen, Woolf took that promise seriously. Volunteering at Morley and calling for democratic access to education in her essays, she crafted a public image as a cultural crusader for those from marginalized class and gender
backgrounds. As for her literary image, that is a different and more complicated story entirely.

ii. Daughter’s Books

Virginia Woolf was a proponent of self-culture because of its promise to bolster aesthetic sensibility in the reader, but she was skeptical of its potential effects on the literary market regarding the related issue of artistic quality in the books themselves. From a viewpoint of equality, access to education and sources of aesthetic inspiration should be positive for the reasons mentioned above. Yet Woolf was more than a social activist and feminist. She was a writer of literary fiction, and would perhaps consider herself an artist above all else. As such, she was skeptical about the trend and impact of cheap fiction which was the cornerstone of informal literary education. To a certain degree, Woolf saw the benefits in affordable access to literature. The drawback was when cheapness becomes more than an indicator of price, and begins to be a descriptor of writing quality. At the time, the paid-subscription process of such notoriously middle-class moralistic standard-bearing lending libraries as Mudie’s Select was being undone by the one-time transaction of purchasing cheap prints. Priced out of expensive hardbacks to treasure, and even subscriptions to lending libraries with books durably bound to circulate, working and lower middle class readers were left to purchase cheap prints that, if they were not disposed of by the reader, would invariably await the same outcome through the spoilage of time. For Woolf, the prospect of building a “library” on these
kinds of books was inherently problematic. In Cornwall in 1921, she “was left with profoundly mixed feelings after a conversation with a self-educated post office clerk, ‘infected with books’, who had ‘Everyman’s Library entire’ on his shelves.” According to Michael Whitworth, “he closely resembled a Bloomsbury intellectual, and yet read ‘no moderns’ and was happy to follow his ‘own heart’ as a guide to taste” (68). Though commendable for his ambition, this man resembles Leonard Bast amongst the Schlegels: half-baked and out of place.

The most egregious contributors to the cheapening of literature (figuratively, though in some ways literally, too), were those who capitalized on exploiting middlebrow sensibilities for profiting without apparently advancing the craft of writing. Arnold Bennett is one of Woolf’s well-known targets, appearing alongside H. G. Wells as the “materialist” devotee of a stodgy realism that had run its course artistically in the nineteenth century, but still attracted many people to its familiar style. Woolf said, “the sooner English fiction turns its back upon them, as politely as may be, and marches, if only into the desert, the better for its soul” (E III 32). How fair these attacks on the Edwardians were remains a subject for debate, and elsewhere in this dissertation I attempt to partly recover Bennett’s reputation from a tarnishing that has coincided with Woolf’s rise in the academy. In addition to Bennett’s fiction was his smattering of self-help books, which promised to maximize the time for culture of the average busy working reader in *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day* (1910), and made claims to enhance the aesthetic perception of the common reader in *Literary Taste: How to Form It* (1909). Through systematic study, anyone regardless of talent or educational level could become

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productive, knowledgeable, and discerning on just about any topic, including literature. These books seemed to promise a shortcut to the kind of culture Woolf was anxious to uphold both in her own writing and in the overall quality of literature being made available to the public. They were also, to her, representative of the pandering variety of cheap literature being sold at the stall—disposable in idea as in material. Whether in fiction or nonfiction, capitalizing on an apparent lowest-common-denominator taste was dubious for Woolf.

Nevertheless, she was conflicted in the two assumptions that affordable books debased literature and that popular self-help books were promising impossible shortcuts for wishful fools. In the first place, Woolf was intensely aware of the commercial aspects of producing literature. Pricing, distribution, binding, and promotion were always foremost when it came to her own novels as well as other books printed through the Hogarth Press. She struggled with the commercial facet of writing just as much, if not more than, other aspiring authors of fiction. To a large degree her tireless efforts at writing essays and reviews stem from an emphasis to be accepted as a woman who was a professional, drawing a living from her intellectual labor. Therefore she sought commercial success from the public to validate her professional ability, but also pursued aesthetic innovation to forward her modern notion of writing to a more focused audience. Whitworth summarizes this dilemma: “To write in a distinctively ‘literary’ manner, for an audience of other specialists, is to risk retreating from the problems of the real world, and so to weaken literature’s claims to be of any importance in that world. On the other hand, to write accessibly for a mass audience is to risk compromising the distinctiveness
of literature, and so to destroy the separation from the world which gives literature the power to comment on it” (75). Literary modernism therefore “attempts to produce a literature which could engage with the world while maintaining a critical distance both from it and from mere literary entertainments,” in order to make literature that “really mattered” (Whitworth 75). It makes sense, then, that her skepticism of authors writing mass-market works is complicated by her commercial attempts at carving a small modernist niche in the big business of literature.

To the other assumption that popular self-improvement books were defiling the print landscape, promising unreasonable achievement to readers in search of shortcuts, we should note that Woolf herself stuck to the kinds of rigorous schedules and schematic routines that many of them prescribed. To be sure, Woolf’s schedule was of her own making and was not culled from a book, but she nonetheless adhered to it and may have inadvertently proven the validity of efficiency schemes a la Bennett to maximize culture in the normal course of the day. Her “work account,” as she called it, was a tremendous motivating force. It was quite simply one of the most important factors behind Woolf’s prolific output. It never varied, as biographer Hermione Lee says: “Writing (fiction or reviews) was done in the first part of the morning; just before or after lunch was for revising (or walking, or printing). After tea was for diary or letter-writing; the evenings were for reading (or seeing people) […]” (405). One can extrapolate a great deal of significance from this schematic—an indication of Woolf’s valuation of order, an engine to maximize the return on a driving literary ambition, even a psychosomatic tool to cope with the bouts of morbidity, coupled with her mental illness, that often threatened her
work—but the fact remains that her scheduling went beyond the mere preference of a writer to guide the flow of her days to maximize her productivity in a chosen pursuit. In that, it is not too far removed from the systems of efficiency and time-management suggested in *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day* and a number of other self-cultural “efficiency” texts. Furthermore, there is plenty of evidence from her nonfictional writings that her reasons for keeping such a tight schedule were to complete as much as she could and maximize her output when it came to doing the kind of work she wanted to do, living more fully through her work (ironically as it tried ever more ambitiously to capture the life around her). More than coping with the negative in depression, her work account sought to accentuate the positive that could come from authorial industry and the leisure time it could free up. From her diary entry on May 18, 1930, she exudes the best way she can envision living life:

> The thing is now to live with energy & mastery, desperately. To despatch each day high handedly. To make much shorter work of the day than one used. To feel each like a wave slapping up against one. So not to dawdle & dwindle, contemplating this & that. To do what ever comes along with decision; […] thrusting through the mornings work (Hazlitt now) then adventuring. […] No more regrets & indecisions. That is the right way to deal with life now that I am 48: & to make it more & more important & vivid as one grows old (*D III* 303-4)

This passage, as sincerely wrought as her more common musings on her own creative and industrial inadequacies, sounds as close to a self-help book as Woolf ever comes.
And the ramifications for this style of life and living (a fine goal but certainly not the reality of her everyday life) goes a long way to show the value Woolf placed on the rigorous routines that are at the heart of disciplined self-culture of all kinds, seeking to maximize the knowledge input and creative output of the student-worker.\(^4\)

For all of the various ways in which Woolf was a proponent of the self-educational cause, especially for women of the lower middle classes—supporting the principles behind democratic education, tutoring at Morley, advocating access to literature and embodying the professional approach to cultural production—there nonetheless remained a noticeable gap in her fiction where these same issues are complicated by the plots they are contained in and ultimately rounded off in ambivalent depictions that do not match Woolf’s support of them in real life. The reasons behind this are many, but they are all related to the problems Woolf had with applying social politics to literature without compromising one or both. And that problem, I argue, has to do with modernism’s insistence on social attention and artistic sanctity—at times, two forces pulling at opposite directions. The result, evident in Woolf’s works, particularly *The Voyage Out* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, is a necessary ambivalence. They may appear to be minor points in the fiction, but when Woolf has publicly and privately taken sides on them, they become more significant. The notion of self-culture underscores these problematic moments in the text, and provides a compelling way to read how modernism’s agenda of social justice ran into conflict with its other agenda of artistic innovation.
2. The Book Stalls: Self-Culture in Woolf’s Fiction

It is not surprising that issues of distinction between social classes abound in Woolf’s fiction, even if they are under the surface. Class status was fascinating to Woolf, who was simultaneously disquieted by the injustice society dealt to the poor and intrigued by the instant refinement it granted to the rich. It was a double-edged fascination similar to the kind she held for Cambridge. Succumbing to the allure of upper class prestige occasionally earned her the title of “snob,” the repercussions of which Sean Latham explores in “Am I a Snob?”: Modernism and the Novel. He says, “Having herself passed through the gauntlet of fame and sampled the pleasures of snobbery, Woolf sought escape in the narrowly conceived concept of the Outsider who could forge an autonomous art at the intersection of class privilege and social alienation” (117). Without a doubt, much of this attention is shaped by her concern with several intertwining issues of the day: feminism, war, and education, particularly democratic education (which includes self-education). As we have seen, Woolf’s essays characterized the kind of accessible education that would transcend class and gender as a particularly feminized force for cultural improvement. That force would ideally challenge traditionally male bastions of power, and, more desperately in the 1930s, provide a peaceful antidote to warmongering. While Woolf was specifically concerned with the outbreak of the Second World War in Three Guineas, the First World War and its attendant aspects of imperialism provided similar anxiety and an approach to framing these issues for some of her earlier works, particularly The Voyage Out (1915) and Mrs. Dalloway (1925). These two texts present
both sides of the self-cultural spectrum, which fail for their own reasons: on the one hand, *The Voyage Out* involves a female Bildungsroman that is predicated on the acquisition of proper knowledge by reading the right books imposed upon Rachel Vinrace from her male benefactors, a stifling exercise that figures in the novel as a critique of imperialist masculine power abroad. On the other hand, *Mrs. Dalloway* features two characters who could be thought of as self-taught, Septimus Smith and Doris Kilman, who partly through their efforts at transcending social class and partly through the catastrophic changes enacted by the war, find themselves outside of society. In Woolf’s fiction, these and other characters draw attention to the issue of self-culture and modernism precisely through their failure to succeed in their self-improvement efforts. There is no single reason why these characters fail, whether it is by character weakness, exploitation, or sheer victimization, but it is important for us to consider why they do when they—and several others—are prime candidates for the real-world emancipation of education that Woolf continued to proclaim in her nonfictional writings.

i. Beowulf to Browning – Self-culture, Bildung, and Englishness abroad in *The Voyage Out*

Woolf addresses the issue of self-culture in her first novel, *The Voyage Out*. Journeying with a group of English tourists, Rachel Vinrace becomes the object of attention for the older and supposedly wiser people traveling along with her. Though it turns into a tragic romance drawing heavily from Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* in the
second part of the narrative, the first part of the story involves an apparent Bildungsroman as the young woman learns about life and love. Gregory Castle has recently theorized the modernist appropriation of the classic educational coming-of-age form, saying, “The aim of the modernist Bildungsroman is to put into play a Bildung process that harkens back to the classical mode, in which the goal is inner culture, but that also inevitably confronts the impossibility of either a unified, harmonious consciousness or a unified, harmonious relationship with the social world” (66). Instead of a rigorous process of intellectual and spiritual development which leads to proper acclimation to a social body, as with Goethe’s young Wilhelm Meister, modernist Bildungsromane are fractured, incomplete, and ironically conceived. Castle says, “The modernist Bildungsroman encourages the emergence of new conceptions of self-formation concerned with evading and resisting socialization, with disharmonious social spheres, or with hybrid, ambivalent, sometimes traumatic processes of identity formation” (64). In other words, the familiar form of the self-cultivational novel is revised in modernism to critique the bourgeois normalizing process that these classic examples reinforce. *The Voyage Out*, in particular, offers a feminist critique of the masculine Bildung scheme when that directive is foisted upon impressionable young women. Thinking about Rachel’s development gives us an early and powerful example of Woolf’s literary application of the troubled and troubling theme of self-cultivation.

It is important that Rachel’s culture is hardly, at first, her own. As part of Rachel Vinrace’s self-development, various members of the English tourists suggest reading to her, which she then internalizes as necessary and important. To begin with, her aunt
Helen Ambrose gives her the society survey *Who’s Who*. Not exactly the most canonical of texts, the *Who’s Who* captivates Rachel with its sketches of important people⁶: “she went on turning the pages and reading biographies of bankers, writers, clergymen, sailors, surgeons, judges, professors, statesmen, editors, philanthropists, merchants, and actresses; what clubs they belonged to, where they lived, what games they played, and how many acres they owned. She became absorbed in the book” (*VO* 82-3). Not for the last time, Rachel is entranced by the romance contained within and implied by a book. In this case, it is a romance of social importance. Interestingly, this moment parallels Woolf’s own introduction to biography at her father’s library, though in a much lighter degree of seriousness. Later, St. John Hirst scorns Rachel for being ignorant of Gibbon, and questions her ability to understand his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He says, “He’s the test, of course, it’s awfully difficult to tell about women […] how much, I mean, is due to lack of training, and how much is native incapacity” (*VO* 156-7).

Simultaneously insulted and challenged by these remarks, Rachel goes to Mr. Ambrose, who has his own opinions about her reading. “You should read Balzac. Then we come to Wordsworth and Coleridge. Pope, Johnson, Addison, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats. One thing leads to another” (*VO* 174). As we quickly become aware, Rachel is subject to a shipful of suggestions about what she should read and why. Presuming she is an ingénue, the fellow travelers on the voyage come together⁷ to give her an education that is particularly patriotic. With the exception of Balzac, who is a Continental master of prose and good practice for Rachel’s French, all of the authors are English. Along with the hotel in Santa Marina and its loving reconstruction of society life in the South American
colony, Rachel’s proposed education is a testament to Englishness abroad and a preparation for citizenship and married life. While Woolf would not place the tragic double helix of war and imperialism directly into her work until Jacob’s Room, the novel’s reinforcement of English values in the colonized jungle echoes a Heart of Darkness critique made more pressing by the cannon shots fired just over the Channel in 1915.

Preparation for married life may be the ostensible reason for this kind of female educational development, but the process is hardly so clear cut. Despite her initial obsequiousness to the English retinue (including allowing herself to be kissed by Richard Dalloway), Rachel’s independence is ironically marked by the books that are prescribed by the men above her as essential to her entrance into the learned community. As before, when Rachel’s reading of the Who’s Who takes her into a fantasy about being a person of consequence (as those listed in the book), so the words of Gibbon inspire an aesthetic connection to a romantic world. She reads a passage from The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, and the narrator describes the power of print over her:

Never had any words been so vivid and so beautiful—Arabia Felix—Aethiopia. But those were not more noble than the others, hardy barbarians, forests, and morasses. They seemed to drive roads back to the very beginning of the world, on either side of which the populations of all times and countries stood in avenues, and by passing down them all knowledge would be hers, and the book of the world turned back to the very first page. Such was her excitement at the possibilities of knowledge
now opening before her that she ceased to read, and a breeze turning the page, the covers of Gibbon gently ruffled and closed together. She then rose again and walked on. (VO 178)

Her encounter with Gibbon is remarkable because it almost entirely avoids the pitfall of prosaic dryness that qualifies *The Decline and Fall* as a “serious” book—a test of intellectual capability for Hirst. Rachel reads enough of the passage to be carried off into an artfully-imagined past world and the possibilities of uncovering it intellectually, but as soon as she is inspired to do so she stops reading—“Such was her excitement at the possibilities of knowledge now opening before her that she ceased to read.” Perhaps not retaining the historical knowledge that Hirst prizes, Rachel nonetheless converts this instrument of Bildung (the book) into self-culture of a different kind. Gibbon’s work, like *Who’s Who*, is valuable in its ability to spark non-academic emotional insight, conflating love and literature as Septimus Smith would later do in *Mrs. Dalloway*. At the same moment Rachel discovers the possibilities of a life of self-cultivation in terms of reading and acquiring knowledge, she also discovers her feelings for Terence Hewet. That plotline will become the primary one after the first half of the book, but only after it is borne from Rachel’s intoxication with (and simultaneous abandonment of) the great mental test of print that men have put in front of her.

The literary influence continues on Rachel with several characters announcing their plans for books that they will write. Hewet says “I want to write a novel about Silence […] the things people don’t say” (VO 224). Critics have connected this stated desire to Woolf’s own fascination with a kind of modernist abstractionism that would
begin to color her fiction from *Jacob’s Room* onwards. Not stopping there, Hewet also anticipates penning a Dorian Gray-style psychological allegory of a poor young bounder reaching for the desired gentleman’s life and having to sell his soul to achieve it. Existing at Cambridge on a hundred pounds a year, the character “has a coat; it was once a very good coat. But the trousers—they’re not so good” (*VO* 225). Later “he goes up to London, gets into good society […] [and] is led into telling lies […] calls himself the son of some great landed proprietor in Devonshire. Meanwhile the coat becomes older and older, and he hardly dares to wear the trousers” (*VO* 225). The hopeful gentleman in Hewet’s proposed novel resembles any number of young men from modest backgrounds who are willing to stake much of what little wealth and health they have to gain access to the right society. Worn trousers and especially a worn coat function in a way similar to Wilde’s famous picture, displaying the outward manifestation of internalized desecration—in Hewet’s words “the gradual corruption of the soul” (*VO* 225). Hewet claims to know several of these real-life bounders, who have educated themselves up from the abyss: “wretched starving creatures […] who quote Aristotle at you over a fried herring and a pint of porter” (*VO* 226). His book ideas connect to Rachel’s self-development by showing the alternative to her smart-set-sponsored enculturation. Being of the right class to begin with, Rachel does not need to pose or lie to earn the attention of polite society—indeed, that society is already traveling with her on the Euphrosyne. All she needs to do is to participate in it by literally and figuratively learning the language of its discourse, one which is built upon the likes of Gibbon.
Another book project from the tourists is Miss Allan’s *Primer of English Literature*, covering poets from Old English to Victorian masters. She is seen reading Wordsworth because she plans to write a paragraph about him for the project. By the end of the novel, she has nearly completed her work and has changed its subtitle to Beowulf to Browning. “I rather like the two B’s myself,” she says. “I think that is the kind of title which might catch one’s eye on a railway bookstall” (*VO* 328). The significance of this project is, like the other literary works mentioned, directly relevant to Rachel’s own progress. Miss Allan is proposing a mass-market compendium of textual snippets and short biographies, combining the literary coverage of Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* with the sketches of *Who’s Who*, resembling today’s widely-assigned Norton anthologies. Changing the name to make it more attractive to potential buyers on a railway bookstall situates the primer into a prospective audience of hurried individuals looking for a cheap and accessible source of “high culture.” We probably think of reading purchased at a railroad station or airport as light today. Miss Allan’s project, however, would fit perfectly to the kinds of railway bookstalls pioneered by William Henry Smith II, whose ubiquitous bookstores still operate in London underground stations and aboveground locations today. Beginning in 1848, with his first bookstall in Euston, his business plan was to temper the sensationalist reading common along the young rails with his own character-building offers, including classic fiction and various self-improving titles (*Hammond* 66). He also sought to allay the fear in newly-mobile middle-class customers that transportation by rail put them too physically close to a mass of people below their social stations. Good, improving literature provided a protection from those
encroachments by simultaneously carrying the rider into the pleasant world of the book (away from the potentially uncomfortable world of the carriage), and signaling the reader’s taste and cultural capital to the other passengers through the artifact of the book itself. Smith still stocked lighter fiction aimed at women, mostly romances and mysteries. But he included it only underneath his banner of upstanding titles, and only with the attitude of paternal tolerance of female weakness. The entire marketing move of the W. H. Smith and Sons bookstalls was based on carving out their niche: “With one stroke they safeguard[ed] both their market and their reputation by situating them within the bourgeois family framework” (Hammond 73). Although Smith’s monopoly subsided after 1905, the model of bookstalls he pioneered remained popular for years to come.

Travel reading was fragmentary for fragmented attentions. Just like Tit-Bits, one of W. H. Smith’s best-selling periodicals, Miss Allan’s now-more-eye-grabbing primer collects bite-sized snippets of text to appeal to a curious but hurried readership. It is aimed at people interested in self-culture, especially of the working, middle, and lower middle classes, who do not have the leisure or resources to engage with classical literature in its full form as symbolized by The Voyage Out’s education other, Gibbon. These would be people looking for the kind of cultural capital Gibbon and the rest of the canon could provide without the investment it would take to actually read the full books comprising it. As Gregory Castle says, “What Gibbon offers is less a scholarly knowledge of Roman history than a specific level of cultural capital, the attainment of which serves as an entrée to social discourses of power” (224). Unlike direct readers of Gibbon, readers of Miss Allan’s primer want to know about literature from a necessarily
truncated perspective. Whether this leads to further reading or a gleaning of cultural capital is irrelevant to what the proposed project is. Miss Allan is aware of, and very interested in courting, a mass market in a hurry both in terms of transit and in terms of personal enculturation—the operative symbol being the figure of the railway bookstall.

For all of the English abroad, the issue of self-education is an important one. Rachel’s aunt and uncle, the Ambroses, see her cultivation as the goal befitting a young woman set to grow up in the world (matching her sexual maturity), and a duty long neglected by her careless father. Hirst views Gibbon as a shibboleth for earning his respect. Hewet picks an outsider bounding into Cambridge as the subject for his prospective novel, and Miss Allan prepares her primer for the kind of men and women who have only the inclination and resources to skim the English masters. Of all the tourists, only Rachel fails to have a firm opinion on the matter—though she so often is the subject of other peoples’ educational efforts. Rachel undergoes a kind of self-development that is partially related to self-culture, somewhat linked to classical Bildung, but is also in the romantic tradition of physical and spiritual awakening. After her kiss with Richard Dalloway, Rachel is emotionally alive to the pleasures and pains of love in the freedom and fear of the jungle far from home. Part of the inspiration leading to her emotional exploration comes from the texts she has (somewhat) read, but there is also a deeper connection to the natural world around her that makes her death by fever that much more appropriate for its organic, biological origins. In other words, while the men and women around her attempt to guide Rachel with their suggestions for her own self-cultivation, which she at times dutifully follows, the spiritual compass that is awakened
within her during this voyage is pointed not towards the contemplative life of traditional
book-based learning but to the more primal physicality of sexual development and
attraction. That which she reads is more of a means, not an end, to what we could read as
her development. Gregory Castle again notes that Rachel’s story is an example of how
the modernist Bildungsroman dismantles the traditional form by foreshortening,
distorting, or ironizing the development process. He says, “Rachel may lie at the bottom
of the sea, but her Bildung plot carries on without her, in other lives and other marriages”
(231). I think his point is accurate, especially when considering Woolf’s own political
motivations for altering the form. Self-culture fails here because it is not of the subject’s
origin, and it is not necessarily for her improvement as an independent woman. In some
ways, Rachel’s death saves her from a life of being subjected to the kind of control
suggested by the numerous reading lists assigned to her by Hewet and the others. Like
Septimus’s suicide, Rachel’s death can be read as an act of defiance. Even though she
does not seek out her fatal fever, it is caused by her willful escape from the ersatz
“civilization” of the hotel and its English books into a more independent existence of
spirited physicality (or physical spirituality) in the jungle.

