Dissidence by Design: Literary Renovations of the “Good Taste” Movement

by

Mary Elizabeth Curtin

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

University of Toronto

© Copyright by Mary Elizabeth Curtin 2011
Dissidence by Design: Literary Renovations of the “Good Taste” Movement

Mary Elizabeth Curtin

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English
University of Toronto

2011

Abstract

This dissertation examines the literary responses to the British “good taste” movement in the work of Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, and John Betjeman. Bolstered by the increased prominence and influence of design experts in the early-twentieth century, critics and designers sought to improve public taste in Britain. The didactic and rhetorical strategies these taste reformers employed gradually convinced Britons that their nation, which lagged behind its European neighbours in accepting modern design, was in the throes of a “taste crisis.” The increased authority of design experts, the public enthusiasm for decoration, and the growth of the market for household goods led not only to a widespread fascination with design, but also to the formulation of an increasingly narrow and orthodox definition of “good taste.” I analyze these authors’ critical and literary writing, relying, in many cases, on their unpublished or neglected work in order to reveal the development of their taste theories. I argue that these writers, dissatisfied with what they perceived to be the “good taste” movement’s stultifying and homogenizing effects, produced a “dissident” taste theory in reaction to the consensual and codified notion of “good taste.” Chapter One considers Huxley’s often overlooked role as the editor of House & Garden magazine in the context of his early fiction and his gradual conversion to mysticism. Chapter Two examines the architectural novels of Evelyn Waugh, noting, in
particular, the inherent tensions he navigated between modernity and tradition, Philistinism and theory, theology and aesthetics. Chapter Three studies John Betjeman’s roles as critic, poet, guide-book writer, and preservationist, charting the development of his tastes from international modernism to local eclecticism. Rather than accepting the easy distinctions between “good and bad” taste, Huxley, Waugh, and Betjeman—themselves so often criticized for being unyieldingly absolute in their worldviews—attempted instead to articulate a “taste between,” one that fused the aesthetic, ethical, and psychic components of taste in an imaginative spectrum, rather than an orthodox system.
Acknowledgments

The completion of this dissertation could not have been possible without the support and encouragement of colleagues, family, and friends. I thank my supervisor, Professor Richard Greene, whose unfailing generosity and guidance provided me with not simply the means but also the motivation to expand my research horizons. Professor Greene’s good humour and imagination made the prospect of writing a dissertation on three rather unpopular figures considerably less discouraging than it might otherwise have been. I am also grateful to Professor Melba Cuddy-Keane for her keen insight and encouragement throughout the past five years; my conception of modernism would have been impoverished without her thoughtful challenges to my own intellectual blind spots. Furthermore, I appreciate the invaluable scholarly experience Professor Cuddy-Keane has afforded me in inviting me to participate in her own research. I would also like to thank Professor Christine Bolus-Reichert for helping me navigate the drawing-rooms of the nineteenth century; I hope that our shared fondness for Liberty’s of London can one day make up for the fictional destruction of King’s Thursday. In addition, I could not have pursued my graduate career without the unflagging support and encouragement of my family. I thank my parents, Michael and Katharine, and my brothers, Sam and Luke, for getting me this far. I can assure you all that I am now officially “done being a student.” I remain grateful to my partner, Patrick, for weathering many a scholarly huff with good grace; his patience is admirable and greatly appreciated. I also wish to thank my colleagues and friends, including Emily Simmons, Laura Stenberg, Ceilidh Hart, Katherine McLeod, and, of course, Jillian Leclair. Thanks for keeping me (reasonably) sane. Finally, I gratefully acknowledge funding for this research from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Graduate Scholarship and the University of Toronto Fellowship.
# Table of Contents

Introduction: A Taste Between ................................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter One: Aldous Huxley, Taste Mystic .......................................................................................................................... 25

1.1 “Il faut cultiver notre jardin”: Laying the Foundation at *House & Garden* .......................................................... 28
1.2 “This strange vale of tears and guffaws”: *Antic Hay’s* Dystopian Aesthetics ......................................................... 47
1.3 “Art is for beginners”: *After Many a Summer* and Spiritual Good Taste ............................................................. 72

Chapter Two: Evelyn Waugh’s Orthodoxies and Paradoxes .......................................................................................... 88

2.1 “Looking Forward to Barbarism”: *Decline and Fall* and the Apocalypse of Taste ................. 90
2.2 “The Lie that Tells the Truth”: *A Handful of Dust* and Philistine Taste ......................................................... 120
2.3 “All Beauty is Difficult”: *Brideshead Revisited* and the Charity of Taste ..................................................... 148

Chapter Three: Locating Taste with John Betjeman ..................................................................................................... 167

3.1 An Apprenticeship in ‘Good Taste’ ........................................................................................................................ 170
3.2 “Half dead and half alive”: Negotiating Contrasts in *Mount Zion* and *Continual Dew* 185
3.3 “Beauty is a historical document”: Betjeman’s Search for Community ...................................................... 219

L’envoi ........................................................................................................................................................................... 242

Works Consulted ............................................................................................................................................................... 245
Introduction: A Taste Between

A true taste is never a half taste.
—John Constable

‘You and I are standing at different angles and though we both look at the same thing we read different messages. Perhaps if we stood side by side we should see yet a third.’
—Ford Madox Ford, *Parade’s End*