Woolf would not work out in print her notion of “a room of one’s own” until
nearly a decade later, but the nascent idea is present in The Voyage Out. Self-culture and
self-development, vaunted instruments of class advancement and gender equality in and
of themselves, are dramatically compromised when employed in situations reinforcing
the gendered dependence and power hierarchy between book-lender (gendered male) and
book-reader (gendered female)—or, in a related scenario, lecturer and student. This is
why she desperately tried to break down traditional barriers between the student and the teacher in a traditional lecture classroom, and sought to level everyone on a common field of academic pursuits. Rachel’s growth in the novel is not primarily through the books she reads, as in the classical Bildungsroman or in popular self-culture. Rather, her growth begins when she is inspired enough by the books lent her to put them aside. Foregoing traditional power relationships that seek to cultivate her into a typically domestic, upper middle class woman, she follows her own instincts into the jungle. It is true that Rachel plans to marry Hewet, but he is one of the only English male characters who does not try to control her reading, and rather shares with her his creative ideas in the forms of new books he wants to write instead of classic books already written (and to be studied). Rachel’s sacrifice, coming early in Woolf’s literary career, sets up the issues of education and female development that she would pursue most deliberately in her essays. Although learning is never a wasted act, the circumstances and power structures behind it determine the quality of the cultivation and its eventual outcome. The death of Rachel actually affirms her independence from the socially normalizing influence symbolized by the series of primarily male book-lenders who seek to provide the right course for Rachel’s voyage. A Bildung story incomplete, The Voyage Out causes us to question the role of masculine intrusion on the development of the young woman, and the failure of the instruments of Bildung—the books themselves—to register with Rachel in traditional ways. We learn that Woolf is critical of systematic learning as it comes to represent masculine control of women’s intellectual development. We also learn that the power of the books, whether they come from a “father’s library” or elsewhere, ultimately
resides in the response of the reader. In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Woolf’s fictional depiction of self-education is further complicated by this very idea as it corresponds to the machine-gun fire of World War I.

ii. A Border Case: *Mrs. Dalloway* and the War-torn Limits of Self-Culture

More than *The Voyage Out*, *Mrs. Dalloway* takes into account the role of the War in shaping social relations by solidifying class connections and demarcating outcasts. Clarissa Dalloway’s select guest list represents the ruling forces largely responsible for leading young men into the fray in support of England and the Empire that has assured their wealthy status. All of them, from the government official Richard Dalloway to the doctor Sir William Bradshaw, have been educated in traditional institutions true to form. As such, they have learned to develop thick emotional shells when it comes to personal relationships and social inequality. With the War, that defensiveness was greatly shorn up. Among other critics, Alex Zwerdling has written about how the upper classes manage apparent emotional equanimity, or “unruffled self-control,” in order to maintain their superiority in everyday life and the class cartography of this novel (137). In this case, the stiff-upper-lip act both protects social difference and emotionally restricts the defender. The novel’s main focus is on the inner lives of private people, who by their importance to the social order and the prospects of the country have been raised into outward reticence.

The icy class distance breaks down through Clarissa, who is the most sympathetic towards the two prominent lower middle class characters in the novel, the clerk veteran
Septimus Smith and Elizabeth’s tutor, Miss Doris Kilman. Though she does not know him, Septimus reaches Clarissa emotionally through his suicide. Doris is more well-known to her, and is pitied by as much as she repulsive to Clarissa. I am interested in these two characters, who are explicitly not invited to the party, because they are lower middle class practitioners of self-culture whose efforts earn them precious little. Much of this is due to the debilitating effects of World War I—mentally for Septimus, socially for Doris—that preclude the possibility of self-culture’s effective elevation of the subject into society. But the failure of both to rise in the ways they want to is also part of Woolf and modernism’s concern with the cultivation of lower middle class readers, and appears at its extreme implications to undermine a feminist effort towards female empowerment. Really Woolf is less democratic in her notion of democratic education than she would like to admit in her essays. *Mrs. Dalloway* shows that, along with the unfair disadvantage of the war, much of self-culture’s promise still remains based on the motives, talents, and personality of the autodidact him- or herself.

In many ways the pre-war Septimus Smith carries an idealistic view of self-culture that is both class and era-bound. He leaves for the city as a young man because of a conflict with his family and his interest in literature, “because he could see no future for a poet in Stroud” (*MD* 92). The narrator relates the epic scope of his ambitions: “[he] had gone to London leaving an absurd note behind him, such as great men have written, and the world has read later when the story of their struggles has become famous” (*MD* 92). Septimus sees his life from this early point as the making of a Samuel Smiles-style success story, imagining his biography to be of the inspirational kind that validates hard
work, commitment, and the courage to follow a dream. Following in line with both his literary interest and his self-education is the extended association with Miss Isabel Pole from the lecture courses at Waterloo Road, the location of Woolf’s own Morley.

Septimus is swept up in the romance of self-culture which is encouraged by Miss Pole’s interest in him, and his reciprocal effort to please her:

He thought her beautiful, believed her impeccably wise; dreamed of her, wrote poems to her, which, ignoring the subject, she corrected in red ink; he saw her, one summer evening, walking in a green dress in a square. ‘It has flowered,’ the gardener might have said, had he opened the door; had he come in, that is to say, any night about this time, and found him writing; found him tearing up his writing; found him finishing a masterpiece at three o’clock in the morning and running out to pace streets, and visiting churches, and fasting one day, drinking another, devouring Shakespeare, Darwin, The History of Civilisation, and Bernard Shaw. (MD 93)

There is heavy irony on the word ―masterpiece‖ in this passage, as the poems of Septimus recounted in the narrative are merely enthusiastic trifles of his love for Miss Pole and literature. The two are actually conflated when Miss Pole corrects his work as a tutor. Certainly, she is one of the main supporters of the efforts of Septimus. She “lent him books; wrote him scraps of letters; and lit in him such a fire as burns only once in a lifetime, without heat, flickering a red gold flame infinitely ethereal and insubstantial” (MD 93). Summoned at the end of the passage is Pater’s famous validation of aesthetics
from the conclusion of *The Renaissance*. As we see, young Septimus burns with a hard, gemlike flame. And to paraphrase his beloved Shakespeare, he burns not wisely but too well.

After the war Septimus is described in terms of his physical appearance, resembling a self-educated clerk, rather like Leonard Bast: “one of those half-educated, self-educated men whose education is all learnt from books borrowed from public libraries, read in the evening after the day’s work, on the advice of well-known authors consulted by letter” (92). The full textual detail of the description summons Arnold Bennett’s materialist realism and a common subject of his works. The last remark about the reading suggestions of “well-known authors” is almost certainly a dig at Bennett and his prolific output. The manuscript version of *Mrs. Dalloway* emphasizes Septimus’s supplementary self-education by detailing his reading of Everyman books and the Loeb series of classical authors (Whitworth 68). The crucial change in these characterizations of Septimus is, of course, due to the war. But the war also causes a crucial change in the characterization of his self-culture, from his early idealistic efforts at reaching poetic refinement to what can appear to be the dowdy and distressed self-culture of a struggling lower middle class man.

Before it damages him irreversibly, the Great War appeals to Septimus on a high ideological level as a self-cultivating clerk. His tendency to romanticize was partly responsible for his being one of the first to volunteer, as “He went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square” (*MD* 94). Septimus falls victim to his own idealistic
innocence, outlined in greatest detail associating Miss Pole and the written word, but also to the irresistible power of the masculine propaganda surrounding the early war effort. Here Woolf is simultaneously chiding the idealism of Septimus and indicting the instruments of warmongering that inspired hundreds of thousands to enter the trenches, including many from the rapidly-expanding blackcoated workforce. Clerks were a large part of the volunteering troops, as Jonathan Wild notes in The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880-1939. He mentions that enlisting for military service during the Great War was a popular way for clerks to battle the stigma that their white collar desk jobs were producing feminized, degenerated masculine bodies. The office was also an ideal place to recruit because clerks subscribed to management philosophies that translated directly to the battlefield—including teamwork, discipline, and sacrifice (126).

In one distinctive passage, Woolf focuses on how the manager of Septimus’s office ironically encounters the reality of the war through his workers’ absence and minor inconveniences at home. Mr. Brewer, “managing clerk at Sibleys and Arrowsmiths, auctioneers, valuers, land and estate agents,” is about to offer Septimus a raise when “something happened which threw out many of Mr. Brewer’s calculations, took away his ablest young fellows, and eventually, so prying and insidious were the fingers of the European War, smashed a plaster cast of Ceres, ploughed a hole in the geranium beds, and utterly ruined the cook’s nerves at Mr. Brewer’s establishment at Muswell Hill” (MD 93). This passage underscores the crucial losses of the war felt most directly by the veterans, represented by Septimus, by extending the “prying and insidious” effects of the War into the minor inconveniences felt by the manager at home. Mr. Brewer’s changes
are real, too, but laughably insignificant in comparison to those of his workers. For Woolf, the passage is an ironic indictment of middle-class myopia. Nevertheless, war changes all. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, we may not hear much from the ruling class party attendees about how the conflict has affected them, and we only encounter through a passage such as this an indirect and ironic account of middle class loss. Clearly, the most striking indication of war’s personal damage is characterized in those of the lower middle classes. When the everyday order of things is devastated, Septimus in turn is devastated, and his dreams for poetry and self-culture are lost or else radically re-directed.

It is interesting to think that Septimus, already characterized as an emotional dreamer from the outset, continues his dreaming after the war—not through aspirational literary fantasy but through heart-breaking hallucination. He is perhaps no less inclined to flights of fancy than before. It is just that now he does not have control over them. Instead of enjoying alluring visions of Miss Pole he is haunted by the specter of his fallen comrade-in-arms Evans. The self-cultural aspirations that were at the first commingled with emotion fall to the wayside when explosive blasts shut down the consistent connection between Septimus and the real world. Instead, he is stuck in the world of emotions that Zwerdling cites as a marker in the novel of the subordinate classes in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Again, there are two reasons for the ostensible failure of Septimus’s self-culture: 1) the overreaching emotional aspects of his flight into London and a literary vocation, and 2) the Great War that exploits his comparative innocence and returns him home a broken man. This two-pronged failure is perhaps best characterized in a short passage involving Septimus and his irritating nemesis, Dr. Holmes. In an attempt to heal
him from his shell-shock, Dr. Holmes suggests to Septimus, “Throw yourself into outside interests; take up some hobby”; Septimus painfully complies: “He opened Shakespeare – *Antony and Cleopatra*; pushed Shakespeare aside” (*MD* 100). This passage absolutely closes (or pushes away) the book on the aspirations that Septimus had before the war of becoming a self-educated poet. *Antony and Cleopatra*, of course, is the text that he associates most directly with the ideals of his youth and his apprenticeship to Miss Pole, and it is indirectly connected to his decision to enlist. Dr. Holmes’ suggestion that Septimus “throw himself” into outside interests eerily foreshadows the veteran’s grisly suicide and the end to the life whose improvement he had already given up on since the war. Septimus is certainly a victim of the war, but his victimhood is partially because of his own pride and ignorance, exemplified through his self-cultural efforts. In this he resembles the book’s other major war victim, Miss Doris Kilman.

... 

Doris Kilman’s problems are many, but they are all associated with her position as an educated lower middle class woman. During the War, she suffers ostracism as a freethinker “because she would not pretend that the Germans were all villains” (*MD* 135). Masami Usui points out that the anti-German sentiment pervading England was more than simple animosity towards a common enemy (as other Central Power opponents of the Entente, such as Austria-Hungary, generated their own brand of international distrust). Rather, the feeling can be traced back to a specific incident near the start of the war called variously the “sexual outrage” or “the Rape of Belgium” in which German soldiers, after invading the small nation, proceeded to sexually assault the women and
young girls of the country. Stories of this atrocity reached the English public through outlets both trustworthy and biased. Usui says, “Clergymen of the Church of England witnessed and reported this horrible experience of the Belgians and the French. Cruel and inhuman images of German soldiers and even of German women were employed for propaganda posters” (158). The resulting public outrage set the early tone for anti-German sentiment which lasted throughout the war, and affected people such as Kilman who were of German origin (her family “spelt the name Kiehlman in the eighteenth century”)(MD 135). Kilman suffers more because she refuses to renounce her fatherland-aggressor. Like Septimus, her principles get her into trouble when the war rushes in and changes everything, as it does for those not safely ensconced in the social milieu of Mrs. Dalloway’s party. Her lost cause is a stable teaching position: “And then, just as she might have had a chance at Miss Dolby’s school, the war came; and she had never been able to tell lies. Miss Dolby thought she would be happier with people who shared her views about the Germans. She had had to go” (MD 135). Her career, thus compromised, is in the field that she most prides herself on: education.

Even though Kilman’s formal education is somewhat unclear in the text, she does have a degree—the certificate of approval that Woolf herself longed to possess. In moments of insecurity, such as when she realizes that she will not receive an invitation to Clarissa’s party, she returns to these self-perceived pillars of her personhood: “she was Doris Kilman. She had her degree. She was a woman who had made her way in the world. Her knowledge of modern history was more than respectable” (MD 145). Yet these bluntly-stated facts do not guarantee her professional success, as we have seen, and
even as a degreed woman her highest obtainable position would be teaching, as the other professions were still closed to her gender. Alone, beyond the marrying age, Miss Kilman stands at the doorway of the Dalloways in her dingy mackintosh as a symbol of troubling lost potential that is partially the subject’s own fault. Regardless of the fact that she affects a pious humility borne from her recent religious conversion, one sees how deeply proud and conceited she really is. She uses her own poverty, symbolized in her Gogol-esque overcoat (reflecting Hewet’s story idea), as paradoxical proof of her supremacy:

“Year in year out she wore that coat; she perspired; she was never in the room five minutes without making you feel her superiority, your inferiority; how poor she was; how rich you were; how she lived in a slum without a cushion or a bed or a rug or whatever it might be [...]” (MD 12). Furthermore, she frames her judgments of the entire Dalloway social class (and of Clarissa, in particular) in terms of divine righteousness. In her mind, she fantasizes class division as spiritual warfare, with her poor but cultured commonality overcoming the wealthy and vapid elite. Clarissa’s apparently effortless grace is toxic to one who has never come across anything easily in her life—“what with being so clumsy and so poor” (MD 135)—and so Miss Kilman desires to embarrass Mrs. Dalloway: “it was the soul and its mockery that she wished to subdue; make feel her mastery. [...] It was to be a religious victory. So she glared; so she glowered” (MD 137). The source of Kilman’s bitterness is a petty competitiveness that simultaneously motivates her ambition to prove herself intellectually as well as to project moral superiority through her pious poverty. In the motivations behind her continued efforts at self-culture she presents herself in ways similar to the self-aggrandizement that Septimus displays in his running
away from home. The one difference is that her superiority is more calculated and reactionary, developed in response to a perceived lifetime of unfair disappointments—the narrator focalizes her thoughts: “She had been cheated. Yes, the word was no exaggeration, for surely a girl has a right to some kind of happiness?” (MD 135)—capped off by the most recent movement against her spurred by the Great War.

In terms of self-cultivation, Miss Kilman is both actively pursuing her own education and administering it to others. Beyond her tutoring, she, like Woolf, involved herself in Extension lecturing. Woolf makes clear, however, that Kilman’s style of didacticism would be highly undesirable in the real space of community learning and self-culture that the University Extension courses proposed to create. Kilman does not come close to the high standards that Woolf aspired to, and which were instilled in her by her favorite teacher at King’s, Jane Harrison. According to Jane Marcus, Harrison was “one of the first generation of university educated Englishwomen” and was “a flamboyant and entertaining speaker” (147). In one such example of an entertaining course, “she showed lantern slides of Greek vases to illustrate her talks and had her friends shaking bull-roarers in the back of the room to illustrate the frenzy of the worship of Dionysos” (147). For Woolf, Harrison was able to bridge the gap between educated women and self-cultured learners better than anyone she knew. And she would do so by moving beyond the staid masculine form of the lecture, which by its rhetorical basis suggested the impartation of wisdom from those who have it upon those who do not. Harrison’s success in bridging the gap clearly inspired Woolf’s own approaches to lecturing. Harrison continued to influence Woolf even after her death, as shown in a diary
entry, dated April 21, 1928, about her funeral. In line with the participatory, non-conformist nature of her teachings, Woolf wonders what Harrison herself would have thought of the proceedings surrounding the funeral service: “But tho’ L. almost cried, I felt very little—only the beauty of the Come unto me all ye that are weary; but as usual the obstacle of not believing dulled & bothered me. Who is ‘God’ & what the Grace of Christ? & what did they mean to Jane?” (D III 181). A freethinker, Harrison inspired independent analysis and constructive dialogue with and amongst her students. Unlike Harrison, the didactic bore Miss Kilman fails to perceive that her methods of instruction are lacking in creativity, just as her lockstep assumption of Christianity (especially as a source of pride over others) displays her detrimental unoriginality. And even in lending Elizabeth books on law, medicine, and politics—an act already prefigured as quasi-romantic in the Septimus and Miss Pole vein—she does so in the exhausting attitude of a lost, self-pitying person fishing for moral support: “all professions are open to women of your generation, said Miss Kilman. But for herself, her career was absolutely ruined, and was it her fault? Good gracious, said Elizabeth, no” (MD 143).

Miss Kilman is reviled and distrusted by Clarissa for more than who she is, personally, but also what she comes to represent: jilted bitterness, distrust of people and relationships, and obsessive attention to her class and status difference. She is an outsider in the least efficacious sense of the term, as one who maintains her position of aberrance primarily because she prefers to wallow publicly in self-pity. In effect, her self-cultural efforts undertaken with spitefulness earn her the “benefit” of continued ostracism, in reaction to the kind of fundamental negativity she displays in her costume at the door,
and which irritates Mrs. Dalloway. Clarissa struggles with her distrust of Miss Kilman and the anti-social negativity she represents: “it was not her one hated but the idea of her [...] [She] had become one of those specters with which one battles in the night; one of those specters who stand astride us and suck up half our life-blood, dominators and tyrants” (MD 12-13). And this could all change because “for no doubt with another throw of the dice, had the black been uppermost and not the white, she would have loved Miss Kilman! But not in this world. No” (MD 12-13). The suggestion about fate and the throwing of the dice has to do with a class difference, which despite Kilman’s best efforts to advance out of her poverty-stricken background is both the most basic and the most irreparable split between her and Clarissa. Kilman cannot control her upbringing, but what she can control, her attitudes towards others, is what prevents the women from ever being friends—the absence of an invitation to Clarissa’s party says it all.

From these examples, we can see that the two issues troubling the waters with self-culture in Mrs. Dalloway are issues of personality and issues of politics. The personalities of both Septimus and Kilman are mercurial, hot-tempered, ambitious and idealistic. Both are victims, arguably self-made, of their own stubbornness and naivety. Though they cannot control the political and military circumstances that lead to both of their falls from grace, they are shown to be in full possession of the idealistic anti-social gusto that leads them there in the first place. In a novel that is in crucial ways about private moments in public settings (with an emphasis on the scene of the party), these characters abandon social connections to follow their self-directed paths, a move which
results in fragmentation, madness, and insecurity. Obviously, the problem of Septimus’s mindset is further exacerbated by his horror in the War, an experience which leads him into “admit[ting] into his world virtually all of the sympathies or currents of being that most of us filter, select, and harmonize through a blindness or a deferral necessary for the proper establishment of an ego” (Meisel 74). Kilman’s experience causes her to adopt the radical defensive measure of closing off her social self entirely, to the circumscribed certainty of dogmatic Christianity, building at the same time ever-higher walls between herself and the pitiful Philistines she has deigned to work for. Both characters function as representative examples of the process of self-culture from lower middle class standpoints, and both function as critiques of the pitfalls of its practice among those who are personally immature, as well as the political circumstances that led to their downfalls. Would Septimus have penned an immortal poem had he not enlisted? Would Kilman have succeeded? The answer to both is probably not, and not because Woolf believes self-culture is inherently ineffective. The problem here is with characters who are limited or who struggle with the concept of selfhood to the point where self-culture is either ineffective or entirely detrimental to its attendant social development. Through the feedback loop of political difficulties and personal weaknesses, Septimus and Doris become victims who are partly responsible for their own victimization. The minor redemption each finds (Septimus’s suicide, Kilman’s born-again faith) is cold comfort for the difficulties each faces in part because of their psychologically-skewed efforts at self-culture. One is reminded through them, away from the narrative’s dominant focus on the upper classes, that not all education is easy. Woolf is emphasizing both the class-based
difficulties of personal aspiration that lead the lower middle classes unfortunately astray—the lie that education of any kind can guarantee entry into desirable higher social circles. It is an unjust social reality that distinctly separates the disinterested calmness of upper class education (the Cambridge and Oxford of the majority of writers) from the ambitious, frustrated, and passionate self-culture of the working and lower middle classes. The attendant power differences in these educations separate the characters that become taken advantage of from the equally-flawed characters (like Peter Walsh) who are neither help nor hurt by their privileged, worldly experiences. As victims, Septimus and Doris invite us to question what exacerbates their victimhood. To a great degree, as Woolf shows, it is their self-driven efforts at education, and their overly optimistic notions that learning and ambition alone would earn them love, respect, and a certain kind of fame. *Mrs. Dalloway* proves this wrong, and uses the whole range of characters present from a diverse array of social classes as a backdrop to do so.

3. Conclusion: Aesthetic Sympathy and Social Reality

In her introduction to Margaret Llewellyn Davies’ *Life as We Have Known It*, a 1935 compilation of autobiographies written by working women, Woolf expresses her concern about being unable to truly understand the plight of working women. This is due in large part to her privileged middle class position of material freedom. The remarks she heard from speakers at the 1931 Congress of Co-operative Women were about practical improvements in labor conditions, working hours, and payment. The gravity of these
requests, she says, is lost to one whose mind is able to “fly free at the end of a short
length of capital” (xxv). Whatever sympathy middle class supporters such as Woolf were
able to muster for the working and lower middle class women was negated by the
presence of physical comforts unknown to the miner’s wife and charwoman. She says,
“We have baths and we have money. Therefore, however much we had sympathised our
sympathy was largely fictitious” (xxv-xxvi). For Woolf, as always, the material and
spiritual realms are innately tied. Just as it might take 500 pounds sterling and a room of
one’s own for a woman to effectively write, so it is the symbolic possession of that
material freedom that prevents women like Woolf from a full connection with the need
for basic physical support. What she can offer instead is “aesthetic sympathy, the
sympathy of the eye and of the imagination, not of the heart and of the nerves.” And as
she says, “such sympathy is always physically uncomfortable” because it rings in a
hollow register (xxvi). Woolf was keenly aware of being an outsider, and often sought the
role for personal comfort or rhetorical effect. Her remarks in Davies’ volume serve to
distance herself in both ways from the stories collected and recollected from the working
women.

The effect of this distancing is striking, however, for the sense of clinical
separation it creates between Woolf and her subjects. Years before at Morley, Woolf had
tried breaking down barriers between classes with her empathetic, lecture-less pedagogy.
She would continue to write about how education for women, through any means
including self-taught, would fortify nations against war. Why then does her introductory
letter dated May 1930 read so strangely unsympathetic, and admit as much? Perhaps the
main reason is that Woolf’s social philosophy and literary ideology were coming to loggerheads in a most unpredictable way. Because she wanted women to become the writers that Judith Shakespeare could not be, she was heavily invested in the kinds of democratic educational initiatives, including self-culture, that could give them the training and access to knowledge that the traditional schooling systems in England had failed to supply. But the nascent results of these efforts in reality were as yet lacking, not for want of education but for the difficult if not impossible assumption of a specific literary aesthetic. Woolf famously touted the importance of “androgy nous minds” in the creation of the best kind of literature, which transcended ego and history and reached what for her was the most important aspect of narrative: character. In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” she says that the duty of literature, and novels especially, “is to express character – not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire” (E III 425). The collection of accounts she was introducing in 1931, though memoirs and not novels, were nevertheless— and obviously so—linked to the political domain of the knowledge and empowerment of women workers. That is to say, even more than preaching doctrines (that goal in Davies’ volume is implicit), these stories and the literary efforts they inspire from other poor women is still strongly linked to the concept of poor women writing, rather than the androgynous (class-less, ego-less) “writing” that Woolf hopes to see produced. Elena Gualtieri has noticed this problematic association as well. She says, “This celebration of the reparatory power of art opens up a point of tension within Woolf’s aesthetic. […] [and is] at the source of Woolf’s hesitations and equivocations in the essay, which reproduces in the shifts of temporal
perspective and authorial position the ambivalence at play in her historical situation as a spectator at the 1913 Congress” (81). Woolf uses her position as a middle class conference attendee to separate herself from the “authentic” complaints lodged by her working class comrades into a more theoretical realm of political and social ideology. Yet here and elsewhere, this separation does not preclude her from voicing her opinions on the matter or arguing for change. In fact, it often operates as a useful rhetorical device, especially when conversing with those of the working classes. Just as she sought to bridge the gulf between social classes in her instruction, so she sought support for women’s rights and equal education through a rallying call of outsiders, together.

In “The Leaning Tower,” a paper read to the Workers’ Educational Association, Brighton, May 1940, Woolf gives one of her last and most polemical perspectives on education for the poor. After first tracing the historical impact of traditional public school and Oxbridge educations on the nation’s gentlemen authors, she affirms that “Education must then play a very important part in a writer’s work” (Moment 112). Her challenge to those present is to transgress the literary blockade of the wealthy and elite educational minority by educating themselves through the free services increasingly offered to the nation, especially in the public libraries, and to become critics of the work they read, and “decide which are the lasting, which are the perishing” (Moment 125). It is a difficult task, Woolf says, but a worthwhile one, to cultivate the literary self through intellectual gluttony, reading “omnivorously, simultaneously, poems, plays, novels, histories, biographies, the old and the new” because “It never does to be a nice feeder; each of us has an appetite that must find for itself the food that nourishes it” (Moment 125). Woolf’s
plan is both conventional and radically new. The impetus behind the kind of self-culture she prescribes is for individual and social advancement, with education being the time-honored gatekeeper of progress. It is also new, and shockingly so, for how it proposes traditional means (self-education) in a new way (public libraries) and for a new purpose (breaking the mold of literature being created primarily by educated gentlemen). This is Woolf’s creative contribution to self-culture, and what in her mind was its most rewarding outcome—quality and equality of literary output, above and beyond individual fulfillment or social advancement. Reading and writing by women and men of the working and lower middle classes was poised to become a transgressive act:

Let us trespass at once. Literature is no one’s private ground; literature is common ground. It is not cut up into nations; there are no wars there. Let us trespass freely and fearlessly and find our own way for ourselves. It is thus that English literature will survive this war and cross the gulf—if commoners and outsiders like ourselves make that country our own country, if we teach ourselves how to read and write, how to preserve, and how to create. (Moment 125)

Woolf was proud to place herself among the transgressors as a woman who also never had the elite education of the gentleman’s standard. She was able to use this association to unite herself to other “disadvantaged” women while still retaining her status as an outsider to educated literary society, which by all other accounts she was not. It is no wonder that Woolf is so consistently inconsistent when it comes to her views on social and literary matters, considering how she shifts sides for rhetorical effect.
Her novels, however, cannot shift. They remain documents of her vexed and contradictory relationship to democratic self-culture across the social spectrum. Because of her own relationship with self-education, publishing, and support for equal access to education, one would expect Woolf to be supportive of the tenets of self-culture in literature as in life. However, when self-culture is forced upon a young woman in The Voyage Out, she rejects the Bildung process in favor of an earthy romanticism that is proto-feministic in its independent resolve. In Mrs. Dalloway, the two prominent adherents to self-culture are broken by it. Already emotionally overwrought and selfish, Septimus and Doris watch the social promises of ambitious self-development vanish in a plume of machine gun smoke. Certainly, part of Woolf’s critique concerns the fallout of war that destroys both characters’ stations (which could have possibly been improved by their continued self-development), and Septimus, at least in Clarissa’s mind, achieves poetic dignity in death. But we are invited to see in the brief sketches of each character’s biography, as compared to the day in which we follow them presently, just how their personal desires and attempts at self-improvement have isolated and warped them—at the very least, how the motivations behind these efforts have prevented them from being fully accepted into society.

Her literary examples show that Woolf was equally ambivalent about self-culture in her fiction as she was in her biography and nonfiction. Given these examples, it is worth pausing over the differences in presentation between Rachel, who as an upper middle class young woman has self-culture thrust upon her, and Septimus and Miss Kilman, who seek out the same from a background of needful poverty. The main
difference we can surmise hinges on emotional attachment. For Rachel, books are the inspiration for love and are abandoned for it. For Septimus, books and love are synonymous, resulting in the wild notion of going to war equally for a woman and for Shakespeare. For Miss Kilman, books feed into her love for herself and prevent her from being loved (at least in her mind). Woolf reminds us often that she is interested in character as the driving force behind her novels, even when she is criticized for not fully fleshing those characters out. In the case of these characters, the problems they encounter with their programs of self-culture are exacerbated by their pasts and their own deficiencies of personality. There is an overabundance of the fiery, “smouldering heat” of lower middle and working class emotionalism that struck Woolf as being a positive harbinger for the future of writing but which had not yet been tempered into quality literary presentation.11 And that is what is most crucial about examining Woolf’s literary representations of these characters—the absence or surfeit of the kind of personal character on which self-culture (especially literary self-culture) must be based, and the lack of the androgynous mind for either that produces Woolf’s most prized output: quality creative expression. The principles of self-culture, rooted in democratic education and supportive of the kind of feminist equality Woolf fought for, are fundamentally accepted by Woolf the nonfiction writer. Woolf the literary author cannot craft her characters as being successful in their pursuits of personal enculturation because of the political forces and personal failings—linked to real-world critiques—that shape their development.
Aesthetic sympathy is therefore a real factor related to Woolf’s personal support of educational equality. It is sympathy more of intellect and theory than of material circumstance. When applied to her writings, aesthetic sympathy falls to aesthetics, simply. Characters who participate in self-cultural efforts do not achieve their goals; rather, they and their educations are used for Woolf’s purposes as symbols of various political and personal agendas. The significance of Rachel, Septimus, and Doris is not in their self-cultural successes but in their failures—how they have abandoned their programs or faced the difficulties that have confronted them personally and politically because they have undergone them. The literary result is an indication that Woolf still prizes the personal responsibility behind self-improvement, especially when the goal as she sees it is the propagation of quality literature from emotionally-level “androgynous” writing styles. Although she supports in theory the continued educational development of everyone, especially women, her self-cultivating characters fail because of the detrimental forces behind the schemes and because of their own personal failings. Self-culture was popular in Woolf’s time, and she was aware of its potentially revolutionary implications. Nowhere was she really convinced, though, that the talent and unbridled minds needed to construct great literary works from the self-cultivating masses yet existed, or would in her lifetime. Ever a critic, Woolf could only muster aesthetic sympathy for the movement. In her aesthetics she could muster even less, featuring these characters as self-defeating victims of fate instead of champions of the movement’s greatest values: industry, application, and success. In terms of her commitment to the
self-cultivation of the working and lower middle classes, she could capture Mrs. Brown and Miss Kilman. She could never fully embrace them.
Curricula varied widely for privately tutored girls of well-to-do families, but there was typically more of an emphasis on “accomplishments” than academic scholarship of rigor. Such accomplishments, outlined in Lady Winchilsea’s *The Introduction* (1869) still remained: good breeding, fashion, dancing, dressing, play; and new ones became more popular during the turn of the century: painting, gardening, and poetry (Whitworth 67). One imagines young Virginia Stephen would be more intellectually at home in the public school-into-Cambridge path which was her male family members’ legacy.

“Highbrow,” first recorded in 1884 as an adjective, reached popular usage as an adjective and a noun between 1908 and 1914—“lowbrow” did too (Whitworth 83). “Middlebrow” was the logical median between the two. According to Whitworth, “the term ‘middlebrow’ was coined to satirize lowbrows who aspired to be highbrows” (83).

Diary entry 23 June 1929: “What a born melancholiac I am! The only way I keep afloat is by working. A note for the summer I must take more work than I can possibly get done. […] Directly I stop working I feel that I am sinking down, down. And as usual, I feel that if I sink further I shall reach the truth. That is the only mitigation; a kind of nobility. I shall make myself face the fact that there is nothing—nothing for any of us” (*D III* 235).

To be clear, my concept of self-culture is not the same as Castle’s use of Bildung. For one, he is restricting his analysis to the Bildungsroman form in literature, both as it is classically presented and in its modernist counterpart, whereas I will continue to make connections to self-culture in fictional works, nonfictional texts, and miscellaneous forms. Additionally, Bildung in the classical sense connotes maturity and coming-of-age, whereas self-culture does not necessarily have that connotation—in fact, many of its practitioners are past the literary age of development and are using processes of self-cultivation to make up for lost education.

The example Helen provides is this: “Sir Roland Beal; born 1852; parents from Moffatt; educated at Rugby; passed first into R.E.; married 1878 the daughter of T. Fishwick; served in the Bechuanaland Expedition 1884-85 (honorably mentioned). Clubs: United Service, Naval and Military. Recreations: an enthusiastic curler” (*VO* 82).

At one point Helen conspires with Hirst, saying, “D’you know, I believe you’re just the person I want […] to help me complete [Rachel’s] education? She’s been brought up practically in a nunnery. Her father’s too absurd. I’ve been doing what I can—but I’m too old, and I’m a woman. Why shouldn’t you talk to her—explain things to her—talk to her, I mean, as you talk to me?” (*VO* 166)

Septimus’s description, in rich “materialist” detail: “To look at, he might have been a clerk, but of the better sort; for he wore brown boots; his hands were educated; so, too, his profile – his angular, big-nosed, intelligent, sensitive profile; but not his lips altogether, for they were loose; and his eyes (as eyes tend to be), eyes merely; hazel, large; so that he was, on the whole, a border case, neither one thing nor the other; might end with a house at Purley and a motor car, or continue renting apartments in back streets all his life; one of those half-educated, self-educated men whose education is all learnt from books borrowed from public libraries, read in the evening after the day’s work, on the advice of well-known authors consulted by letter” (*MD* 92).
Perhaps not incidentally, this kind of “emotional” designation is one that many in the rising lower middle classes were desperate to avoid as it implied intellectual immaturity and a lack of decorum reminiscent of the working classes. Aesthetic self-culture, especially in the development of literary taste, was one way to work towards all-important respectability.

See *A Room of One’s Own*, Chapter VI.

Woolf mentions the fiery nature of many of the speeches she heard, which incited her excited but somewhat frustrated response: “And nothing perhaps exacerbated us more at the Congress (you must have noticed at times a certain irritability) than the thought that this force of theirs, this smouldering heat which broke the crust now and then and licked the surface with a hot and fearless flame, about to break through and melt us together so that life will be richer and books more complex and society will pool its possessions instead of segregating them—all this is going to happen inevitably, thanks to you, very largely, and to Miss Harris and to Miss Kidd—but only when we are dead” (“Introductory Letter” xxviii-xxix)
Chapter 4: “Cultured Allroundmen”: Joyce’s Autodidacts

“An illiterate, underbred book it seems to me: the book of a self taught working man, & we all know how distressing they are, how egotistic, insistent, raw, striking, & ultimately nauseating. When one can have the cooked flesh, why have the raw?”

- Virginia Woolf, entry 16 August 1922. (Diary 188)

Eschewing propriety, as she so often did in her diary, Virginia Woolf targeted her initial descriptions of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* to present both the work and man as distinctly uncouth. “Illiterate,” “underbred,” and “self taught working man” all highlight the dismissal of Joyce’s work through class and educational terms. Woolf and her knowing “we”—referring to the “daughters of educated men” milieu she would target again in her later essays—stand at arm’s length from this unsavory Irish poseur, made animalistic by the emphasis on raw flesh and the nauseating nature of his work. Woolf scholars including Melba Cuddy-Keane urge us to take her sometimes shocking diary compositions with a grain of salt, but it is difficult to overlook the class-fashioned vitriol of this particular series of entries. Elsewhere in her diary she notes that Joyce’s project summons “a queasy undergraduate scratching his pimples,” saying that she is constantly reminded of “some callow board school boy […] full of wits & powers, but so self-
conscious & egotistical that he loses his head, becomes extravagant, mannered, uproarious, ill at ease” (Diary 188-9, 199). With all of her criticisms, whether fully thought out or not, Woolf makes similar claims that relate Joyce’s amateurism with a crassness that exists outside of a recognized educational standard, or is removed from formal education entirely. If a university diploma is worth anything—and for Woolf, it is worth a great deal—then her depiction of Joyce as the over-eager, under-developed education-seeker highlights what the Irish author fails to possess, or at most only halfpossesses, in terms of artistic merit and cultural capital. Whether self-taught, in board school, or an undergraduate, Joyce has not “graduated,” or symbolically earned the right to speak with authority. He is an amateur, a dilettante with his brightness misplaced, all flash and no (cooked) flesh. Joyce and his style, conflated here, do not belong in the company of sophisticated readers because they lack the narrative fire to turn “raw” experience into “cooked flesh”: to Woolf, a coherent, meaningful work appealing to intelligent audiences. His experiment is a “mis-fire” because it fails to hold together: “A first rate writer, I mean, respects writing too much to be tricky; startling; doing stunts” (Diary 199). In Woolf’s opinion Joyce is not first rate, nor is his style suited to sophisticated readers respectful of texts, or even to sophisticated people who know how “distressing” self taught working men are (one is reminded of the impatience of the Schlegel sisters to Leonard Bast’s attempts at describing the literary merits of George Meredith).

Later Woolf tempered her initial criticism with concessions, though without retracting her first impression.² Plenty of reasons for Woolf’s defensive reaction to Joyce
have been offered by scholars and literary historians—she was upset that her fledgling Hogarth Press could not afford (financially and legally) to publish the novel in England; she was jealous of Joyce’s superior stylistic technique; she could not follow the plot; she was a downright snob. Some or all of these may be true. But the way in which Woolf frames her initial reactions to the experience of reading Joyce’s most famous work—socioeconomically and educationally—draws attention to the issues at stake in her opting to do so. Why would Woolf, a keen influencer of literary taste throughout her career as writer and reviewer, be personally critical in these particularly class-based terms about what would be one of modernism’s keystone texts by one of modernism’s most celebrated authors? In this chapter, I wish to follow the assumptions behind Woolf’s private assessment, drawing them out to include other works of Joyce.

The Irish writer has often since been characterized alongside Woolf in terms both familiar and troubling to scholars of modernism: elitist, learned, high-brow. Joyce in the current popular imagination, as well as in critical camps, continues to straddle the increasingly vague line between populism and elitism, somehow being both eminently approachable and impossibly erudite. This, too, is the paradox of self-culture—a process which implicitly promises coterie knowledge to a mass audience—and which may have piqued Woolf’s irritation with Joyce’s over-ambition from an Irish upbringing and respectable but Catholic education. By placing Joyce’s works as the objects of study within the context of views around self-education that were prevalent at the time, I argue that they exhibit the interests of an author-autodidact whose unique interest in education—especially from a Catholic perspective—evolves into a humanistic
endorsement for the spirit of self-culture that is embodied in his most enduring character, Leopold Bloom. I trace this evolution through three representative primary works: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, “A Little Cloud” from *Dubliners*, and *Ulysses*. I wish to locate, at the risk of rehashing a tired dialectic, how self-culture in Joyce self-consciously straddles the fluctuating high- and popular-culture line. This recurring element of his texts exemplifies, in its own immanent paradox, the impossibility of being fully one or the other. Self-culture, like Joyce’s art, revels in its difficulty of classification.

1. An Education: Joyce’s Jesuit Training, the *Ratio Studiorum*, and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

Unlike many practitioners of self-improvement in history and fiction, Joyce and his autodidact characters all begin with formal education as a springboard to self-motivated learning. Such is the case with the Joyce and Stephen Dedalus, with all apparent problems of conflation recognized. For both, the first and most important influence on their life-long education was the Society of Jesus. Joyce may have been naturally bright and inquisitive in his early years as Stanislaus and others have testified, but it was his formal educational training that disciplined his intelligence and set him towards a career reading widely and deeply. In *Portrait*, Stephen serves as young Joyce’s semi-satirical proxy, demonstrating the serious benefits and pitfalls of formative religious instruction in an exclusively middle-class realm. Kevin Sullivan’s 1958 *Joyce
Among the Jesuits remains the classic study of this period in Joyce’s life, and coupled with A Portrait helpfully illustrates the tenets of Jesuit educational methodology. Besides the obvious religious instruction, reaching its climax with Father Arnall’s fire-and-brimstone homily in Chapter Three, the life of school children in Irish Jesuit schools near the turn of the century was centered on moral and scholastic rigor. There is much to be said about the British quality of Dublin-area boarding schools like Clongowes and Belvedere; with their emphasis on compulsory games, the seniority-based prefect system, and the character-building constant of violence on campus, one might see as much of Dr. Thomas Arnold’s sports-mad evangelicalism abound in turn-of-the-century Belvedere as its origination in early-Victorian Rugby. As such they are also conveyors of a gentlemanly ethos that is particularly Irish but in the English model. Nevertheless there is one key difference, pedagogical as well as religious, that separated the less academic English-Protestant public schools from their Irish-Jesuit equivalents: the Ratio Studiorum Atque Institutio, the authoritative guide to comprehensive instruction in the order of St. Ignatius. As Sullivan originally noted, and other Joyce scholars such as Michael Patrick Gillespie have since concurred, this document was much more than a handbook for best practices. The 1599 Ratio Studiorum devised the proper way to instruct young men in the Catholic faith with a Jesuit adherence to scholastic rigor but also with the Renaissance addition of humanities to the medieval trivium (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy). Among other guidelines, the Ratio established universal rules for examinations and class prizes. Subjects evolved over time, but the Catholic adherence to tradition certified a more or less unbroken continuity in educational
practice. It is this guiding principle that I wish to analyze in terms of its location in Joyce’s work, and how its highly-specific practical purpose gave Joyce the wherewithal to transcend his education’s theological bounds and rummage a portable toolbox for reading and scholastic discipline uprooted from the Catholic canon. Gillespie notes in his analysis of Joyce’s Trieste library, *Inverted Volumes Improperly Arranged*, that “The Jesuit approach to education gave Joyce a high regard for intellectual achievement, but it also instilled in him a sense of his own ability and a spiritual independence that compelled him to question and then to resist traditional sources of authority in Dublin” (26). It also gave him the ideological model for Stephen, who, since he possesses “the cursed jesuit strain […] only it’s injected the wrong way” (*U* 1.209), proceeds to utilize the teachings of the Church to utter *non serviam* against it.

It is not true that the philosophical structure behind a kind of education necessarily shapes a person’s future life or work, but in the case of Joyce and Jesuit education the connection is undeniable from both biographical and literary perspectives. Certainly, almost every scholar concerned with Joyce’s life and works makes at least a passing mention of Catholic influence. Therefore it calls our attention to the pedagogical philosophy behind the system whose ingrained efficacy influenced so much of Joyce’s works. In the *Ratio* were three aspects of Jesuit education key to shaping a young scholar’s formative years: emulation, repetition, and prelection. With emulation, or *emulatio*, students were invited to engage in good-spirited competition to improve their skills in academics and, of course, athletics. According to Sullivan, “*Emulatio* is the term used in the *Ratio* to cover all appropriate means for stimulating a wholesome spirit of
academic rivalry” (79). We see this principle applied during the War of the Roses sum-solving contest between the “houses” of York (including Stephen) and Lancaster (including Jack Lawton) (Portrait 8). The technique works by effectively inspiring ad-hoc allegiances and capturing the attention of the classroom, though Stephen rather misses the point when upon failing the math problem he can only ruminate on the artistic associations of the competition’s theme: “White roses and red roses: those were beautiful colors to think of” (9). Of emulation as devised in the Ratio, the document’s 1970 English translator Allan P. Farrell notes that “This rivalry was individual, group and interclass. […] It included disputation and debates, […] contests within a class and between classes nearest to each other in grade, competition within a class for leadership, awarding of prizes for best results in Latin and Greek composition, both prose and poetry, and awards for general excellence in studies” (Ratio 130). Joyce was no stranger to these composition contests, winning several prizes for English essays. Interestingly, as Patrick J. Ledden notes, there was a small but not insignificant benefit to schools whose students performed well at competitions fostered by the Intermediate Education Act of 1878—having won £30 for his exhibition at the 1897 Intermediate, Joyce caused Belvedere to receive a commensurate credit from the government (332). At school and at home, Joyce was positioned in an environment of competition that was inspired by one of the guiding principles of education in the tradition of the Society of Jesus. Though he turned away from the Catholic faith, he would carry the precepts of the Ratio Studiorum with him through the rest of his life and transfer them into his works.
Another aspect of Joyce’s Jesuit education was an emphasis on repetition. Daily and weekly review of material ensured a solid grasp of the material and a development of memory in line with the faithful character-building goal of the *Ratio*. As Sullivan says, the Jesuits sought to mold young Christian thinkers more than simply fill them Gradgrind-style with knowledge: “their intention was so to saturate young minds with the matter of these disciplines [literature, religion, and philosophy] that they became, according to their capacities, literary, religious, and philosophical minds” (80). Repetition was an act of knowledge-building and, through the kind of discipline familiar to a prayer rule, character-building. It also makes sense as a key element of Jesuit education because it figures so heavily in the faith as a whole. Perhaps the most apparent example of repetition in the Catholic faith, besides the Nicene Creed and the *paternoster*, is the catechism. This dialogue of orthodox theology is required knowledge for Stephen and his cohorts, and the remembrance of which provides the young student with his devotions at the beginning of Chapter Four of *A Portrait*, but also provides one recognized origin for the schematized form of “Ithaca.” Joyce, with his gifted mind, was well-suited to the work of memorization, and benefitted from instilled patterns of repetition in learning French and Italian at University College, Dublin. Patterns of repetition were everywhere apparent in Joyce’s education, often crossing over into non-required reading. Stanislaus says that as a young man James “seemed to know by heart many passages and most of the songs of Shakespeare’s plays” though it was not clear for what reason he had learned them or why he had remembered them (100). That is no doubt reminiscent of the young man’s repetition work in school.
The final and most important aspect of the *Ratio*-based Jesuit education in Joyce’s era was prelection, a system of approaching texts through five steps: “reading, translation, explication, analysis of poetic or rhetorical structure, and *erudition*” (Sullivan 77; italics in original). Combined with emulatio and repetition, prelection provided the framework for a systematic approach to classical literature that could be used for all kinds of readings. The routine process of overall analysis may have been a five-step recipe for boredom to less imaginative individuals, but to Joyce it provided a way to read for form and aesthetics that could be collected, thoughtfully considered, and remembered for years. Its innovation was precisely in cultivating organization on various levels: “Here, in the discipline of the ‘prelection,’ the boy developed habits of mind which placed a premium on intellectual order and thoroughness, and on the systemization and schematization of knowledge” (Sullivan 10).

Prelection has its pedagogical end in examination, and so great was Joyce’s desire to build up knowledge as a young man through this process that he would ask his mother to prepare lessons for him from his Clongowes schoolbooks. She did so, Stanislaus recalls, giving him what she thought would be lessons long enough to keep him busy while she did housework, but which James inevitably finished in half the time, asking for more (45). James’s fervent talent and desire for educational approval continued until he was about fourteen years old; the persistence of the examinations sometimes proved to be an annoyance to Stanislaus, especially when his brother would bring notebooks of French and Latin to family picnics at Howth (58). Joyce’s abilities to read, decipher, and master texts for their informative and aesthetic qualities began in the classroom but carried over
into his personal life, first with his mother’s quizzes and later with his own reading: “my brother had been a docile and diligent pupil, but from this age [fourteen or fifteen] onwards his systematic studies, which had followed the prescribed curriculum obediently, gradually gave way to a line of reading, as my father generally preferred to call it, of his own choice” (76). The reasons for the increased independence of Joyce’s reading are several. As a reader and student, he was bright and diligent enough to take on outside reading even as his devotion to winning class honors waned. Having found his calling as an artist, or at least experiencing the first serious push towards letters after the fateful Fortnightly Ibsen review, Joyce took upon himself much wider reading to develop his own authorial voice. And finally, with his turn against the Catholic faith he was unsatisfied with only the prescribed agenda of Christian education and devoted himself to literature in earnest. Both Stanislaus and Ellmann note this shift in James’ reading interests was in response to, and partly derived from, his previous educational experience. That is to say, much of his success in later reading and self-education was based on the formal, if not philosophical, system which the Ratio Studiorum established in universal Jesuit pedagogy—emulation, repetition, and prelection. Gillespie says, “This rigorous training, although it did impose an orderly approach to learning, did nothing to blunt Joyce’s personal desire for knowledge” (27). Even further, I argue that this training the central element to Joyce’s self-education as much as it was to his formal Catholic schooling.

It is worth pausing for a moment over what exactly the rigors of the Ratio Studiorum wished to establish in educating young men, for its influence on Joyce’s life is
no doubt symptomatic of Joyce’s larger relationship with Catholicism. It is striking that, for all of its religious emphasis, Jesuit education did and continues to stress a deeply humanistic development of the individual. Such a notion is keenly developed in the Catholic literature of the time, especially in the newly-published, monumental *Catholic Encyclopedia*—a text which simultaneously incited in Joyce both admiration for its expansiveness and disgust for its claims to universal truth. In an entry for *The Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1911, Robert Schwickerath has this to say about the tenets of the *Ratio*:

This training or formation of the mind means the gradual and harmonious development of the various powers or faculties of the soul—of memory, imagination, intellect, and will; it is what we now call a general and liberal education. The training given by the *Ratio* was not to be specialized or professional, but general, and was to lay the foundation for professional studies. […] The educated man is to be not merely a wage-earner, but one who takes an intelligent interest in the great questions of the day, and who thoroughly understands the important problems of life, intellectual, social, political, literary, philosophical, and religious. To accomplish this a solid general training, preparatory to strictly professional work and reasonably prolonged, is most valuable. (n. p.)

Schwickerath was writing in a period of controversy over the value of traditional classical education, and therefore quite understandably assumes the role of apologist. Even at the time of Joyce and Stephen’s schooling there were rumblings for more practical skills-based approaches to pedagogy, more so in England but making its way to the colonies.
Clongowes and Belvedere were insular worlds, existing in their own youth-based sociological microcosms like so many boarding schools in fiction following *Tom Brown’s School Days*, so the debate did not penetrate *A Portrait’s* pages. Still, Schwickerath goes on to explain the core value of traditional liberal arts in religious education: “The Ratio does not deny the educational value of other branches, as sciences, modern languages, etc., but it highly values the Classical curriculum not merely because it is the old traditional system, but because, so far, it has proved to be the best means for giving the mind the much desired liberal training and general culture” (n. p.). By all appearances, the best route to both the fear of God and the development of self was through rigorous adherence to the prelection of classical masters. It is no wonder that both of these conflated aspects of Jesuit education, the religious and the (self-)cultural, never fully departed from Joyce’s purview.

Even though he renounced religion for aesthetics, Joyce maintained a nostalgic respect for Catholicism that, like a curious antique, sometimes appeared in the ideological auction houses of his works. Indeed, having left the faith, the faith never left him. Rather than simply harboring heresy and unbelief, Joyce was closer to a state of what Roy Gottfried calls “misbelief”: a condition in which he was “always mindful of orthodoxy while attempting to break its hold of unitary meaning, its narrow sense, and to open up personal possibilities that led to artistic ones of rebellious challenge and freedom” (8). After Belvedere, of course, the theological aims of Ignatius Loyola’s institutions were no longer applicable to the young apostate. But the educational agenda—that of the full cultured man, prepared to serve God and others—remained relevant in every respect save
one. And that was easily enough solved by substituting “art” for “God,” the very essence of Stephen’s conversion to aesthetics. It is easy to forget that this artist, striving on his own to achieve greatness through the arms of “silence, exile, and cunning” and whose grandstanding goals include to “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (276), in fact received his assignment for researching “the esthetic question” from the dean at University College. Mixing Aristotle and Aquinas, Stephen’s philosophy of beauty benefits from the research he underwent to write this particular paper, and which he (reluctantly at first) explains to Lynch. This again shows that Stephen, like Joyce, was never completely divorced from his core education even when it came to following a path that seemed entirely contrary to it. Much of this has to do with the versatility of the Jesuit model and the Ratio on which it is based—designed to instill principles of discipline and personal growth in order to cultivate better Christians, it could just as likely provide a secular model of humanistic culture aided by the tools of rigor in emulation, repetition, and prelation. As a schema for institutionalized religious education, the Ratio Studiorum had proven its worth over centuries. With Joyce it became something else entirely, but of equal worth—the basis for the reading and self-education that would shape the writer he would be, and would provide an educational model for Stephen Dedalus that other characters could be measured against.

2. The Celtic No: Anxiety, Artistry, and Self-Culture in “A Little Cloud”
Joyce may have benefited from a Jesuit education in terms of shaping his artistic discipline, but he understood that not everyone was suited for the aesthetic life. It is worth noting that even though the Joyce family was in financial decline, James was able to complete his schooling at some of the best institutions around Dublin. As *A Portrait* shows us there was time and opportunity to pursue artistic endeavors. For others it was not as easy. Such is the case of Little Chandler from “A Little Cloud.” His story of a pursuit of literature in vain, in more ways than one, is part cautionary tale and part elegy for Ireland. Coming in the middle of a clerk trio in *Dubliners*, following Mr. Doran in “The Boarding House” and preceding Farrington in “Counterparts,” Chandler’s story is in a position of adolescence in the lifecycle of the collection. Indeed, as the narrator says, “His temperament might be said to be just at the point of maturity” (60). His self-doubting inadequacy in cultural matters is literally put into dialogue against his ostensibly successful and worldly companion, Ignatius Gallaher (called “the Great Gallaher” in *Ulysses*’ “Aeolus”). Within this deceptively simple tale, Joyce simultaneously sympathizes with and pokes fun at the clerk and his literary aspirations, recognizing the inspiration behind the effort but denying its possibility for success.

Little Chandler is a clerk with literary aspirations, rather like Arnold Bennett’s Richard Larch. He had nearly given up on his dream to be a poet except for his encounter with Gallaher. Chandler’s one-time companion in mediocrity has during the past eight years made a killing in the journalism world in London: an arena that is well-known in Dublin. Joyce is not specific about the shared past of the two—they were friends “known under a shabby and necessitous guise” (57)—but it appears that Gallaher and
Chandler come from roughly the same socioeconomic situation, though Chandler thinks his friend is “inferior in birth and education” (66). Regardless, Gallaher’s success confirms for Chandler the connection linking artistic aspiration and ambitious self-culture: latent potential trumps class background, that is, and if others are able to achieve something, you can too. After Gallaher impresses his companion with stories about Paris, the Continent, and the worldly pleasures there, it sets upon him a resurgence of dormant poetic temperament towards authorial renown and the desire to leave Ireland, his job, and his stultifying family life. Even in this moment of discouragement and escape fantasy, though, he cannot flee domestic practicality: “A dull resentment against his life awoke within him. Could he not escape from his little house? Was it too late for him to try to live bravely like Gallaher? Could he go to London? There was the furniture still to be paid for. If he could only write a book and get it published, that might open the way for him” (68). In this passage there is a back-and-forth thought process between realism and idealism, practicality and soul-searching. His “little house,” a physical reminder of his cramped existence, is contrasted to London, the unseen city of boundless possibility; the “furniture still to be paid for” opposes the dream of a book to be published, opening the floodgates to fame. For every time that Chandler tries to idealistically weigh his soul “to see if it was a poet’s soul,” there is plenty of material counterweight to balance the scales (60). After all, at thirty-two, married, and presumably the breadwinner for a wife and newborn child, Chandler is in no position to take flight with Stephen’s unencumbered ease.
The prospect of moving away from Ireland is its own fearsome feat. Vincent J. Cheng says, “Chandler […] is torn between desire, the desire to escape the provinciality of the colony and to acquire the expansive and worldly vision of the city, and the parallel fear that such a worldliness is necessarily impure and contaminating, a fear that sends one right back to the safe, the familiar, the known, the local” (221). Chandler is trapped in Ireland, like so many of Joyce’s Dubliners, in a situation where he cannot afford to risk his family’s livelihood even though he feels like he is missing out on an opportunity to become what he wanted to become. Gallaher does not help him here. With his fairly one-track expositions on the splendors of the British and Continental metropoles, delivered in leisure at Corless’s too-fancy restaurant, it is obvious to the reader that Gallaher is trying to impress his success upon his friend, pounding home with the subtlety of an iron glove that his prosperity, indeed all prosperity, could only happen outside of Ireland. For his part, Chandler only bristles at Gallaher’s changed accent and idioms, but convinces himself that they only are only symptoms of his friend’s movement in internationally-significant circles: “There was something vulgar in his friend which he had not observed before. But perhaps it was only the result of living in London amid the bustle and competition of the press. The old personal charm was still there under this new gaudy manner. And, after all, Gallaher had lived, he had seen the world” (62). Regardless of his old friend’s authenticity, Chandler accepts the significance of his posturing and uses it to channel his own wish-fulfillment towards literature. Here, comparisons to Stephen help us make sense of the disparate natures behind two ostensibly similar desires to pursue art through personal enculturation. Like Stephen, Chandler has had (and rekindles) the
yearning to become an artist; unlike Stephen he is trapped by his career, family, and diffident personality. Gallaher’s return, with his amused assessment of his hometown’s quaintness, incites in Chandler the jealousy of the one who never left. The response, a doomed one, is to dream once more about the liberation of a literary calling. He reads poetry, as so many of his fellow clerk self-cultural characters from Leonard Bast to Septimus Smith do. It is significant that he reads and is so affected by Romantic poetry, especially the work of Byron, for the associations of individual freedom that it is supposed to bolster: “He paused. He felt the rhythm of the verse about him in the room. How melancholy it was! Could he, too, write like that, express the melancholy of his soul in verse? There were so many things he wanted to describe: his sensations of a few hours before on Grattan Bridge, for example. If he could get back again into that mood. …” (68-9). He never does, as he is interrupted by his child’s cries—surely the most direct reminder of physical necessity in the face of helplessness known. Chandler’s reverie is cut by the wails of the babe, but at the moment of crisis he is more metaphorically situated with the child than with Byron, especially when he is thinking about his own authorial voice (“could he write like that?”) when the more direct association with his trapped life is the indiscriminate wailing of vulnerability. All questions of voice, desire, and helplessness are dismissed with the violent act that brings Chandler to sullen remorse, for his life and the wellbeing of the child, whose parallel situations of being trapped (Chandler in spirit, child in body and mind) reflect the equally desperate class-based conclusion of “Counterparts.”
Why does Chandler never have a chance to become a writer, despite his best intentions and a desire towards art? There are several reasons, which give us more of an insight into Joyce’s own view of the desire for self-culture. Chandler’s interest in art and literature is commendable. The problem is that his dreams have lain dormant for so many years that to dig them up at the reappearance of a man who has “gotten on” is disingenuous and desperate. It indicates that the little man, a follower, lacks the independence to make a full go at his dream and, among other things, leave Ireland to succeed. In other words, the dream may be there, but the desire to follow it is not sufficient. Likewise Chandler may be basing his wish for literary fame on uncertain aesthetic foundations. The “dominant mode of his temperament,” melancholy, could with the proper tools become a wellspring of verse: “If he could give expression to it in a book of poems perhaps men would listen” (60). This is perhaps not too far from Stephen’s wish to forge the uncreated conscience of his race in the smithy of his soul. But despite any of Joyce’s (self-)criticism of Stephen, Chandler’s project goes on to appear even less authentic. Fantasizing about his rise in recognition through a coterie “appeal to a little circle of kindred minds,” he says, “The English critics perhaps would recognise him as one of the Celtic school by reason of the melancholy tone of his poems; besides that, he would put in allusions” (60). Realism and idealism once again emerge as the dialectical impasse in Chandler’s plans. Making men listen is the romanticist’s (and political ideologue’s) desire; putting in allusions to conform to genre type is the practical writer’s puffery. So is his willingness to “Irish up” his verse, making it more wistful and melancholy, even making own name appear more Gaelic in print (“T Malone Chandler”),
in order to ride the moonbeams of the Celtic Twilight (60). Such appropriation of an
easily-defined Irishness that is as much a construction from England as from anything
indigenous is dubious by a number of standards, including Joyce’s own. But for a strictly
artistic ambition it is lacking even the hint of greatness that Stephen tries (and fails) to
achieve. Reinforcing Chandler’s artistic weakness is a conservatism that is symptomatic
of his menial, but relatively secure, lower middle class life. He cannot even dream his
way out of mediocrity, preferring to accept in a facile wish the middle road of mere
acceptance, recognition as one of a like-minded and easily-understood group.

Chandler is caught up in sentimentality, the defining trait of middlebrow
literature, which is supposed to carry him into artistic success. Chandler asks himself,
“Could he, too, write like [Byron], express the melancholy of his soul in verse?” (68).
But the better question is whether this particular kind of expression is a powerful kind of
soul-bearing, and if this is what Chandler wants to do whether his prospect of uncreative
creativity could ever possibly succeed. Joyce purposefully chooses this passage from
Byron for the reader to see the disconnection between idea and execution that plague
Chandler’s chances of success. Byron’s “On the Death of a Young Lady” is symbolic of
the effort: the right author, but the wrong poem, just as Chandler considers the right idea
(artistic self-cultivation) but with the wrong motivations (jealousy, escapism, settling for
mediocrity, following the crowd, an imperfect understanding of the artist’s reality).
Passages from poetry abound in Joyce, but I believe there is an intended connection
between the lines extracted and interrupted from Byron here and the verse which Stephen
the artist has scripted in A Portrait. We are invited to ask questions of the artist, artistic
temperament, and inspiration for all of the self-conscious qualities with which Joyce’s stories treat the figure, and this is certainly the case for Stephen and Chandler. At the very least, one obvious difference is that Stephen’s villanelle is from his own pen and the product of, not a call to, poetic inspiration. We witness its generation on the page to a completed product. Chandler’s poem is Byron’s, and is interrupted by the crying child. Both poems are underwhelming, aesthetically, but carry very different meanings to their readers. To Stephen, a complete poetic product is further proof that an artist’s life is possible and that inspiration is worth following to exile. To Chandler, the melancholy first transmitted by the opening lines (before Byron’s elegy moves to more uplifting themes of remembered virtues), is the feeling that remains in his interrupted experience. Remorse for an incomplete life follows from an incomplete poem.

By comparing Stephen’s path toward inner cultivation to Chandler’s, it is tempting to surmise that they represent “right” and “wrong” ways of doing so. Nevertheless this is an oversimplification. Stephen’s path, instigated by inspiration after a bout with religious devotion, is nonetheless tempered with rigorous academic investigation and the commitment to leave Ireland to become an artist of the world. Chandler’s attempted program, on the other hand, is besought by difficulties implicit to his class, occupation, educational heritage, and family commitments, not to mention his jealousy for Gallaher and his stifling practicality which keeps him safely, disappointingly at home. Obviously, we cannot assume that Joyce was trying to provide a guide to artistic self-culture with either of these characters. Stephen’s Bildung process is not without dampening through Joyce’s critique of this version of his younger self, as Stephen’s
artistic independence can easily come off as pedantic, self-absorbed, and anti-social. But Stephen at least has the opportunity to develop his artistic talents in ways that are forbidden to Chandler, regardless of the extent of Stephen’s eventual success. Both are snobs in the sense that they regard themselves as superior to the people around them. For Chandler, this sense of superiority comes as a backlash against Gallaher, who by all logical indices of social expectation should not have advanced beyond Chandler’s self-proclaimed “superior” education and birth.

The sternest justice falls, however, on the little man who holds jealousy as petty as his hopes for advancement in poetry. Latham says, “Fearful of fleeing the life he has built for himself and unable to read or write poetry, Chandler recognizes the futility not only of his artistic aspirations but of his own pretensions to superiority. Shouting in the face of his child, and thus accused of cruelty by his wife, he can see no opportunity for escape” (140). Literally and figuratively stuck in mediocre Ireland, there is no possibility for excursion into the culture-rich cityscapes of London and Paris which have held countless dreamers spellbound. Ireland as it has proven to the other Dubliners is an island of isolation, removed from the cultural influences of the Continent and forced literally to accept other nation’s classics (Byron) or else water down its own partly-imagined racial heritage into digestible poetic forms (Celtic Twilight). The narrator blends Little Chandler’s frustration over the state of his life with Joyce’s frustration over the state of the nation: “There was no doubt about it: if you wanted to succeed you had to go away. You could do nothing in Dublin” (59). The path to inner culture, self-improvement, and aesthetic education was one that led away from Ireland and all of its inherent drags on the
understanding and development of the self—politically, socially, and religiously. Joyce exiled himself and his family for most of his adult life from Ireland in order to follow his path as a writer. But as he was exiled, he produced the book that would finish the story of Stephen Dedalus, his primary autobiographical autodidact, and counter it with the possibilities of a new kind of man in a new kind of situation, whose natural curiosity and practical mindfulness purposefully counterbalance Stephen’s by-the-book learning. In *Ulysses* Joyce explores the expanding possibilities of learning in the era of modernity, where the elitist vestiges of Jesuit and private college education begin to give way to a new literary model: the character-based, democratic, idiosyncratic, University of Life.

3. The University of Life, or, Wisdom While You Wait: *Ulysses*, Bloom, and Modern Self-Development

When Lenehan recounts the ribald story of how he grabbed Molly while her husband was pointing out constellations in the night sky, he is met with M’Coy’s cold silence. Lenehan, reproved, ends his narrative with this lame concession: “He’s a cultured allroundman, Bloom is […] He’s not one of your common or garden … you know … There’s a touch of the artist about old Bloom” (*U* 10.581-3). The humorous way in which Bloom’s reputation here is first downtrodden and then elevated speaks to the pathetic lovability of the character himself, especially as a “cultured allroundman”: a practitioner of self-culture whose interests reflect those of Stephen and Chandler even as his methods and philosophies differ. As the butt of the joke, a common position for him in *Ulysses*,
Bloom is still not entirely without respect. In recent critical interpretations, partly due to the boom in Joyce and popular culture studies from the mid-1990s onward, Bloom has experienced a resurgence of interest as the character closest to the urban experience of the middle-aged, thoughtful, hapless modern man. I wish to take Lenehan’s concession, which he “seriously” makes, then, seriously—in terms of analyzing how Joyce utilizes Bloom, a character whose occupation, personality, and interests construct him as a new model autodidact for the modernized colonial city and, more precisely, modernist narrative.

Of course, Bloom’s occupation is essential to his characterization as an emblematic modern figure. Being an ad canvasser, his business is to commission the accounts which will appear as advertisements in newspapers, fly-posters, and signs all over the city. His duties succeed by infiltrating the cityscape with commercial text and image, but Bloom shows through his wanderings (and wonderings) to be as much a student of a world as modern, widespread, and disconnected from reality as the ads of his trade. Bloom is not a man of great significance in the life of Dublin, nor in his mind. He avoids the grandstanding and posturing that Stephen affects in *A Portrait* and parts of this novel. Yet it is precisely his inconsequentiality, publicly and privately recognized, that Joyce invites the reader to notice and scrutinize. In the history of *Ulysses* readership, the choice of Bloom as chief protagonist has struck some readers curiously. As Ellmann says, Joyce’s project to “endow an urban man of no importance with heroic consequence” was often misinterpreted as satire: “How else justify so passionate an interest in the lower middle class?” (5). As readers came to grips with the unusual complications of this
protagonist, no doubt aided by the leaked Homeric schemata, it became clear to many that Bloom was more sincerely “a humble vessel elected to bear and transmit unimpeached the best qualities of the mind” (Ellmann 5). Indeed, Joyce’s inner and outer presentation of Bloom is what grants him the ability to become such a dynamic, memorable, and intimately knowable character. Seeing Bloom in this way—the “epic in the ordinary”—is a time-tested approach. What can be lost in this interpretation, however, is where Bloom stands in terms of his knowledge and the novel’s depiction of his knowledge-gathering. What he knows and how he thinks are crucial in understanding the role his character plays in this particular journey, and in the greater odyssey of modern literature. I wish to argue that his idiosyncratic mode of self-culture is crucial to what makes him a memorable and important modernist figure, and also marks an important evolutionary step in Joyce’s literary depiction of autodidacts. A main reason why he can remain interesting, endearing, and even admirable despite his flaws is because of the way he approaches life with abundant curiosity, wonder, and a desire for personal betterment. Bloom is a self-improver in spirit, as well as in action. The kind of impetus towards self-development that he displays is immensely similar to but fundamentally different from Little Chandler, who is trapped in domestic ways unknown to Bloom, and Stephen, who retreats from the idealistic exile at the end of A Portrait into a debilitating post as a schoolteacher in dear dirty Dublin in Ulysses. Bloom stands out among these autodidacts by dint of his idiosyncratic approach to the life of the mind, which is actually strengthened not simply by the book but by the (popular) culture around him.
In terms of characterization, it is commonplace to separate Stephen and Bloom by the dichotomy of artistic and scientific temperaments—“Ithaca” does this for us literally—but when it comes to modes of self-culture this distinction is worth examining once more. In his thinking, Stephen tends to ruminate upon art, religion, and philosophy, following thoughts to other thoughts often without discernible starting or end points. Bloom is far more reliant on the material world to spur his thoughts. These thoughts tend to be a mixture of analysis, memory (voluntary or involuntary), and imaginative projection. For example, the promotion for the land-tract scheme of Agendath Netaim captures his attention first for its commercial prospect, which he reasonably denies (“Nothing doing. Still an idea behind it”) (U 4.200); then, while thinking of oranges and citrons he remembers his old neighbor J. Citron, who lived on Saint Kevin’s Parade (U 4.205); finally, as a cloud covers the sun his mood darkens and he reverses his thoughts about the Holy Land from a fruit-bearing paradise to the desolate wasteland of destroyed Old Testament cities, with the Dead Sea taking on literal connotations (U 4.219-229). With Bloom, we are invited to think about not just how the mind works, but how this practical man processes and internalizes sensual information of a particularly 20th-century quality, spurred in a significant way by the new century’s cultural investment in consumer attraction, the kind of advertisement Agendath Netaim represents. Because it is his business, Bloom pays special attention to artifacts like this, Kino’s, and Plumtree’s. These ads, and the wealth of popular culture material Bloom experiences throughout the day, do more than show that Joyce was detail-oriented in a somewhat obsessive way. Bloom brings his powerful memory to bear on even the most mundane experiences,
summons obscure trivia to support imaginative ramblings, and manages to learn from the best and worst of the city around him. He is an autodidact of a new type, foregoing the siren call of art alone that wrecks Stephen and Little Chandler, in favor of a massive, plutocratic, non-judgmental absorption of facts from all areas of modern experience, often to mentally remark upon ways he or the world could be improved. Calling this temperament “scientific” is only a start. In the mental realm, whereas Stephen tends toward rumination, Bloom tends toward innovation. This lends him the air of a scientist or marketer, but not without “a touch of the artist.”

For Joyce’s autodidacts, artistry and literature are almost always synonymous. Like Stephen and Chandler, Bloom has literary interests beyond his more widely-commented upon fascinations with the commercial, scientific, or otherwise “practical” realms. These, however, are rarely as straightforward or honest as other characters such as Leonard Bast profess. In fact, Bloom often clutches to a literary pretension in moments of fantasy and insecurity, which are not mutually exclusive. His in-print solicitation of Martha Clifford began with the advertisement “Wanted, smart lady typist to aid gentleman in literary work” (8.326-7). Bloom, partly due to class insecurity, often equates literariness with gentlemanliness. One such example is when he is on trial in “Circe.” After appealing to the class and nationalism of the prosecution, asserting his relation to the falsely-elevated “Majorgeneral Tweedy” of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers (“The royal Dublins, boys, the salt of the earth, known the world over”) (U 15.779, 785-6)⁹, he goes on to make this claim about his profession: “Well, I follow a literary occupation, author-journalist. In fact we are just bringing out a collection of prize stories
of which I am the inventor, something that is an entirely new departure” (U 15.801-4). This is false, and Philip Beaufoy, acting prosecutor and author of “Matcham’s Masterstroke” (which Bloom has defiled once already during the day), corners Bloom thus: “No born gentleman, no-one with the most rudimentary promptings of a gentleman would stoop to such particularly loathsome conduct. One of those, my lord. A plagiarist. A soapy sneak masquerading as a littérature” (U 15.820-3). After Beaufoy reveals that the defendant “has not even been to a university,” Bloom responds indistinctly, “University of life. Bad art” (U 15.837-8, 840). Quietly, defensively, Bloom posits his claim to professional respectability in this fantasy scenario in terms of streetwise knowledgeability—the kind of mastery of common sense and learning from life that qualifies him to judge Beaufoy’s piece from Tit-Bits as bad art. The enduring characterization from this exchange is two-fold: first, Bloom’s self-image here and elsewhere throughout the novel rests on him as a competent, knowledgeable man about worldly and often literary things; second, when cornered about the weakness of his credentials that he falls back on the cliché that he has attended the University of Life.

This University, metaphorical as it is, provides a background for more of Bloom’s character and mannerisms than we might first expect. Unlike with many other twentieth-century autodidacts, who intensely guard their knowledge and aims from the general public, the idiosyncratic fruits of Bloom’s wide education tend to spill over into his conversations and cause some deal of weariness. In “Cyclops,” the narrator recounts with annoyance how Bloom responds to the humorous story of one hanged criminal’s post-execution erection:
—That can be explained by science, says Bloom. It’s only a natural phenomenon, don’t you see, because on account of the …

And then he starts with his jawbreakers about phenomenon and science and this phenomenon and the other phenomenon. (U 12.464-5)

Rather than sharing a laugh with the rest of the barflies, Bloom tacks on a factual explanation for the tall tale that he is certain will teach and delight the captive audience. With this response he has missed the point entirely, and exhibits neither for the first nor final time a lack of social acumen. It is enough to exasperate the narrator of “Cyclops,” who along with the Citizen becomes tired of Bloom for his intelligent-sounding talkiness and perceived air of superiority. The narrator says, “if you took up a straw from the bloody floor and if you said to Bloom: Look at, Bloom. Do you see that straw? That’s a straw. Declare to my aunt he’d talk about it for an hour so he would and talk steady” (U 12.893-6). It is significant that Joyce’s narrator here would make fun of Bloom’s capability to speak steadily for a long period not just because he was boring, but because talking clearly for an extended period was an elocutionary badge of honor. And elocution, via such instructional texts as Bell’s Standard Elocutionist—first published in 1860, but reaching nearly 200 other editions—was a popular pursuit not only for school-age boys and girls but the self-improvement crowd, who wished to deliver speech with educated purpose and also overcome a variety of class-bound and regional accents. This is the kind of critique that Bloom garners throughout the novel, which is linked in “Cyclops” and other episodes to elements of social undesirability: snobbery, race, and introversion. But for all of his awkwardness in social situations, and the occasional
inappropriateness of his interactions with others, Joyce’s ad-man means well. He never quite exasperates the reader in the same ways he might weary fellow characters in the storyworld. He is sharing his facts because he feels, often erroneously, that others would be as interested in them as he is. Nevertheless in this particular example from “Cyclops,” an episode already obsessed with political and racial demarcation, Bloom’s outsiderness is further linked to his inward storehouse of knowledge, most of it deemed trivial. Enthusiasm for learning new things and curiosity about the wonders of the world comprise the highly unsystematic course of his studies at the University of Life. In *Ulysses* we see Bloom as student and part-time instructor at this institution; at the price of being an outsider to others, he gains by matriculating much of what makes him a modern autodidact.

... 

We can learn about Bloom’s position as one of Joyce’s new lower middle class self-improvers by placing him against an older-model autodidact. Regardless of the formal educational differences between the two, Bloom and Stephen’s opinions regarding self-enculturation are on full display when *Ulysses* nears its close. It is appropriate that the two are together in the *Nostos*, specifically “Ithaca,” for reasons other than the mythical reunion of father and son. Here is an encounter between two characters who struggle with building themselves up against the obstacles to personal advancement in their way. Throughout the day we have witnessed Bloom’s characteristic eye for improvement, all while he has tried his best to avoid his wife’s lover. And Stephen, we should remember, has returned home from his excursion in Paris to mourn the death of
his mother but also the death of his dreams for literary consequence on the Continent. In
a twist, having learned so much about learning from his own education, Stephen is now
in the position to impart lessons to an uninspired group of misfits who only mothers
could love. Mired by feeble-mindedness, they do not even understand his jokes—a real
apple of discord for the sensitive schoolteacher. Nevertheless, the connection between
Bloom and Stephen is strong but complicated because they share similar improvement
interests but with different motivations and objectives. We have examined Stephen’s (and
Joyce’s) self-educational course in detail with A Portrait, which despite the young artist’s
failings and return to Ireland continues to philosophically influence him. He never
abandons his artistic notions or his reading, despite the state of paralysis that holds him,
and that serves to place him as both complementary figure and foil to Bloom in the
Nostos.

In “Ithaca,” Stephen and his fellow autodidact commingle through the striking
method of the episode’s narration. Joyce famously claimed to be writing this chapter to
resemble a “mathematical catechism” where “All events are resolved into their cosmic,
physical, psychical etc. equivalents […] so that the reader will know everything and
know it in the baldest and coldest way” (Letters 159-60). The concepts of knowing and
knowledge are certainly key issues in this episode, as we can tell by its form and content.
Though inspired by the tradition of the Catholic catechism, the direct source for this
question and answer format is ostensibly Richmal Mangnall’s Historical and
Miscellaneous Questions for the Use of Young People, a copy of which Joyce kept in
Trieste and consulted for Ulysses (Gillespie 98). Written by a schoolmistress, and first
published anonymously in 1800, the book was enormously popular and went through fourteen editions by 1818 (Hampson 239). In his classic essay on “Ithaca,” A. Walton Litz calls Mangnall’s Questions “a compendium of undifferentiated ‘practical’ knowledge, cast in the form of a familiar catechism.” He adds, “Questions that any child might ask are phrased in simple form, while a voice of hectoring authority responds with a surfeit of information and misinformation” (394). I would argue with Litz that Mangnall’s Questions includes intentional misinformation, because its primary purpose is as a study guide. Certainly, the Questions may seem unusual, even bizarre, for twenty-first century readers accustomed to answers at the click of a mouse rather than through a deluge of essayistic information, but we should understand that the primary purpose of the text was to prepare “young people” for the kind of testing that they would encounter in grammar and intermediate school: that is, essay-based questions and answers. Certain editions, like William Pinnock’s “Improved Edition” of 1844, were adapted specifically for school use and appeared on middle-school syllabi (Hampson 240n22). Mangnall’s text is not an isolated case; Robert Hampson tells us that the catechism, outside of its traditional function in religious instruction, was a popular educational method in the nineteenth century (237). This becomes clear when we look at other examples in this style that the schematic style of catechetical knowledge was attractive even for general adult readers beyond school-bound “young people.” Popular catechisms from Adolphe Ganot, including Natural Philosophy for General Readers and Young People (1872) and Popular Natural Philosophy (1879), recognize in their very titles that general readers also sought knowledge in these ways (Hampson 246). This suggests that the schematic study
guide was as much the autodidact’s ally as the school-child’s crutch. It could be used beyond the classroom to cultivate individual knowledge, especially for a readership that shared Bloom’s curiosity for facts and sought a way of getting forward by returning to, or perhaps practicing for the first time, the habits of mnemonic learning. In this way, the form itself seeks to connect the learning styles of Stephen and Bloom, academic and general reader, “sublimating” the two (as Joyce indicated) in this case by virtue of a shared indebtedness to the catechistic structure which had by the mid-nineteenth century transcended school and church to become a method of popular learning. One can see this sublimation in Joyce’s own life. Joyce was familiar with the structure of the catechetical setup from his own education, where the Catholic catechism and the tripartite structure of the Ratio Studiorum inspired rigorously logical thinking. Having Mangnall’s Questions in Trieste suggests that he thought its structure still intriguing, or its information still quaintly useful (perhaps enough so to employ on young Giorgio and Lucia).

In “Ithaca,” the catechism borrowed from Mangnall and the Catholic Church marks the formative backbone of this episode concerned with knowledge. It is a logical choice because according to Litz “it was associated with some of his most profound early experiences, and had proved to be a vehicle for precise intellectual argument which simultaneously allowed scope for exaggeration and self-parody” (395). The claims that “Ithaca” makes toward exact knowledge and its subsequent inability to deliver on them are intrinsic to the problem of comprehensiveness that the catechetical method seeks to overcome. Herein is the essence of self-parody—“Ithaca” unveils the fallacy of total knowledge by undermining through its “scientific” language the Socratic method
employed. The minute details and technical language of the responses, in this case, actually draw attention to the questions not being asked and the answers’ lack of helpful revelation. Recent critics have returned to “Ithaca” to revisit the issue of knowledge failure. Jon Hegglund reads the style of “Ithaca” as Joyce’s parody of the colonial ambition to amass the mythical knowledge of the world, what Thomas Richards has called “the imperial archive” (Hegglund 59). This is a promising interpretation, especially with its emphasis on questioning both 1) the possibility of full and total knowledge as a form of controlling the world, which both the Empire and the Enlightenment sought; and 2) the appropriateness of “facts,” in general, but especially in a moment where a desire to explore these personal relationships by the questioner is buried in raw material by the answerer. Joyce was highly skeptical of any total truth claims, whether they came from religion, science, or anywhere in between, and considering this Hegglund’s reading of “Ithaca” makes complete sense. I would even extend it beyond a critique of the colonial amassment project into a criticism of useless knowledge, or knowledge for its own sake, especially when the modern culture of science threatened to take over the less easily definable area of relationships. Nevertheless, Joyce was not anti-intellectual, just attuned to the contemporary dominance of science’s clinical jargon—offensive to literary wordsmiths for its joyless tone and pretension toward exactness. “Ithaca” is frequently funny because it uses the verbal instruments of accuracy inaccurately, inappropriately, and at cross-purposes with common sense.

At any rate, due to the pretentiously thorough mode of information-gathering here employed, we neither search for nor find quite what we are looking for. One instance
where we appear to have a simple answer is radically reductive, if fundamentally accurate. The question “What two temperaments did they individually represent?” correlates Bloom and Stephen simply to “The scientific. The artistic” (U 17.559-560).

“Ithaca” is too much of not enough. It attempts to break down difficult, variable ideas into concrete categories, which, though difficult in their own ways, approach factual infallibility but emotional incompleteness. These are correct answers, mostly, but not the right answers. “What the catechism of ‘Ithaca’ parodies is not the idea of relationship but the idea of a system that purports to halt the play of potential relationships,” Karen Lawrence says. “All sorts of relationships do exist in unexpected places—coincidences, repetitions, puns—but these ‘facts’ cannot be reduced to a schema” (195). “Ithaca” highlights the imperfection of knowledge-gathering from a schematic standpoint, but it does so without abandoning the characters who are there at a distance. And with the shape of the episode centered on the imprecision of facts as wisdom, it is appropriate that much of the subject matter and development of the characters has to do with the way they deal with their own self-cultivational limitations.

With all of the ironic questioning of catechistic knowledge that occurs in “Ithaca,” whether it targets Church, Empire, or learning itself, we find Bloom and Stephen meaningfully obscured in the pages of the parody as partial practitioners and partial victims of the form. There is yet another reunion happening during the Nostos—that is, the rapprochement between nineteenth- and twentieth-century ways of envisioning self-culture. On the one hand, Stephen emerges from A Portrait as the product of a more traditional kind of Bildungsroman, or more specifically Künstlerroman, instigated by the
benefits of private education and classical study through the university level, not to mention the Jesuit strain (cursed or not) inscribed therein. Bloom’s education, on the other hand, though more ambitiously middle-class than some readers may expect, ends before college. We know his interests extend to a wide variety of topics, often pursued through his own efforts unsystematically and not necessarily through personal motivation. His excitement to take in Stephen for the evening is spurred in part by his admiration for the young man’s intelligence and a desire to engage in repartee elevated above Molly’s habitual indifference to brainy matters. Bloom is clearly more excited to be in the company of the “author” and “professor” than Stephen is to be with him. Still they are able to converse about shared interests. The litany of diverse topics covered by the two sounds at first like a program for a mutual improvement society’s debate club—large, general interest issues, about which self-educated men and women were expected to have opinions to appear informed and intelligent in everyday life. These topics evolve as the conversation shifts from more objective to more subjective, ending with Stephen’s fall: “Music, literature, Ireland, Dublin, Paris friendship, woman, prostitution, diet […] the Roman catholic church, ecclesiastical celibacy, the Irish nation, jesuit education, careers, the study of medicine, the past day, the maleficent influence of the presabbath, [and] Stephen’s collapse” (U 17.13-17). Whether they see eye-to-eye about these issues is obscured, but the emphasis on shared conversation suggests mutual interest and knowledge enough to carry on discussion—some of which comes straight from “Eumaeus.” The way that “Ithaca” retreads these topics in the form of a list shows again how knowledge, specifically self-culture, underscores the episode and connects the two
characters. From the “big-issue” beginning to the personal end, the list of topics suggests that Bloom and Stephen can be seen as fellow self-improvers who, though their methods and motivations differ, have a relationship that is based in part on curiosity and their shared pursuit of knowledge.

Linked to the guiding force of the episode’s catechism-cum-study guide form, there are several passages related directly to self-cultivation in “Ithaca.” One prominent example deals with opposing opinions: “Stephen dissented openly from Bloom’s views on the importance of dietary and civic selfhelp while Bloom dissented tacitly from Stephen’s views on the eternal affirmation of the spirit of man in literature” (U 17.28-30). Interestingly, this is the only time in the book where the word “selfhelp” is mentioned, and it is smashed together without the more common usage of a hyphen to break up the word. As with Joyce’s other typographical idiosyncracies (e.g. “jesuit,” lowercase), visual defamiliarization sometimes warrants closer inspection, even interrogation, of the term at stake. (On the other hand, this may be no more than a printing preference of the author.) At any rate, the centrality of self-help, particularly concerning the “dietary and civic” kinds, is affirmed by Bloom in the face of Stephen’s outspoken dissent. This is not exactly the kind of personal, inspirational self-help that was made popular by Samuel Smiles. Civic self-help (and its attendant dietary variety) refers to a nineteenth century view of popular citizenship to which Bloom still subscribes. One famous case of civic self-help occured in Victorian Birmingham. Anne B. Rodrick describes the situation of the industrial Midlands town, which, after years of incompetent local government and “municipal chaos” made traditional representation undesirable, managed to develop as an
alternative route the “development of cultural leadership” to raise and recognize the city’s best leaders (xiii). The efforts of the civic self-help movement there yielded the Birmingham and Midland Institute which “combined instruction for working adults with a program of civic culture based upon public lectures and soirees” (xiv). The students at the Midland Institute and those involved in debating and improvement societies were formally identified by Birmingham’s cultural leaders as “our excelsior class”—including the likes of Joseph Chamberlain, who on the basis of his experience in Birmingham would champion British education reform (xiii). Rodrick makes clear that the success of civic self-help in this particular historical case stemmed from a strongly-held notion of cultural competence which Birmingham fought to uphold with provincial pride. One could make a connection between Bloom’s support for civic self-help and the Sinn Fein movement—translated “we, ourselves”—but his politics in the rest of the novel do not support stating the case so strongly. More centrist and pragmatic than radical, the political importance of civic self-help for Bloom is surely less important than the benefits of the exercise to the people involved.

Though he is a proponent of self-help, Bloom disagrees quietly about literature’s supposed affirmation of the human spirit—the very crux of Stephen’s wild-eyed ambition to become an artist in exile. Bloom is not an artist in the traditional sense, nor is he a heavy reader of fiction, but he is aware and respectful of the literary masters who had reached canonical status by the end of the nineteenth century, especially Shakespeare. One way he has engaged with the Bard is through a quotation-of-the-day calendar, which he either owns or has seen somewhere (likely even in an advertisement). In “Sirens” he
thinks, “Too poetical that about the sad. Music did that. Music hath charms. Shakespeare
said. Quotations every day in the year. To be or not to be. Wisdom while you wait” (U
11.904-6). His further efforts to apply Shakespeare’s verse “for the solution of difficult
problems in imaginary or real life” wind up unsuccessful: “In spite of careful and
repeated reading of certain classical passages, aided by a glossary, he had derived
imperfect conviction from the text, the answers not bearing in all points” (U 17.386-7,
389-91). When his largely abridged understanding of Shakespeare proves disappointing
in terms of contextual applicability, Bloom’s skepticism of literature’s central role in
personal development is sealed. It may be a mistaken conclusion for him, based on shaky
logical grounds, but it nonetheless characterizes how Bloom envisions literature
reverently, not personally. Bloom’s failure to “apply” literature may also accent his
respect for those, like Stephen, who apparently can. In a strange way, both characters’
beliefs are made to look somewhat ridiculous, as if to put the moral authority for the
disagreement on the shoulders of the one who diverts from, rather than the one who
upholds, that opinion. In any case the question serves to immediately characterize Bloom
and Stephen on the basis of their upheld beliefs, and then chide them for holding such
beliefs in the first place. As amusing as they appear in the clinical language of “Ithaca,”
these divergent views are held dearly. Bloom’s attention to self-improvement is local and
at large, of the mind and the body. Stephen’s is more personal, artistic, and myopic, with
no interest in cultivating civic advancement. Marguerite Harkness puts it succinctly when
she says, “However much Bloom wants the perfect, he accepts less. Stephen has
difficulty making that adjustment” (191).
In this context, Stephen actually appears very limited with the strong emphasis he places on literature’s humanistic affirmation. This, again, is what he decided to dedicate his young life to, and it does not appear in *Ulysses* that he has reaped the full benefits of his course. Next to Bloom’s dynamic interests across diverse outlets, Stephen’s devotion to art in literature seems rather stodgy, old-fashioned, and distinctly nineteenth-century. When it is stripped to its roots, as the answering voice in “Ithaca” so effectively does, Stephen’s project resembles the humanistic sentiment of so many creaky Victorian sages—Arnold, Carlyle, Ruskin—who argued vehemently for the life of the mind, urging everyone who could to pursue Culture as a divinely-detached, higher form of aesthetic experience. Only the best could be considered worthy of the grave responsibility that literature was supposed to entail: an affirmation of the human spirit, available in truth to only those with the genius to understand what that affirmation meant. Stephen was called, but his answer has not been heard by any other than himself. The route towards literary self-cultivation, in the mind of this already introspective young man, leads to loneliness and further withdrawal into the interior realms of memory, philosophy, and aesthetics. Even in *A Portrait*, looking back on his semi-autobiographical self, Joyce was not entirely convinced that the Dedalus workshop could produce real flight. In *Ulysses*, he has passed the wings to a new kind of learner who allows himself to be taught by society, not having to retreat from society in order to teach.

The exploration of self-culture in “Ithaca” does not stop there. We are reminded throughout the episode of other kinds of Bloomian self-culture that are physical in nature. Most strikingly, the famous turn-of-the-century bodybuilder Eugen Sandow’s *Strength
and How to Obtain It appears upside-down on the bookshelf, and in one of Bloom’s drawers is a sheet of measurements to chart his progress in muscle size corresponding with the book’s exercises. In nearly every way, Bloom is looking to improve, capitalize, learn, and grow. His father’s adoptive choice of surname is here quite appropriate to the growth and development aspirations he possesses. The process is also brought into the realm of fantasy with his ambitions for the dream house and estate, Flowerville, where he can enjoy natural beauty away from the glum city and realize the agrarian ideals of self-reliance and cultivation of the soil as well as the self. As Vike Martina Plock points out, this reverie, following on the heels of Bloom’s reflections on Sandow, actually matches up quite closely with the principles of physical culture—especially that of latent potential. “Like the mystic figure of the glorious strongman, Bloom of Flowerville is the product of self-improvement stretched to the utmost,” she says. “And whereas Bloom’s transformation obviously remains an idealizing fantasy, it is significant to remember that Sandow’s physical culture empire firmly relied on advertising fantasies of perfection and on promoting psychological determination as a requirement for physical empowerment” (130). We cannot easily distinguish with Bloom the influences of high literature, low literature, advertisements or weightlifting books. All comes together. Whatever source material provides the inspiration, Bloom is looking inward to make good, or as muscle-builders say, make gains.

Ulysses in general, and “Ithaca” in particular, then, provide the framework for locating Bloom in the role of a new modernist autodidact—one who borrows from classic education, culture at large, and his own innovations to become a student (not entirely
ironically) at the University of Life. By his methods and motivations he is opposed to Stephen, whose literary aspirations remain unrealized in *Ulysses*. Joyce has his doubts about the efficacy of catechetical education, whether in church, school, or in the public, but he recognizes its importance to all of these systems and chides the readers who seek absolute knowledge in the pages of “Ithaca.” What is there behind the screen of linguistic authority, instead, is two characters whose interests in self-improvement—in temperament roughly “artistic” and “scientific”—inculcate them in the narrative parody performed. But they are not exactly obliterated by this technique, as distancing as it may be. Bloom rather emerges from Joyce’s chiding to take his role as the definitive autodidact for the new century, replacing Stephen and Little Chandler’s literary devotions with a diverse range of interests that fit his natural curiosity and the stimulation of urban life—especially as an ad-man. Bloom’s version of self-culture, “updated” as it is from Joyce’s previous examples, endures because Bloom is a memorable, sympathetic character. The connection between a generous personality and a generous mind outlast the gloomy selfishness of Stephen and the questionable inspiration of Chandler. Bloom is full of faults, but genuinely interested in life around him. Perhaps Joyce, going through similar stages from Stephen to Chandler to Bloom in his own artistic life, could recognize and respect that mentality.

4. Conclusion: Raw Meat and Cooked Flesh
Woolf saw Joyce via *Ulysses* as an amateur posing as a serious literary innovator, who masked poorly written work with the pretense of all-knowingness. In many ways, Joyce was prepared for such a reaction from the established literary elite. To Harriet Shaw Weaver, November 1921, he wrote, “I hear also that there is a good deal of latent hostility towards the book among men of letters in England and Ireland […] but, judging by the type of their mind so far as I know it, their opinion will change several times before definitely settling down” (*Letters* 176-77). The “latent hostility” he mentions is very close to the initial reaction of Woolf in her diary, and he is correct about her opinion changing several times (though never completely eradicating her initial distaste for the book). Once again, the terms of Woolf’s disapproval—“the book of a self taught working man”—actually, unintentionally, point us in a fruitful direction of study. For *A Portrait*, “A Little Cloud,” and *Ulysses*, are works of self-taught men as characters. From these three examples we can trace a constellation of disparate approaches to self-cultivation, from the patently artistic to the worldly, as well as the complications inherent to those approaches.

A great reader himself, raised like Stephen on a rigorous schema of knowledge-building, Joyce knew what kind of education, passion, and intense self-confidence went into a project of *bildung*. For the artistic side, Stephen and Little Chandler both attempt to improve themselves through literature in order to escape, figuratively and literally, the narrow confines of Ireland. Stephen’s ostensible success in *A Portrait*, though problematic in a number of ways, is due in large part to *bildungsroman* conventions that Joyce was willing to re-conceive but not entirely destroy. After all, there is much to be
admired in Stephen’s passion even if it does not take him where he wants to go. Little Chandler’s failure as an artist touches a darker side of Irish paralysis, in which the motivations for personal advancement are primarily selfish and escapist in a negative sense (whereas one reads in Stephen’s selfishness a vestige of artistic focus), and highlight the class issues at play that prevent Chandler from leaving when Stephen is able to. Finally, with *Ulysses*, and all of its kaleidoscopic narrative fanfare, Joyce puts the cracked looking-glass up to Ireland once again and gives us a character who is not stuck in fundamental ways, who does not let snobbery prevent him from learning something new, and who possesses in earnest the desire, if not necessarily the ability, to turn self-culture into social-culture. Unlike Stephen and Chandler, he has compassion to coincide with passion. It is a move away from the kind of snobbery that evinces itself in Stephen’s conversations with others, and indeed in Stephen’s own thoughts.

Joyce, a student of the world as much as a student of literature, realized that self-culture did not have to be contained in books, and was rather more potent when exercised with compassion. As Timothy Brennan says in “Joyce and the Common People,” “Joyce was a habitual joiner of opposites—in this case, of trends within his own sensibility. As a result, he made Bloom’s compassion into a kind of aesthetic indicator—a means of clarifying for us *Ulysses’s* aesthetics” (148). That aesthetic indication grounds the book in the travails of Bloom, Everyman and Noman, who lacks Stephen’s formal education but more than makes up for it with individual innovation. Around Bloom the episodes of this odyssey take shape in strange but wonderfully compelling ways. As Bloom experiences highs and lows throughout his day’s journey, the reader travels with him and
experiences defamiliarization that becomes more familiar with each episode. It is a question of constant re-orientation, which Bloom’s mental state and approach to self-understanding compel him to do. It is Joyce’s achievement to present a work that requires so much of its readers as to make them students of the text as Bloom is of Dublin. As Leo Bersani says, “Ulysses is often hard to read, but, more than any other work of literature, it is also a guidebook to how it should be read” (211). Joyce’s autodidactic everyman is untethered to the culturally-restrictive, even snobbish, standards of self-education that Stephen embodies. Ulysses itself is in the style of a new age ushered in by Leopold Blooms more than Stephen Dedaluses, and reflects the multifarious influences that would provide the raw material for self-taught students of the modern world: as much advertisements, popular songs, and smut as Shakespeare, philosophy and theology. Joyce created a modern character who was as fascinated with the popular as he was, and whose story in form and content legitimated his kind of inclusionary, practical self-cultural odyssey.
In *Three Guineas* (1938), she has this to say about university education: “There can be no doubt in the first place of its supreme value. The witness of biography—that witness which anyone who can read English can consult on the shelves of any public library—is unanimous upon this point; the value of education is among the greatest of all human values” (31).

Woolf says, “[…] L. put into my hands a very intelligent review of Ulysses, in the American Nation; which, for the first time, analyses the meaning; & certainly makes it very much more impressive than I judged. Still I think there is virtue & some lasting truth in first impressions; so I don’t cancell [sic] mine” (*Diary* 200).


Stanislaus’ view is as much about his misgivings towards the Church as James’: “while the business of saying adieu to the Catholic Church was still continuing, he had transferred his allegiance with diminished intransigence from the Word of God to the written word, about which at least we can know something, and further that in this new religion the paramount virtue was literary sincerity” (204). Ellmann puts it more frankly, as usual: “His period of piety done with, he read a great many books of all kinds at high speed” (53).

Gottfried explains Joyce’s unsurprising skepticism towards the *Catholic Encyclopedia* project: “Foremost, bearing the imprimatur of the Roman Church hierarchy, the *Encyclopedia* is certified to be dogma. Begun in 1905 and published serially between 1907 and 1914, its years of compilation and publication span Joyce’s period of catechism and education and provide the doctrines he would have heard and resisted. The *Encyclopedia*’s prefatory claim to present the work ‘of the foremost Catholic scholars in every part of the world,’ v, speaks to the church’s claim to universality that Joyce found so stifling; its claim to provide ‘proper answers to the questions’ not available hitherto in English speaks to Joyce’s own stubborn use of English as his contrarian stance. Most particularly, the boast that ‘in all things the object of the *Encyclopedia* is to give the whole truth without prejudice, national, political or factional,’ vi, is precisely the pride of asserting ultimate power and knowledge that Joyce would neither believe nor accept and which he would challenge at each point with his studied misbelief” (119n2).

We are reminded of the prominence of the London press in Ireland just one story before when Mr. Dolan reads *Reynold’s Newspaper*, the English gossip and society rag (54).

Hardly the best of his oeuvre, “On the Death of a Young lady, Cousin of the Author, and Very dear to Him” from 1807’s *Hours of Idleness* is neither memorable nor characteristic of the author’s strong voice in verse. Terence Brown, in his notes to the Penguin edition of *Dubliners*, says, “The poem is Byron at his most affectingly sentimental and scarcely represents him as the romantic he was. Rather it is a piece of emotional trifling, in a wearisomely conventional mode” (246-7).

Concerning Bloom, Leo Bersani says, “Has any fictional character ever been so completely known? Warm-hearted, commonsensical, and appealingly unfanatic in politics and religion; a loving son, father, and even husband, full of enterprising (if unrealized and impractical) commercial schemes; slightly but not unappealingly pretentious intellectually; horny and a bit guilty sexually; garrulous but a stylistic outsider in a city of besotted skilled rhetoricians; perhaps a bit tight by Dublin pub standards (where the one unpardonable sin is failing to pay one’s round); something of a loner (but by no means a rebel or an outcast) with his daydreams of travel in exotic Eastern lands—Bloom is eminently appealing and eminently ordinary. In one of the exchanges which constitute the impersonal catechism of ‘Ithaca,’ Bloom is called
‘Everyman or Noman.’ Perhaps. In any case he is a sweet man, and if Joyce has inspired a kind of attachment and anecdotal curiosity (about him, about the streets of Dublin) […] it is largely due to his success in creating Bloom” (204).


10 Contents of *Bell’s Standard Elocutionist* include Principles of Elocution (The Breath, The Organs of Articulation, Pronunciation, The Voice, Gesture (including “attitude, motion, grace, expressiveness’’)) and a lengthy selection of canonical lyric and general interest prose selections for pupils at various stages of development (Bell ix-x).

11 Ledden gives us a helpful summary of Bloom’s education: “Bloom attended Mrs. Ellis’ school, probably from 1872 to 1879 or 1880. That he did not attend a National School indicates the Virag/Blooms’ ambitions for their only son. Bloom then attended the High School for one or two years […]. Any schooling at the intermediate level was exceptional, but to attend the High School was even more so. The High School was an Erasmus Smith endowed school with a strongly Protestant orientation (the Anglican Archbishop of Dublin and several other Anglican clergy were on the Board of Governors of the endowment), and at least in 1904 it maintained an impressive faculty of former scholarship students at Oxford, Cambridge, and Trinity College. It was one of the natural stepping stones to Trinity College and careers in the Civil Service, Foreign Service, and so forth. Vance’s ‘cracking curriculum’ was likely a challenging one.” (334). At the High School, Bloom would have been schoolmates, perhaps classmates, with a young W. B. Yeats.
Chapter 5: Going to the Dogs:
Self-Culture’s Culminating Reversal in George Orwell

“There was only one way Orwell could confront and overcome his own conviction that he was doomed to be a worthless failure. That was by failing.”

- Dan Jacobson (50)

“It is a feeling of relief, almost of pleasure, at knowing yourself at last genuinely down and out. You have talked so often of going to the dogs—and well, here are the dogs, and you have reached them, and you can stand it. It takes off a lot of anxiety.”

- George Orwell (Down and Out 20-21)

For George Orwell, learning and suffering always went together. An iconoclastic thinker, he was never quite at home in any kind of traditional educational establishment, and sought learning experiences that tested his will as much as his intellectual abilities. Indeed, training to be a writer through harrowing poverty came to be Orwell’s defining self-cultural moment. Beginning in the 1930s, his writing began to focus on the political aspects of class division and how they could be rectified by Socialism properly employed. He also addressed the growing lower middle class population in ways
overlooked by other modern writers: as crucial agents in the political cause, to be mobilized with reason rather than placated with conventional self-betterment. In this chapter, I trace Orwell’s self-education of suffering as it came to be manifested in his works, arguing that his effectiveness as a political writer hinges on his real-world willingness to follow self-culture’s dictum to struggle for learning in a deeply literal way. Paradoxically for self-improvement’s aim of personal advancement, Orwell learned by giving up his class status and material comfort to live among the poor as a poor man himself. By viewing Orwell’s works as de-coupling the twin promises of self-culture (knowledge and social advancement), his larger interest in the kind of personal and collective progress through learning that requires a step down the social status ladder really comes to light. Rather than obliterate the self-cultural tendency entirely, Orwell enacts its paradigm in reverse.

First in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, then in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell sought to capture the frightful condition of the lowest rungs of the social ladder in France and in England. His fictional works of the 1930s, including *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *Coming Up for Air*, often focused on dreamers stuck in reality and striving for cultural gain or artistic success: modernism’s tragic autodidacts. Whereas Forster and Woolf, politically supportive of efforts to extend education, nevertheless looked towards self-culture with class-tinged suspicion in their works, Orwell sought to eliminate his class associations entirely in order to live in and write about the depths of the abyss.¹ Orwell’s interest in the working classes went beyond a desire to document for the sake of documentation, or for culling sympathy for charitable efforts to help the needy. It
certainly went beyond “slumming,” the descent into working-class culture and conditions by classes above for temporary amusement, in theory and in practice.\textsuperscript{2} Orwell lived among those he wrote about, and his own conditions of poverty in Paris and London were real.

Having examined a range of earlier modernist approaches to self-culture, I believe there is much to gain by considering Orwell’s interest in living and writing about the conditions of the poor as the culmination of self-culture’s promise of improvement and its compulsion towards sacrifice on the part of the reader-participant. He may not have thought of his purpose in this way, but Orwell was providing a way for his middle-class readers, well-meaning and interested in improvement of all kinds, to consider the deeper implications of social stratification and the sacrifice inherent in attempting to change things. These readers, by and large, were of the same liberal temperament of Bennett’s readers at the turn of the century, and the kinds of well-meaning supporters of Forster and Woolf’s lecture series, just some years before. Orwell hardly delivers straightforward and uplifting success stories, however. While sharing similar kinds of anecdotes of suffering in the style of Samuel Smiles, Orwell denies the conclusion that hard work alone necessarily reaps cultural, social, and financial rewards. Instead, he makes his stories of the destitute poor and working classes of France and Britain, many nameless and faceless, part of a larger case study concerning the raw power of poverty in shaping living conditions. He, of course, is the most direct example. Given the circumstances of his writing, stories of redemption do not come to completion. On the part of his poor subjects, there is suffering, but no conventional success. But if one considers Orwell’s
life and works, these forays into more familiar hearts of darkness did serve an educational—even self-cultural—purpose, both for Orwell and for his readers. He gained more valuable experience in observing the machinations of social relations that would be the heart of all of his writing.\(^3\) He felt hunger and humiliation. He began to temper the “plain style” that would become a hallmark of his reportage, essays, broadcasts and most well-regarded novels. He became a Socialist. His readers were with him throughout these written transcriptions of suffering and learning. It is the germ of improvement (in terms of germination but also in terms of disease) that is present in his texts, and that indicates how much the virtue of self-sacrifice existed for him as self-culture by another name.

1. Tough Were the Joys: Hard Knocks in School and Imperial Service

Approaching Orwell’s view of learning and suffering, it is advantageous to peer into his biography, especially autobiography, to see how his writing was shaped by (and, indeed, helped to retroactively shape) his real-world experiences. Given that so much of his nonfictional work was autobiographical, or at least featured the figure of Orwell in it, his life and work blend together in ways integral to this study of his self-culture. To begin with, his formal education was disastrous. In “Such, Such Were the Joys,” Orwell details his miserable experience at an ambitious preparatory school in the Edwardian era. When he was very young, the Blair family struck a deal with St. Cyprian’s to place young Eric in an academic program aimed at an Eton scholarship, without which they could not afford the privilege. Smart, but not particularly keen on conventional academic study,
Eric nonetheless crammed hard during the school year and over holidays. Like a young Joyce, Eric occupied much of his time with studying. Childhood friend Jacintha Buddicom says, “often when the rest of us wanted to go on playing, he had to go back home to ‘swot’” (3). Pressured with guilt, he was made to believe that he would not have a “decent future” without winning a scholarship to a good public school; in plain speech, “Either I won my scholarship, or I must leave school at fourteen and become, in [the headmaster’s] favourite phrase ‘a little office boy at forty pounds a year’” (Essays 1301).

Threatened by this bleak prognostication of a clerking future, more for his family’s sake than for his own, Eric continued to work—harder than most others of a higher social standing at St. Cyprian’s. He saw later just how much class difference played a role in each boy’s treatment. Much more than the sons of the rich, he says, “It was the poor but ‘clever’ boys who suffered. Our brains were a gold-mine in which he had sunk money, and the dividends must be squeezed out of us” (Essays 1300). Mr. Wilkes, known as “Sambo,” headmaster and leader of the scholarship group at St. Cyprian’s, made sure his pupils were prepared for their examinations in the most efficient and educationally-suspect ways. Orwell says, “Over a period of two or three years the scholarship boys were crammed with learning as cynically as a goose is crammed for Christmas. [...] Your job was to learn exactly those things that would give an examiner the impression that you knew more than you did know, and as far as possible to avoid burdening your brain with anything else” (Essays 1297). Like H. G. Wells before him, Orwell came to abhor the process of cramming for exams that passed as instruction, and that was overtaking the entire twentieth-century educational system. Worse still was the headmaster’s constant
vigilance, forcing young Eric into discomfort for the sake of swotting even harder. Wilkes was always “goading, threatening, exhorting, sometimes joking, very occasionally praising, but always prodding, prodding away at one’s mind to keep it up to the right pitch of concentration, as one might keep a sleepy person awake by sticking pins into him” (Essays 1299). Sometimes this meant physical punishment with the rod—a very literal kind of prodding, to match the word’s bestial connotation, and to serve the same bestial purpose. The suffering continued with each targeted lesson.

Through dint of hard work under duress, Eric won his scholarship. Then, left more to his own devices, he floated through his public school days without trying too hard. But he did not escape a certain degree of social difficulty at Eton. He suffered discrimination from other boys for his perceived braininess and lack of family funds. It was irony not lost on Eric that what got him into Eton was despised at Eton. While never winning much academic praise besides his scholarship, he was a King’s Scholar nonetheless, one of about seventy out of a thousand, and distinguished from the “Oppidans,” or full fee-paying students. King’s Scholars lived in the College as opposed to other houses around campus, and wore robes over their suits to earn the nickname “Tugs” (from “toga”) (Rees 142). Adelphi editor and Eton alumnus Richard Rees recalls how the term, though rarely mean-spirited in school-days, still elicited a response from Orwell much later: “One day in 1948, when I had known him for eighteen years, I incautiously used the word ‘Tug’ and although he was too polite to say anything he winced as if I had trodden on his tenderest corn” (142). He goes on to comment, from his own experience, “That a famous middle-aged writer should have retained such a deep
trace of boyhood sensitiveness and suffering seems remarkable” (142). His experience was far from the cartoonish virtue of Boy’s Own magazine or popular public school novels of the past century. In fact, part of his inspiration for changing his name to George Orwell resided in a particularly resonant distaste for his given name: “He disliked the name Eric because it reminded him of Eric or Little by Little, the Victorian boys’-school story of which he took a particularly dim view” (Buddicom 5-6).

Though he passed, formal education still failed Orwell. His lessons at St. Cyprian’s were miserable and at Eton they were worthless. Orwell did not accept the stolid establishment values that were still taught as readily as Greek and Latin in the early twentieth century public school system. After his schooldays, Orwell lived through his final developmental mismatch in Burma. Commentators have read Orwell’s foray into Indian Civil Service as both an escape from and culmination of his experience at public schools. The plain fact is that Orwell once again bowed to the wishes of his family—his father was “Indian Civil” and took pride in the post—this time, and for the last time. Partly because of his failure to excel academically, he was shepherded off to Burma to complete his apprenticeship in unwanted occupations built on unaccepted values. In “Shooting an Elephant,” his most famous piece of anti-imperialism, he says, “Theoretically – and secretly, of course – I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear” (Essays 43). Nevertheless, Orwell does make pretty clear that his responsibilities as a police officer in a wayward outpost were hateful and beyond absurd. The compulsion to kill a mostly docile beast to please the gathered crowd of natives
attests to the ridiculous reality of imperialism’s supposedly magisterial purpose, reducing the white officer’s duty to this: “my whole life, every white man’s life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at” (Essays 47).

From his writings about Burma, including his first novel Burmese Days (1934), the pettiness of the venture is as much on display as its offenses against fundamental individualism. In the book, John Flory’s failure to find love or purpose in the depressingly shallow country-club outpost reaches its dismal culmination in one of Orwell’s darkest passages: Flory “going to the dogs,” literally and figuratively, by shooting his canine and killing himself.

She crouched down and whined for forgiveness. It hurt him to hear it.

‘Come on, old girl! Dear old Flo! Master wouldn’t hurt you. Come here!’

She crawled very slowly towards his feet, flat on her belly, whining, her head down as though afraid to look at him. When she was a yard away he fired, blowing her skull to fragments. (Burmese 280-81)

The helplessness of the creature at the hands of its homicidal master suggests a particularly militant critique of the noblesse oblige philosophy guiding Britain’s imperialism, while also underscoring the lies inherent in it (“Master wouldn’t hurt you”). More directly, though, is the personal moment of purposelessness that leads to irrational action. From elephants to dogs, the killing of innocent animals marks the topsy-turvy logic of outpost life—symptomatic of the larger flaws in ethical philosophy struggling to support imperialism’s crazy house of cards. Not for the first or last time in Orwell, animals (especially dogs) show mankind’s animalistic actions in sharp relief.⁵
When he had completed his education in the grim reality of imperial administration abroad, retiring while on leave in 1927, Orwell began his most influential period of development by once again going to the dogs. This time, he would seek out his own failure instead of having it thrust upon him. Having experienced both the privilege and the pain of a typical upper middle class English upbringing, bullied at school and bullying colonial subjects, Orwell was to abandon it all for the opportunity to live submerged beneath all class status. In what has become critical consensus in Orwell studies, this experience changed him as both a writer and a political thinker. In the words of Jeffrey Meyers, “it was Orwell’s experience among the poor and outcast in Paris and London that made him aware of the need for that radical change which involves not only a more equitable distribution of wealth, but also a sincere concern for the welfare of impoverished people” (Reader’s 79). His reportage from *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier* effectively solidified his Socialist politics, however critical he would become of Socialists themselves. His growing concern for rectifying social injustice also paved the way for his fiction of the 1930s. In it, he deals explicitly with yet another group of impoverished but overlooked people, the lower middle class. All of this was born through a particular kind of self-culture exercised through suffering and self-reliance on the streets.

2. Fall to Rise: Poverty, Documentation, and Self-Culture
Raymond Williams claims that above all the other reasons for pursuing a life of poverty in Paris and London—including what we would now call liberal guilt, victim-identification, and a rejection of mainstream ideas of “success”—Orwell first and foremost sought to be a writer, “that is to say, to live ‘outside’ society and to ‘write’” (32). I think this is mostly true, but the issue of whether Orwell is outside society at this point bears more analysis. By common associations with his class and upbringing, certainly, he is off the track of polite society in his *Down and Out* days. But in another sense he seeks to enter a different kind of society and is very much an insider to its particular culture. Perhaps more in *Wigan Pier*, which I will soon discuss, Orwell’s narrative positions him as a participant-observer, likening him as many critics have to a modernist anthropologist. Unlike Bronislaw Malinowski, who pioneered ethnographic techniques placing him among the natives while retaining an objective, scientific writing style, Orwell portrays “the prejudices of his fieldworker-persona” with an eye to undercutting the appearance of anthropological authority cultivated by other middle class observers (Rae 63). He is an insider because he suffers along with those he observes. The descriptions of the unfortunate workers at the bottom of the hierarchy at Hotel X reaffirm Orwell’s own unenviable position as a *plongeur* in Paris, barely scraping by on “bread and marg.”

The issue of identification becomes even more significant when the narrative moves home to London. In recording domestic living conditions anthropologically, Orwell belongs to the home-grown documentary movement most popularly recognized in the films of John Grierson and the reports of Mass Observation and the BBC. Jed Esty
has theorized that the thirties documentary movement in England was in response to the contracting of empire, where “the shrinking island” itself became the new object of study as much by necessity as by choice. He says, “The relativization of England as one culture among many in the face of imperial contraction seems to have entailed a relativization of literature as one aspect of culture; together these discursive events constitute the anthropological turn of late modernism in particular and English culture in general after 1930” (8). To that end, the poor of England became an ideal subject in an increasingly insecure postcolonial, multicultural state. Long familiar with the appalling living of many of its colonial wards, Britain could no longer ignore the plight of their own people as its imperial possessions vanished. The domestic documentary movement exploded with new forms of media, such as radio and film, to capitalize on a national interest and concern.

To British middle-class readers, who would become Orwell’s primary political target in the thirties and forties, the second half of Down and Out lifts the sad veil of social inequality once again. Clearly, the poverty Orwell describes was real. The way he writes about it leaves no mistake, neither moralizing nor dramatizing for rhetorical effect. Unlike, say, Dickens’s saintly Stephen Blackpool, whose dire poverty magnifies his unselfish goodness, the poor are just poor and are neither better nor worse morally because of it. What needs to change are the material conditions and economic systems that continue to cultivate poverty, as well as the enduring misconception of poverty as the fitting condition for bad, lazy people. Orwell goes so far to combat this misconception that he famously equates begging with any other profession in terms of time and effort expended. “Beggars do not work, it is said; but, then, what is work?” he says. “A beggar
works by standing out of doors in all weathers and getting varicose veins, chronic bronchitis, etc. It is a trade like any other; quite useless, of course—but, then, many reputable trades are quite useless” (*Down and Out* 173). Certainly, this is a jab at the growing number of office workers who failed to make or do as the working classes did (with their muscles), and were thereby useless in the most technical sense. More bitterly it targets the bankers, traders, and speculators of “reputable trades” who convert the honest efforts of the lowest orders into personal gains through myriad backroom redistributions of capital. It is also, more poignantly, a conflation of both ends of the labor spectrum. Both the middle-class office worker and the beggar are united by their essential uselessness. Only one, through the merciless perspective of society, is respectable.

What Orwell was trying to do with this passage and the overall project was to cast his own poverty and that of those around him in a radically clear light that sought to make the lived concept of being poor, through his own experience, directly relatable to his target middle class audience. Gayle Salamon, recently calling for a theory of poverty in literature, says that “Literature about poverty repeatedly makes this claim: all there is to do is to describe precisely and well, without ideology, what one sees, a stripping away on behalf of the impoverished” (171). The belief in “unornamented description to offer the empirical truth of poverty” is apparent throughout the history of literature on poverty (Salamon 171-2). This is not enough for Salamon, who argues that poverty is in fact more deeply systematic than mere material description could allow (176), but for Orwell this was exactly what was needed to educate his audience to the real difficulties of the
working poor. It was also so much a part of his writing that he would say in “Why I Write” (1946), self-effacingly but seriously, “So long as I remain alive and well I shall continue to feel strongly about prose style, to love the surface of the earth, and to take a pleasure in solid objects and scraps of useless information” (Essays 1084). In Down and Out, scraps (useless or not) are the primary form of sustenance, both literally and figuratively in terms of narrative.

Orwell could take hunger as a kind of penance, purifying in its simplicity. But he could not take the embarrassment of discovery. If anyone found that he came from the middle class, it would threaten to compromise his integrity completely. At one point, he expresses just this concern: “Dressed as I was, I was half afraid that the police might arrest me as a vagabond, and I dared not speak to anyone, imagining that they must notice a disparity between my accent and my clothes” (Down and Out 129). While he does not elaborate more on this passage, the implication is that a disparity between accent and clothes marks something amiss, socially—even sexually, in Orwell’s mind. One encounter where he risks being discovered is at a shelter with another man, also an old Etonian, who picks up on his accent as someone who does not belong with the poor. Orwell deflects the man’s assumptions, and records his own homophobic ones: “Perhaps he frequented common lodging houses in search of the ‘nancy boys’” (Down and Out 159). In the anxious heart of Orwell’s autobiographical ethnography is the accusation of slumming, equally damaging from below as above. Jacobson says, “The slummer, we feel, is one who makes daytrips into the lower depths, and then hastens back, positively refreshed by what he has seen, into the security and comfort of the middle classes” (48).
The slummer cannot accurately depict poverty because he or she is a tourist, looking for a show or distraction before returning to comfort. It was essential for Orwell to place himself personally and rhetorically outside of this kind of poverty-recording. On the one hand, one doubts Orwell would be able to cultivate friendships with people like Charlie, Boris, Paddy and Bozo if they knew (or cared) that he was merely on holiday from being middle class. Without those friendships, Orwell’s knowledge about working class and tramping communities would be much less robust. On the other hand, Orwell understood that his targeted middle class readers could not take his experiences seriously if they were deemed to be an extended occasion of slumming. Orwell is the first and final filter of his own experience, and therefore can control his rhetorical presentation, but all evidence points to as “real” an experience of poverty as possible for a man in Orwell’s situation. In form and content, the experiment is similar to the Stoic hunger games of Seneca: *non lusus, sed experimentum* (“not a game but a test”) (Foucault 60). Echoing the epigraph of Orwell above, Foucault describes the point of the hunger games in his *History of Sexuality*: “One does not deprive oneself for a moment in order to sharpen one’s taste for future refinements but to convince oneself that the worst misfortune will not deprive one of the things one absolutely needs, and that one will always be able to tolerate what one is capable of enduring at times” (60).

In a related essay, “The Spike” (1931), Orwell details a figure who functions as his foil in the community of tramps. The foil shows the shallow and inauthentic approach to poverty that Orwell was trying to avoid. This man, a “rather superior tramp,” kept away from the others, affected an air more of a “free man” than a “casual,” and upheld
his passion for the literary by always keeping a Scott novel handy (Essays 13). The superior tramp maintained his distance from the rest at the shelter by calling them, and tramps in general, scum. Orwell says, “It was interesting to see how subtly he disassociated himself from his fellow tramps. He had been on the road six months, but in the sight of God, he seemed to imply, he was not a tramp. His body might be in the spike, but his spirit soared far away, in the pure aether of the middle classes” (Essays 14). One is reminded of a real-world Leonard Bast, substituting the clerk’s desk for the tramp’s pavement, still maintaining a belief that through a spirit of superiority (encouraged by aesthetic experience) he could avoid the abyss that in all other ways, and to all other observers, he has already fallen into. It is interesting to see the example of the superior tramp as a foil to Orwell in terms of characteristic responses to poverty. With as much care as Orwell places on remaining anonymous, imbedded with and observant of his hard-scrabble companions, the superior tramp places his concern on standing out, disconnected and ignorant of the spike’s other occupants. His aloofness is even more remarkable when viewed through Orwell’s conscientious attention to others and to the details of the situation. To be sure, this particular tramp warrants Orwell’s suspicion not because he is a poor, like the others, but that he does not recognize his own poverty and connection to the rest of the group. To make a compact analogy, the superior tramp is the nineteenth century chronicler of poverty, distant and cold. Orwell is the twentieth century documentarian, participating and personally involved. The difference is that Orwell knowingly takes poverty as his perspective, while the superior tramp is impoverished in his perspective without knowing it.7
Down and Out is an early piece, but it plays a significant role in Orwell’s development as a writer and foreshadows even more didactic work. Even before he has an expressly political reason for doing so, Orwell’s experience of living among and chronicling the lives of the poor serves a dual educational, and, I would suggest, self-cultural purpose. The first purpose is that Orwell learns to connect to and write about an unknown populace. He does so through self-directed sacrifice, an essential element to self-culture of all kinds. Although Bennett and others were speaking of sacrificing free time to pursue edifying cultural experiences, while dearly holding onto middle class responsibilities and respectability, Orwell sacrifices much more essential elements of his life in order to live in poverty—money, food, shelter, security, and, as much as is possible, his class status. It is true that this may not be, at first, an intentional sacrifice. But once Orwell goes to the dogs, he uses his impoverished condition to soak in as much as he can about how the other half really lives. The second purpose is that readers learn what it is like to be poor by a man who became poor. Raymond Williams says that a good source of Orwell’s power as a writer was in his willingness and ability to be socially mobile and assume a variety of serious roles, putting him in contact with all kinds of people. (88). “When he is in a situation, he is so dissolved into it that he is exceptionally convincing,” Williams says, “and his kind of writing makes it easy for the reader to believe that this is also happening to himself” (88). When the reader believes this, the issue’s exposure is made to be exactly what Orwell would want: direct, relevant, and painfully acute.
The directness and relevance of Orwell’s ethnographies of the poor became even more important once he began writing for a specific political purpose, to a specific liberal audience. The structure and content of *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) build recognizably from Orwell’s down and out days, but with several key differences in the scope of the project. First, rather than falling into it, Orwell was on paid assignment from Victor Gollancz of the Left Book Club to expose the living condition of mining communities of the North. He was paid well, earning £500 for the investigation (Hamilton 55). Second, Orwell did not spend nearly as much time among the working class poor as he did in Paris and London. He was in Wigan and surrounding areas slightly less than two months in 1935 (Hamilton 55). To counter those who might think that he undertook this objective because he truly enjoyed slumming, his speed of work is significant: “there was clearly no pretence about what he was there for, and he rightly saw that the best approach was to be as brisk and business-like as possible” (Hamilton 56). Also, with the exception of his trip into the mines, he did not largely participate in the day-to-day struggles of the workers. His task was more to record lives than to live, though participatory accounts of his own hardship still appear. Third, this book is more strongly didactic and political than *Down and Out*. He says in “Why I Write” that his work following his political conversion “has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism, as I understand it” (*Essays* 1083-84). His reasoning is that “It seems to me nonsense, in a period like our own, to think that one can avoid writing of such subjects” (*Essays* 1084). *The Road to Wigan Pier* is expressly *for* democratic Socialism, and it is carried by Orwell’s observations and analysis of the current state of Socialism in Britain.
The excursion was really a litmus test of his own political thoughts, which emerged more powerfully-formed from the process. “Feeling already that he knew more about real poverty than most so-called Socialists would ever know,” Ian Hamilton says, “he would find out from his northern excursion just how much of a Socialist he was” (55). He came out as secure in his political identity as ever before.

To be sure, Orwell’s own experiences in Wigan inform a great deal of his documentary narrative and qualify him as a credible participant-observer. His presentation of his own observations share a similar astonishment concerning the state of things as well as a man imbued primarily with common sense. For example, he famously comments on his experience of trudging through the mines with the singular amazement that the excursion to even reach the shale is largely, even primarily, a horizontal rather than vertical journey. “Before I had been down a mine I had vaguely imagined the miner stepping out of the cage and getting to work on a ledge of coal a few yards away,” he says. “I had not realised that before he even gets to his work he may have to creep through passages as long as from London Bridge to Oxford Circus” (Wigan 25). From there he describes the uncomfortable process of traveling in second-person discourse, inviting the reader “You” to imagine his hunched-over pain: “You have not only got to bend double, you have also got to keep your head up all the while so as to see the beams and girders and dodge them when they come. You have, therefore, a constant crick in the neck, but this is nothing to the pain in your knees and thighs. […] You begin to wonder whether you will ever get to the end—still more, how on earth you are going to get back” (Wigan 26-7). The average reader would admire the strength needed to power through
miles of mines, just as he did, and would see his struggling to do so as a mark of Orwell’s
everyman appeal. It was important for Orwell to be understand as a “typical” middle
class observer in this reportage for three reasons: 1) to separate a typical class
background of the reader from the class experiences of those observed, mirroring the
reader’s experience; 2) to show that thoughtful and sympathetic support from an
educated, professional commentator-observer was appropriate; and 3) to separate himself
from fringe Socialists (the “food cranks” and “simple-lifers,” among others\(^9\)) who
threatened to isolate more mainstream middle class supporters with their eccentric ideas
and personalities. Socialism, Orwell argues, is the rational political affiliation for anyone
disgusted by poverty, regardless of what other pet theories they may have. The annoying
part about fringe Socialists was the way in which their alternative viewpoints tended to
overshadow the validity of Socialism in the public eye, or, worse still, stood for
Socialism in popular (mis)understandings of it. For these three reasons, Orwell did not
present himself as living among the poor in Wigan as he did in Paris and London before.
In *Down and Out* he had fallen into poverty and reflected on it. In *Wigan Pier* he was
sent into poverty and reported on it.

Even more consciously and directly, then, Orwell’s prose aims at a target middle
class audience, particularly sympathetic to the cause of improving the condition of the
working classes, from a documentary perspective. As with all of his forays into
ethnography, relating to different cultures was a question of choosing the proper frame of
reference. For example, almost all middle class readers sympathetic to the goals of the
Left were interested in education—access, reform, quality, and so forth. Many readers,
like Orwell himself, were likely proud of or insecure about their own personal educational history. Take this longer passage:

If you offer a working-man something he doesn’t want, he tells you that he doesn’t want it; a middle-class person would accept it to avoid giving offence. And again, take the working-class attitude towards ‘education.’ How different it is from ours, and how immensely sounder! Working-people often have a vague reverence for learning in others, but where ‘education’ touches their own lives they see through it and reject it by a healthy instinct. […] I know now that there is not one working-class boy in a thousand who does not pine for the day when he will leave school. He wants to be doing real work, not wasting his time on ridiculous rubbish like history and geography. To the working class, the notion of staying at school till you are nearly grown-up seems merely contemptible and unmanly. (Wigan 116)

Orwell taps into a sensitive area for middle class readers in such a way that is simultaneously exposing the differences in classes and recognizing their similarities. Yes, he seems to say, the working classes do not place the same level of importance on education. But what makes their perspective on it even “sounder” is that they base their view of worthy expenditure on the kind of effort that brings real value to the community. Is that the kind of education that most of the middle class says it values, but almost universally abhorred as youth? Is there real value in the kind of cramming that Orwell underwent in order to pass his exams to attend Eton? When he says that the working class
boy, anxious to leave school, “wants to be doing real work, not wasting his time on ridiculous rubbish like history and geography,” there is a slight shock to the words, with plenty of irony to them. On a first reading, it seems as if Orwell is taking over the assumed perspective of that working class boy, in a moment almost of free indirect discourse, and using his words, “ridiculous rubbish,” ironically (because the readers know that the academic subjects of history and geography are neither ridiculous nor rubbish). On a second reading, however, the irony may be more self-directed: yes, this is what that boy would say in his words, but perhaps he has a point. The clarity of the working-class view on education as Orwell presents it may be so because it sees through the pretense, prestige, arbitrariness, and dreary unoriginality of typical English education—a subject which it is evident he cared about deeply.

In another one of Orwell’s direct attempts to humanize the working class, he dispels another misconception about how the working classes think or feel. In an often-quoted passage, he describes a kneeling young woman attempting to break up a clogged drain-pipe with a stick. As she struggles to do so, she wears “the most desolate, hopeless expression I have ever seen” (Wigan 18). The moment was epiphanic for Orwell. He says,

It struck me then that we are mistaken when we say that ‘It isn’t the same for them as it would be for us,’ and that people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums. For what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal. She knew well enough what was happening to her—understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it
was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a foul drain-pipe. (*Wigan* 18)

The “we” Orwell uses in the first sentence is just as significant in a similar way as the “you” employed earlier. Orwell presents this highly personal moment of sympathetic connection in a manner that draws out and refutes the kinds of misconceptions about classes that he himself admits to having. As with the previous passage (“How different it is from ours, and how immensely sounder!”), these moments of description attempt connection despite recognized difference. In the first example, that difference is philosophical, concerning the value of formal education. In the second example, that difference is material, concerning living and working conditions. In both cases, Orwell wants us to see how intellectual connection is possible across these differences—how “sound” a healthy distrust for formal education’s value can be, and how the poor can understand (“as well as I did”) the painfulness of their poverty. These passages do great work in simultaneously humanizing the working classes in Wigan (and elsewhere), appealing to the middle class readers, and suggesting that both classes have much to learn from each other.

Recently, Patricia Rae has summarized Orwell’s objectives with *The Road to Wigan Pier*: “he aims to counter misconceptions about the working class with the evidence of participant-observation; to empathize deeply with his subjects; to draw his readers into the experience; to establish his own authority with empathy and self-awareness” (73). Rae is skeptical that Orwell achieves these aims—in fact, she calls the project a “failure” because of the degree to which Orwell remains unconnected to the
working classes he studies (73). I disagree with Rae on this matter, but I also tend to read Orwell’s rhetorical intentions as at least as important as the success or failure of any “real” connectedness to the poor. This is because I want to place his ethnographic writings, particularly *Down and Out* and *Wigan Pier*, in a different tradition of writing than either the political or anthropological categories they are usually sorted into. That tradition is self-culture, in which Orwell among the poor is both learner and teacher. These two works and his essays do not do the same kind of work as, say, Samuel Smiles and Arnold Bennett’s self-help titles, but they refer extensively to the themes and ideas always inherent in self-culture, particularly to the struggle and sacrifice needed to make the effort worthwhile. And they are didactic in similar ways to these popular self-cultural guidebooks, exhorting the reader to pay closer attention to the world outside the office walls, and, in their own ways, to sacrifice now for the benefit of the future. Orwell’s Socialist philosophy reflected the liberal impetus of social improvement through cultural understanding, which began with enlightening well-meaning individuals to the merits of the cause.

Despite the best intentions of its proponents, the Socialist movement in the 1930s was failing to connect the middle classes to the working classes in meaningful ways. Orwell’s ethnographies were one way to redress that failure, and sought to do so through description, personal connection, and the anecdotal power of the participant-observer. The end result was something aspiring to the tenets of self-culture through class erosion rather than class ascension. In most other examples of self-improvement the goal, implicit or explicit, was to ascend in (or at least maintain) social status through the accumulation
of culture, taste, mental efficiency or such-wise. In Orwell’s reconfiguration of self-cultural tropes for political and aesthetic means, the goal was to fearlessly descend into acceptance of the working classes before working together to raise everyone up.\textsuperscript{10} Certainly, critics such as Terry Eagleton have noticed the blind spot in Orwell’s political theory. He says, “If Orwell could have admitted (what is patently obvious) that it is possible for a working man to grasp the theory of socialism at a highly complex and articulate level, he would have seen the possibility of a totalisation and transcendence of the social experience he detested” (106). But Orwell was simply “too middle class” in believing that Socialism needed to spread from the top down (Eagleton 106). He even admits in \textit{Wigan Pier}, “so far as my experience goes, no genuine working man grasps the deeper implications of Socialism” (176).\textsuperscript{11}

Despite an apparent blindness in regards to the intellectual capabilities of the working classes to understand Socialism’s “deeper implications,” Orwell was cognizant of another missing piece of peaceful revolution’s puzzle. As he grew more politically aware from \textit{Down and Out} to \textit{Wigan Pier}, he realized that the hearts and minds of the lower middle classes, wedged uncomfortably between the more clearly demarcated working classes and core middle classes, were crucial to win in order to combat totalitarianism. This class, from which many of the characters so far analyzed have emerged, provided a wellspring of subject matter also for Orwell’s fiction. In it he would carry over the political and aesthetic lessons learned from going to the dogs. Their real-life importance to the cause is complicated by Orwell’s affection for the distinct English values they represent, and as fiction and politics inform each other, the overarching
theme of his work from the 1930s shows the importance of self-culture as development of the individual in service to a larger social good.

3. The Political Importance of Social Insignificance, or, the Big Value of the Little Man: Fiction of the ‘30s

Although his nonfiction of the 1930s often featured a personal attempt to bridge the chasm between middle class and working class, Orwell’s fiction of the same time period significantly featured those caught in the chasm itself—the lower middle class. He famously dismissed much of his fictional work from this era, but recent critics such as Loraine Saunders have returned to evaluate “the unsung artistry” of his novels. She seeks to move beyond the conventional reading of Orwell that his novels were merely springboards for journalistic and political thought, instead pointing out how he was actually rather advanced in narrative techniques, including a similar kind of Free Indirect Discourse utilized by Joyce and Woolf (4). It is interesting that the charge of “merely” writing novels of ideas was also leveled at H. G. Wells, one of Orwell’s favorite authors, decades before. At any rate, I wish to supplement the kind of re-evaluation carried on by Saunders and Kristin Bluemel12 by analyzing selected novels of the thirties in relation both to his nonfiction of the time and to similar modern narratives of self-improving lower middle class characters. To do so, I will analyze two of his most critically-acclaimed novels, which happen to feature types of ambitious lower middle class
protagonists that should be very familiar by now: *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), and *Coming Up for Air* (1939).

In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, the very notion of class difference is raised when the lower middle class bookseller Gordon Comstock forsakes the opportunity to advance his career in favor of living an artistic life, free from the damaging influence of money. Referring to Orwell’s previous occupation, the narrative also refers to his down-and-out period of aesthetic development. The clear difference is that Gordon’s crusade against money is misguided, riddled with hypocrisy—among other violations of his creed, he takes money from his supportive sister—and disconnected from the larger Socialist movement characterized, however imperfectly, by the wealthy editor Ravelston (modeled after Richard Rees, who published much of Orwell’s early work). Perhaps the best earliest indication of the misdirection in Gordon’s creed is Orwell’s “adapted” epigraph from the famous passage of 1 Corinthians:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not money, I am become as a sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. […]

Money suffereth long, and is kind; money envieth not; money vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. . . . And now abideth faith, hope, money, these three; but the greatest of these is money. (*Aspidistra* n. p.)
This epigraph cleverly sets up Gordon’s money-centric beliefs and the flaws inherent in his perspective. For one, money has replaced love in his view as the most important thing in the world. Convinced that money is the greatest power in the world, his notion to reject its influence is to attempt a removal from the world (and what makes it go around). But at the same time, and appropriately for the nuptial context in which this passage is traditionally read, Gordon is so wed to the notion of money’s power that he is in love with what he supposedly hates. Ostensibly trying to rid himself of money’s manipulation, Gordon becomes obsessed with it to the point, ironically, where money—the lack of it—really does become the “greatest of these” in his life. His flaw is avoiding money religiously. Only when he accepts that love is a greater force than money does Gordon save his decency and restore the 1 Corinthians passage to its unadulterated form.

As a character type, Gordon borrows from the previous generation’s modern autodidacts: Forster’s Leonard Bast, Wells’s Mr. Lewisham, Joyce’s Little Chandler (in some ways, Stephen), and even Woolf’s Septimus Smith. All of them have dreams of becoming successful. They all carry a vain faith that their individual effort can transcend societal norms. One difference is that most of the other characters besides Gordon try to work their way up in the world through well-established pathways, particularly through education, aesthetic or otherwise, with emphases on reading and writing. Gordon wants to be a poet, but his objectives are incompatible with his process. Instead of working within a well-established system (publish popular writing, make money), he short-circuits the process (forsake money, publish poetry) into its financial and logical dead end. Instead of trying to be successful within a money-driven society, he attempts to step
outside of that society entirely. He is destined to fail in his misguided quest, but in ways differing from the other characters we have examined. Like those who survive, he becomes at last respectable and firmly lower middle class—wife, child, aspidistra and all. But unlike the rest, his initial distrust of money’s influence on his art and life links to several resonant questions long after Gordon gives up on his fool’s errand.

The first question is why the lower middle class is especially prefigured, in literature as in life, to attempt these various, often overly-ambitious, self-improvement programs. It is clear that the desire for respectability, notoriety, and achievement beyond the typical social station are key motivating factors for ambitious autodidacts. Gordon’s pursuit of success is unconventional as it is (supposedly) based only on poetic mastery and not financial or social wellbeing. Gordon wants to do it himself, alone and without money. The second question that remains is why the political actions that connect so strongly to Gordon’s distrust of money do not lead him to Socialism, even when he is reaching desperately towards something akin to its central tenet. The answer may have as much to do with the confusion of class inherent in the lower middle classes as it does with Gordon’s willfully ignorant perspective on money.

Orwell was completing *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* the same year (1935) that he began work on *The Road to Wigan Pier*. In both cases the issue emerges of what to do with the lower middle classes, politically. As part of his other criticism of Socialism in Britain, he thought that the movement was failing to make itself relevant and clear to this demographic. He also thought that Socialism’s tendency to make the distinction between proletariat and bourgeoisie was too black and white:
And what about that far larger class, running into millions this time—the office-workers and black-coated employees of all kinds—whose traditions are less definitely middle class but who would certainly not thank you if you called them proletarians? All of these people have the same interests and the same enemies as the working class. All are being robbed and bullied by the same system. Yet how many of them realise it? When the pinch came nearly all of them would side with their oppressors and against those who ought to be their allies. (Wigan 225-26)

Certainly Orwell’s characterization is accurate. The lower middle classes were a problematic group to both categorize and reach, because of their tendency to identify with the middle class above them while not earning much more than the working class below them. Their sympathetic association was with those above them, socially. It is the classic literary situation of Leonard Bast. It also indicated a large (millions of people large) blind spot in the project of spreading Socialism in Great Britain. The lower middle classes were not recognized as part of the proletariat, either by themselves or by other political analysts. Partially “because of the Socialist tendency to idealise the manual worker as such” (Wigan 226), members of the lower middle class, who often worked with pen and paper, did not fall in the program’s purview. Orwell’s invective against the failing publicity campaign of the Socialist left is direct: “It has got to be brought home to the clerk, the engineer, the commercial traveler, […] the lower-grade civil servant and all other doubtful cases that they are the proletariat, and that Socialism means a fair deal for
them as well as for the navvy and the factory-hand” (*Wigan* 228). With this perspective, we can view Gordon’s “progress” in a new light.

As critics have suggested, Gordon offers an effigy of autobiographical personality traits for Orwell to burn. Beyond the biographical, aesthetic critique, however, is undeniable political commentary. Gordon is lost economically, artistically, and socially. The self-evident approach to finding his way is Socialism, but he is too proud and self-absorbed to realize it. His desire to plunge into the depths away from money is based on the romantic, fundamental misconception that poverty brings freedom and happiness:

“Under ground, under ground! Down in the safe soft womb of earth, where there is no getting of jobs or losing of jobs, no relatives or friends to plague you, no hope, fear, ambition, honour, duty—no duns of any kind. That was where he wished to be” (*Aspidistra* 203). This is not the same kind of sentiment as Orwell’s epigraph about going to the dogs. In it, Orwell expresses the satisfaction of being able to muster a baseline self-reliance in the worst of times. This is not, by any means, the same as happiness. Gordon sees escape from the money-god as a necessary precursor to his own happiness. Worse still is Gordon’s misconceptions about poor people and their attitudes towards being poor: “He liked to think about the lost people, the under ground people, tramps, beggars, criminals, prostitutes. It is a good world that they inhabit, down there in their frowzy kips and spikes. [. . .] a sort of kingdom of ghosts where all are equal” (*Aspidistra* 203).

Gordon sees the poor themselves as unaware of their own misfortune—worse still, happy in the “good world” of poverty—one of the greatest misunderstandings that Orwell attempts to dispel with the drain-pipe woman in *Wigan Pier*. Whimsically equating the
poverty-stricken with specters ignores the real material hardships they endure, as well as the possibility for them to recognize their own suffering. Ghosts, after all, are neither embodied nor conscious. As with his own life, Gordon fails to see the painful truth until the very end.

Eventually, Gordon settles down with his aspidistra and stable if humdrum job. In one sense, it shows advancement from his juvenile, parasitic, ignorant war against finance. But in another sense, it symbolizes a failed conversion. When Gordon is already so committed to the eradication of the negative effects of money that he attempts to strike at the cause, he is a prime potential catechumen for Socialism. Without a full understanding of the issues (whether he is “capable” of that or not), and lacking the direct support of Ravelston (who is set apart already with his own money), Gordon, like so many others of the lower middle class, does not pick up Socialism’s relevance to him. His retreat back to the money-god ends ironically, as he is eager to promote the kind of quick fixes promised by the ads he originally abhorred. Notable among them is the fictional “world-famed” Culturequick Scrapbook, which as a repository of knowledge similar to other self-cultural compendia, and perhaps akin to a poor man’s encyclopedia. The advertisement offers a brief testimonial of its power to raise the common man: “Only a drummer and yet he quoted Dante” (Aspidistra 235). Gordon’s original response to all of these ads is “Christ, what muck!” (Aspidistra 235); by the end of the novel he has joined in the production of muck. Having lived in it, he now uses it to sell, among other seemingly useless items, a compendium that fails to teach the political lesson that also fails to reach Gordon, representing the intellectually-capable lower middle classes.
himself. Having found no political voice, Gordon trades in a weak artistic voice for the mouthpiece of capitalism, proclaimed loudly in newspapers and bills posted citywide.

In *Coming Up for Air* (1939), the lower middle class protagonist has a voice, and it is the voice of first person narration. Once again Orwell’s fictional concern centers on a member of the lower middle class whose view of politics is murky and muddled. Many critics have read *Coming Up for Air*, along with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as one of Orwell’s most prophetic novels, predicting the darkness of the coming war and its changes for the English life and landscape. For example, Jeffrey Meyers in 1975 says, “Orwell shares the Marxist concept of the dissolution of capitalistic society – the apocalyptic war predicted in *Coming Up for Air* broke out three months after the book was published – but not its optimistic belief in the creation of a new and better one” (*Reader’s* 97). My interpretation is more in line with recent readings by critics such as Annette Federico that see Orwell’s focus on the life of the mundane not primarily in a negative context. Rather than showing the hopelessness of a lower middle class life crushed by the coming forces of total war and totalitarianism, Orwell’s perspective on the materialistic detail of common life actually defends the decency of lower middle class life against these forces. As Federico says, “The liberatory potential of the novel is derived less from a position of overt rebellion against the existing order than from a position of faith in the existence of the ordinary as a repository of meaning in a technocratic, politically unstable, and almost entirely secular society” (51). While it does not preach revolution in the uprising sense, it supports maintaining basic humanity to defend against radicalism—the source of which
often came from a segment of the population desperate to uphold its dignity in the face of low wages and social insecurity.

George Bowling, insurance salesman, lives like so many others in predictable suburban respectability. He addresses the reader, “Do you know the road I live in—Ellesmere Road, West Bletchley? Even if you don’t, you know fifty others exactly like it,” and characterizes the qualities and names of those just like it: “The stucco front, the creosoted gate, the privet hedge, the green front door. The Laurels, the Myrtles, the Hawthorns, Mon Abri, Mon Repos, Belle Vue” (Coming Up 11). Though his house blends in, Bowling stands apart by nature of his telling the story to us as well as his individual idiosyncracies. He is one part Leopold Bloom and one part Mr. Polly. With the witty observations of the first, often seen in his narration, he possesses the undisciplined interest in reading of the second. His observations are made throughout, but his education through reading is given special emphasis.

Like other autodidact characters, there are stages in Bowling’s self-development that are triggered by his reading of certain books. As a young man, he recounts that there were not very many books in his house, claiming that his father never read anything except the Bible and Smiles’ Self-Help (Coming Up 102). Fatherly self-improvement evidently did not go beyond these two most guiding and inspirational texts. Bowling was forced to find his own path to and through literature. He says, “I’m not sorry it happened that way. I read the things I wanted to read, and I got more out of them than I ever got out of the stuff they taught me at school” (102). Bowling’s whole family seems to be interested in self-improvement, whether in earnest or in likely exaggeration, as in the case
of one uncle: “Uncle Ezekiel liked to boast that he’d never been to school in his life and had taught himself to read by a tallow candle after working hours” (52). Having left school without the means to attend University, Bowling put it upon himself to improve in the specific area of business. This self-cultivation also included a process of refinement to affect greater class standing. His narration is worth quoting at length because it is so indicative of the aspirations of many young self-improvers from the lower middle class:

Between sixteen and eighteen I made serious efforts to ‘improve my mind’ and train myself for a business career. I cured myself of dropping aitches and got rid of most of my Cockney accent. […] I did a correspondence course with Littleburns’ Commercial Academy, learnt book-keeping and business English, read solemnly through a book of frightful blah called The Art of Salesmanship, and improved my arithmetic and even my handwriting. […] But when I was eighteen I suddenly turned highbrow, got a ticket for the County Library and began to stodge through books by Marie Corelli and Hall Caine and Anthony Hope. It was at about that time that I joined the Lower Binfield Reading Circle, which was run by the vicar and met one evening a week all through the winter for what was called ‘literary discussion.’ Under pressure from the vicar I read bits of Sesame and Lilies and even had a go at Browning. (115)

The fact that “improve my mind” is within quotation marks goes to show that Bowling is referring to a popular idea that others might have heard about, even in those exact words. His “highbrow” readings are, in fact, popular bestsellers at the time. The sentiment could
also be ironic because Bowling does not consider most of his mental improvement to come about during this time, but while he was stationed in the sleepy outpost of Twelve Mile Dump during the Great War. Regardless, the reference to improving the mind and the subsequent attempts at self-culture point to a post-War atmosphere of pressure among the lower middle class, much of it self-imposed, to “get on.” He says, to a knowing reader, “You remember the line of talk. Pep, punch, grit, sand. Get on or get out. There’s plenty of room at the top. You can’t keep a good man down. And the ads in the magazines about the chap that the boss clapped on the shoulder, and the keen-jawed executive who’s pulling down the big dough and attributes his success to so and so’s correspondence course” (Coming Up 154). Like the pins of his eponymous sport, Bowling succumbs. He even takes the correspondence course. And he says, “It’s funny how we all swallowed it, even blokes like me to whom it hadn’t the smallest application. Because I’m neither a go-getter nor a down-and-out, and I’m by nature incapable of being either. But it was the spirit of the time. Get on! Make good!” (154). Personally predisposed neither to great highs or lows, Bowling is emblematic of the greater social class to which he belongs, always betwixt and between.

Orwell imagined much of the lower middle class to be this way—neither too ambitious nor too resigned, and generally favorable to whatever trends, political or otherwise, would at the very least prevent their slide into the working class (or, conversely, quell the rise of those below). In The Road to Wigan Pier, Orwell makes this fear explicit. He says of the “average unthinking person of gentle birth” that “In his eyes the workers are not a submerged race of slaves, they are a sinister flood creeping upwards
to engulf himself and his friends and his family and to sweep all culture and all decency out of existence. Hence that queer watchful anxiety lest that working class should grow too prosperous” (132). This may be the case for the average “unthinking” man, but it is definitely not the case for Bowling. He is a thoughtful man, aware of his tenuous social position but nonetheless critical of some key establishment practices. He does not bow to the retired public-schoolmaster Porteus, whose grandiose reading of Keats fails to transmit anything more than nice-sounding words. Lacking a public school education himself, Bowling like Mr. Polly keeps his book-reading variegated as a matter of pride. This opens him to new possibilities. As Annette Federico notes, part of his political awareness comes from “his solitary, random education, his unsupervised book-learning of a year-and-a-half, without the benefit of experts” (57). Also like Mr. Polly he gravitates towards free thought through the course of serendipitous reading without a master (or master plan) to guide him. Yet he is still susceptible to the rhetoric of success, and he shows his rather embarrassed admission of this fact. More compassionate than Gordon, sharing aspects of his interest in social inequality but lacking his sharp aversion to the money-code, Bowling finds most of his reassurance in nostalgia just as Gordon eventually finds his in the safe corporate and domestic sphere. The long-lost fishing hole speaks to an entire Edwardian era of peace and order, lost to the world but present in Bowling’s memory as a relic of simple goodness.

Beyond some of the simpler differences of character between Gordon and Bowling, then, the undeniable fact is that Gordon retires into respectability after childishly kicking and screaming against commerce while Bowling maintains his decency.
throughout the narrative. Both of these characters exemplify Orwell’s concern in the
1930s to portray realistic images of slump-era living in the case of *Keep the Aspidistra
Flying* and pre-war anxiety in *Coming Up for Air*. His training in describing the lives of
the down-and-out by becoming one of them prepared him to chronicle the hard details of
hard living, and to do so with a particular attention to placement on the social order. In
his documentary accounts he focused on the working class poor. In his realist fiction he
gathered protagonists from the lowest rung of the middle class (with the exception of
Flory from *Burmese Days*). Gordon and Bowling follow suit. Orwell might have been
following the lead of three of his most respected authors—Dickens, Gissing, and Wells—
by featuring this class so prominently. Certainly there may have been a concerted effort
to attract more readers from the lower middle class to his work. Zwerdling says, “It
seems probable that Orwell felt unhappy about the narrowness of the appeal of his early
fiction and deliberately tried to expand his audience to include people like Bowling when
he wrote *Coming Up for Air*” (123). This is because, as we have seen, “the lower-middle
class his hero represents was the missing link between the victims and the victimizers of
British society. In a country on the brink of world war, that class could no longer be left
in its state of comfortable political indifference” (Zwerdling 123).

Bowling’s role as character-narrator of the lower middle class challenges the
“comfortable political indifference” stereotyped in the *petit bourgeoisie* and makes him
much more than the hopeless victim of historical forces coalescing into war that many
critics have assumed him to be. While he does not lead uprisings, Bowling recognizes
cant. A self-improver himself, he recognizes the political pretensions behind, for
example, his wife and friends at the local branch meeting of the Left Book Club. “The three of them sit there like lumps of pudding,” he says. “They don’t know what the meeting’s about and they don’t care, but they’ve got a vague feeling […] that they’re improving their minds, and it isn’t costing them anything” (166). Part of Bowling’s impatience with his wife is based on years of marriage in the doldrums, but some of it is also a critique of middle-class involvement in politics based on trendiness, a low commitment level, or, as seen here, a perceived high personal-improvement-to-monetary-cost ratio. In this regard Bowling is acting the part of Orwell from the second half of *Wigan Pier*, calling out the so-called Socialists from the core members and root supporters of the cause. Far from resigning into political indifference, Bowling recognizes the hypocrisy at risk when organizations such as the Left Book Club encourage political tourism on the premise of self-improvement. Here and elsewhere he represents a straightforward honesty and directness that belies his class-informed complexity. In that position, he is able to maintain intellectual stability even as the rest of the world (his wife and friends included) risk falling into political disorder and the false comfort of hypocrisy.

All of Bowling’s observations are made stronger and more direct, of course, because he is talking to us directly. Making George Bowling the teller of his own tale means much to empowering the under-represented in Socialism and in fiction. There had been lower middle class narrators in British fiction in the century before, notably in George and Wheedon Grossmith’s *The Diary of a Nobody* (1892), but often times they were employed for humorous purposes (as in Charles Pooter’s various social gaffes and
groan-inducing puns). The narrative of *Ulysses* focalizes Leopold Bloom’s thoughts from time to time, but he cannot be said to be the narrator of either an episode or the entire volume. Bowling’s narration is unique and overlooked, considering Orwell’s purpose and bringing him to recount his life in the lead-up to war. The importance of Bowling’s narration resides in the class he represents, but also how he strives to connect with the reader within and perhaps across class lines. He does so, as we have seen, by referencing shared experiences, compelling the reader to respond by asking questions, and by generally seeking to employ a down-to-earth conversational dialogue instead of a authoritarian monologue. Rather like Bloom, Bowling’s “humane desire for companionship and understanding” is a mark of his simple decency (Federico 53). In this decency resides the strength required to both defend traditional English values (represented by the pastoral fishing-hole of a lost era) and to shape the next wave of adherents to Socialism—the lower middle class—to fight against totalitarianism. As Federico says, “The first thing repressive regimes do is prevent people from talking to one another” (53). Orwell, through Bowling’s conversational narrative, wants the reader to listen and, as much as possible, talk back.

4. Conclusion: Learning and Suffering

In an essay entitled “Not Enough Money: A Sketch of George Gissing,” first appearing in the *Tribune*, 2 April 1943, Orwell characterizes one of his favorite authors as “a humane, intelligent man, of scholarly tastes” who by his lower-middle-class
upbringing is “forced into intimacy with the London poor” (Essays 471). Such familiarity bred contempt, according to Orwell, who says that Gissing concluded the working classes were “savages who must on no account be allowed political power” (Essays 471). Orwell defends Gissing by expanding his thought process to include the rest of the social class that may not be as distinguished and talented as him, saying that Gissing’s response “is the ordinary reaction of the lower-middle-class man who is near enough to the working class to be afraid of them,” but “In a more excusable form” (Essays 471). As he had come to believe at least since The Road to Wigan Pier, there was a significant portion of the middle class that was just as exploited by capitalism yet was ignored by established political movements. He says, “Above all, Gissing grasped that the middle classes suffer more from economic insecurity than the working class, and are more ready to take action against it. To ignore that fact has been one of the major blunders of the Left” (Essays 471). While his nonfiction accounts chronicled the lives of the poverty-stricken and working class, Orwell’s fiction almost exclusively featured the same kinds of lower middle class protagonists that made Gissing’s stories of struggle so appealing to his twentieth-century devotee. Orwell’s journeys into the abyss confirmed the need for political action to help the poor, but his fiction focused more directly on what, to middle class readers, would be a more recognizable face of poverty in the lower middle class. Just as exploited under capitalism, characters such as George Bowling represented a basic decency that was as valuable to preserve as working-class interests. Orwell underwent his “voluntary descent into the world of the oppressed” as Alex Zwerdling has said, in order “to make the life of the oppressed classes as vivid for the protected middle-class reader as
the faces of his own victims had become for him. His work became a systematic attempt to harrow and enlighten the reader” (135). “Harrowing” and “enlightening” make a great deal of sense when applied to Orwell’s aims, because suffering and learning were always linked for him.

Finally Orwell’s experience, reflected in his writings, is the culmination of self-culture as “vulgar ambition” during the modernist era. As we have seen, movements in institutionalized self-improvement were reflected in literary representations of bounders from the lower middle class from at least the mid-nineteenth century. By the turn of the twentieth century, these movements lost their Christian charitable roots and became a kind of business—literally, when it came to the publishing of trade-press “pocket philosophies” a la Arnold Bennett; and figuratively, when considering the heft of cultural capital demanded by individuals in pursuit of taste and social standing, supplied by a wealth of resources aimed at them. Tied up in this issue were fundamental problems with capitalism and the education system that reformers such as H. G. Wells satirized. The Bloomsbury set reacted ambivalently toward the results of self-culture’s vulgarization—a kind of dismissive approval, or supportive disdain. Both Forster and Woolf politically and personally supported the democratization of education, but were unable to provide a narrative arc for their literary autodidacts beyond tragedy. Joyce, from an outsider’s perspective, used the tools of his specifically Catholic education to prepare himself humanistically and aesthetically—a process of self-development partially satirized in Stephen Dedalus and celebrated in Leopold Bloom. Orwell, like the other modernists covered in these chapters, had a vexed relationship to his own education and was
painfully aware of social class. Unlike the other modernists, however, Orwell underwent a process of self-culture that specifically sought to eradicate both of these social status indicators. As he learned by suffering through his down-and-out days, he cultivated an author’s attention to disparate lives. He became more convinced of Socialism’s necessity in the modern world while also emphasizing the lower middle class as necessary participants—sacrificial participants—in such a global change. Attempting to eradicate the class markers that buffeted him against failure at St. Cyprian’s, Eton, and Burma, he went down. He faced his fear of failure, as the epigraphs above suggest, by failing.

From Smiles onward it was universally recognized that the autodidact, in order to gain knowledge, must give up time, energy, oftentimes sleep, and very likely money. The sacrificial expense of self-culture runs deeper in modernist literature, though. Characters who best represent the class-raising potential of the idea are often sacrificed in the tragedy of their own ambitions. Most examples in this dissertation bear witness to such sacrifice, from Leonard Bast to Little Chandler to Septimus Smith and Doris Kilman. Literary sacrifice is one thing, but literal sacrifice is quite another. Orwell’s importance was to combine both in an effort to politicize individual self-culture into a national concern.

In “Why I Write,” he says, “The job is to reconcile my ingrained likes and dislikes with the essentially public, non-individual activities that this age forces on all of us” (*Essays* 1084). In this sentiment, Orwell encapsulates the sentiment of sacrifice that could cut through the differences in perspective keeping people away from helping each other against defend against greater political forces. Avant-garde writing was often
accused of elitist isolation by its detractors at the time; from the other perspective, mainstream fiction was often seen as pandering and diluted to the masses by proponents of high art. Orwell’s style cannot easily fit into one or the other because it sought to mobilize aesthetics (his “ingrained likes”) to the promotion of politics (the public service required of the age)—or vice versa. The strong link between class standing and aesthetic quality of art break down in light of Orwell’s self-sacrifice, even to the point of making the written word serve a concrete purpose. What remains is as muddy a middlebrow distinction as one can make, and it is all through the directive of self-culture. Orwell’s writings seek to eliminate class because they want everyone to fall before rising up, together. To him, going forward meant first going to the dogs. The culmination of self-culture as a means of self-improvement is to recognize that the most pressing need for improvement is beyond the self, and that the highest ambition is to see vulgarity, in the Latinate sense of belonging to the masses, as really not vulgar at all.
Such attempts to chronicle the lives of the working classes were nothing new in England, of course. Examples from the nineteenth century include Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* and Friedrich Engels’ various reports on workers whom he and Marx deemed most ripe for revolution because of England’s particularly abhorrent labor conditions. Even early in the twentieth century, the desire to document living and working conditions of the English working classes inspired such work as Lady Bell’s *At the Works: A Study of a Manufacturing Town* (1907).


Of his own idleness at Eton, he says, “For years past I had been resolved – unconsciously at first, but consciously later on – that when once my scholarship was won I would ‘slack off’ and cram no longer. This resolve, by the way, was so fully carried out that between the ages of thirteen and twenty-two or –three I hardly ever did a stroke of avoidable work” (*Essays* 1326).

Earlier in the novel, Flory encounters wild dogs—a moment of futility begetting violence that foreshadows his eventual “going to the dogs”:

The moon was vanishing behind the dark wall of the jungle, but the dogs were still howling. […] It is not the less bitter because it is perhaps one’s own fault, to see oneself drifting, rotting, in dishonour and horrible futility, and all the while knowing that somewhere within one there is the possibility of a decent human being.

Oh well, God save us from self-pity! Flory went back to the veranda, took up the rifle, and, wincing slightly, let drive at the pariah dog. There was an echoing roar, and the bullet buried itself in the maidan, wide of the mark. A mulberry-coloured bruise sprang out on Flory’s shoulder. The dog gave a yell of fright, took to its heels, and then, sitting down fifty yards farther away, once more began rhythmically baying. (*Burmese* 72-3)

James Frazer was Malinowski’s main influence, both by positive and negative example. Inspired by Frazer’s scientific approach to ethnographic study, Malinowski was also frustrated with the armchair anthropology that kept the *Golden Bough*’s author safely removed from his subjects. See Konstantin Symonolewicz’s "On Malinowski, Frazer, and Evolutionism" in *Current Anthropology* 9.1 (1968): 66-7.

While it can be argued that both Orwell and the superior tramp have taken on “poses,” the difference is still that Orwell places himself among the poor to encounter an often-unseen but vital reality—the superior tramp, on the other hand, escapes into the refuge of social fantasy.

Hamilton reminds us of some of the main differences between the *Wigan Pier* project and the *Down and Out* experience: “Orwell’s sojourn in the north is often spoken of as if it were a heroic act of self-sacrifice; as if, even, Orwell’s suffering were as significant as the suffering he went to study. It is worth remembering that the whole trip lasted slightly less than two months, and that for a fair part of it he stayed in relatively comfortable (what he would call ‘clean and decent’) lodgings. It is also worth noting that he did not go there in working man’s disguise. Richard Rees provided him with letters of introduction to various Independent Labour Party contacts, and he was not at any time left to fend for himself. These points should be kept in mind, not to disparage Orwell but merely to stress the distinction between his *Wigan Pier* project and the self-abasing escapades of his down-and-out-days” (55).
9 Victor Gollancz, in his foreword to the volume for the Left Book Club, defended many of the “fringe” Socialists Orwell targeted—feminists, pacifists, vegetarians, and advocates of birth control—saying that Orwell’s definition of crank was too broad, and that it “appears to mean anyone holding opinions not held by the majority” (xiv).

10 Orwell ends The Road to Wigan Pier with the famous call, aimed at the middle class, to descend into the working class in order to understand their plight in solidarity. Humorously, he says, “probably when we get there it will not be so dreadful as we feared, for, after all, we have nothing to lose but our aitches” (232).

11 Ironically, the quotation which implies doubt about working peoples’ ability to understand Socialism comes not even twenty pages after this quip: “Snobbishness is one of those vices which we can discern in everyone else but never in ourselves” (157).


13 See “Bookshop Memories,” originally published in Fortnightly, November 1936, and reprinted in most of his essay collections.

14 About the such-named plant, Christopher Hitchens notes, “The original idea of the aspidistra as a fetish came to Orwell by way of Robert Tressell’s celebrated proletarian novel The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists, in which a starving carpenter is forced to pawn everything but clings to his potted shrub as an idiotic token of social status. What I suspect is this: for Orwell this grubbed-up and replanted thing was de-natured, a pseudo or kitsch version of vegetation masquerading as greenery among the deracinated and the suburban.”

15 Jeffrey Meyers makes the connection of Gordon to Orwell’s bad side: “Gordon […] lacks integrity and honor, and his envy and self-pity, his sense of social, artistic and sexual failure, tend to alienate the reader. He’s selfish and unfair to Rosemary; hopelessly parasitic with Julia and Ravelston; cowardly with waiters and servants; improvident and lecherous, callous and cold-blooded, without self-respect or moral principles. Orwell seems to use the novel to exorcise the worst side of his character.” (Wintry 129)

Artistically, like Joyce’s Stephen, Gordon represents Orwell’s failed juvenile attempts at poetry through his labored efforts yielding labored verse.

16 When Gordon looks over the newspaper advertisements, at first in disgust, the effect is very similar to Bloom’s ad-minded surveillance of the modern world: “And that was the world they wanted him to re-enter! That was the business in which he had a chance of Making Good. He flicked over the pages more slowly. Flick, flick. Adorable—until she smiles. The good that is shot out of a gun. Do you let foot-fag affect your personality? Get back that peach-bloom on a Beautyrest Mattress. Only a penetrating face-cream will reach that under-surface dirt. Pink toothbrush is her trouble. How to alkalise your stomach almost instangly. Roughage for husky kids. Are you one of the four out of five” (Aspidistra 234).

17 Bowling lists Wells’s book as one which affected him deeply during his war-time reading days at Twelve Mile Dump: “But now and again it so happens that you strike a book which is exactly at the mental level you’ve reached at the moment, so much so that it seems to have been written specially for you. One of them was H. G. Wells’s The History of Mr. Polly, in a cheap shilling edition which was falling to pieces. I wonder if you can imagine the effect it had upon me, to be brought up as I’d been brought up, the son of a shopkeeper in a country town, and then to come across a book like that?” (Coming Up 141). Orwell had expressed similar reactions to the work of Wells.
References


The British Controversialist. London: Houlston and Wright, 1863. Print