On the evening of March 7, 1935, the United Arts Society held in London an “Evening of Bad Taste” that promised recitations, announcements, and “crooning,” followed by a “buffet.” In an effort to live up to the party’s name, the programme made use of no less than thirteen typefaces and featured on its cover a small cartoon of a gnome. John Betjeman, listed as one of the evening’s speakers, was unable to attend, but, true to form, he provided organizers with a gramophone recording of his talk (no doubt the closest thing to “crooning” made available that evening), in which he addresses “Mr Chairman, art lovers and art haters” (qtd. Hillier, *New Fame* 47). His recording begins, “I can think of nothing in poorer taste than accepting an invitation and coming like this” (qtd. Hillier, *New Fame* 47). The statement is at once apologetic and triumphant, for, of course, the whole point of the evening is to revel in “bad taste.” But the evening was not simply a glorious escape from the strictures of taste; it was, rather, a symptom of a larger concern about the nature of judgements hinted at in Betjeman’s query, “for what is bad taste?” (47). For Betjeman, “bad taste” is “self-consciousness. It is refecement” (47). In fact, he asserts that “bad taste” “is what is usually called good taste,” adding, “if someone says to me, ‘[Mrs So-and-So’s] house is in fearfully good taste,’ I know what she must be like. [. . . .]

Mentally, I bark my shins against the unstained oak table and trip over the expensive steel furniture of that artistic woman’s drawing-room” (47). For Betjeman to exalt the guilty pleasures of “bad taste” was as polemical as it was whimsical. Notice the easy transition Betjeman can
make between taste judgements on the social plane (missing a party and sending a gramophone in one’s stead) to taste judgements on the aesthetic plane (Mrs So-and-So’s “artistic” drawing-room). Yet, the point at which this transition occurs is never entirely certain; what the whole of the Bad Taste evening makes clear is that the social and the aesthetic are inextricably linked in matters of taste.

In this era of post-post-modernism, in which “kitschy” is almost universally a term of endearment and in which sartorial irony is taken for granted, it may not seem provocative to plan a party around the notion of “bad taste.” But in Britain in the 1930s, exulting in the worst of taste was a powerful statement, both politically and aesthetically. “Good taste” was—improbable as it may seem now—a matter of national interest; it was a subject of conversation in domestic, commercial, bureaucratic, and aesthetic circles. Betjeman’s substitution of “bad taste” for “good taste” was shocking, perhaps, but he was not alone in his suspicion that something was very wrong with the state of taste. One might imagine that modernism—whether literary or aesthetic—had a firm grasp on the boundaries between good and bad taste, but in actuality the definition and valuation of taste in early-twentieth-century Britain was far from stable. That “good taste” could be a negotiable concept is not, perhaps, a revolutionary conclusion, but the nature of this negotiation—its fervor, its implications, its pervasiveness—does require further analysis. Rather than asking, as Betjeman does, “what” taste is, I will ask “why” taste is so contentious a debate in early-twentieth-century Britain.

In order to understand the grounds of this debate, it is instructive to consider what led up to a party in favour of “bad taste.” This turn backward is useful not simply because of the historical context it provides, but also because the Victorian era looms large over the three authors studied here—Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, and John Betjeman. Of the innumerable literary examples from the previous century to which one might point, Henry James’s *The Spoils
of Poynton, published first in 1897, provides a particularly revealing look at nineteenth-century taste debates. Behind the family drama that rests at the centre of the novel lies a telling insight into late-Victorian taste. Poynton succeeds in capturing the transitional period between two rival models of aesthetic taste: one traditional and academic, and the other contemporary and commercial. This transition is central to the development of “good taste” in twentieth-century Britain. But Poynton is useful not merely as a record of debate, but because in it James dramatizes the human costs of a changing definition of beauty—a topic that will plague his successors studied here.

As James notes in both his diaries and his preface to the novel, the story’s genesis was an anecdote recounted at a dinner party concerning a family dispute between a widow and her son over the question of inheritance. The woman, it seems, possessed an impressive collection of valuable furniture that she was reluctant to see fall into her son’s hands purely according to the whims of English property law. James takes the kernel of this anecdote—the injustice of inheritance, the battle between mother and son—and extrapolates wildly, creating a fiction that explores not simply legal and familial issues, but the very grounds of aesthetics.

The novel begins at Waterbath, the imposing home of the nouveau-riche family, the Brigstocks. James’s description of this upwardly mobile, middle-class vision of richesse through the eyes of the established and “tasteful” Mrs Gereth forms a lasting, if scathing, impression of the last days of Victorian aesthetic ambition. As Mrs Gereth ponders the “esthetic misery” (35) of Waterbath, she concludes it is “an ugliness fundamental and systematic” that takes the form of a “universal futility,” composed of “trumpery ornament and scrapbook art, with strange excrescences and bunchy draperies, with gimcracks that might have been keepsakes for maid-servants and nondescript conveniences that might have been prizes for the blind” (37). Beyond being kept up at night by the wallpaper, Mrs Gereth’s greatest difficulty is that her son is set to
marry one of the Brigstock daughters, Mona. Worse yet, as a recently widowed dowager, Mrs Gereth must forfeit her prized home, Poynton, a stunning masterpiece of aesthetic connoisseurship. It is to this tasteless upstart, Mona, that Mrs Gereth must relinquish her “long, sunny harvest of taste and curiosity” (41). Mrs Gereth’s only comfort at Waterbath is her newfound comrade-at-arts, the penniless yet tasteful Fleda Vetch, who soon becomes a major player in James’s net of family intrigue, legal wrangling, and aesthetic deadlock.

From the outset, *Poynton* is a novel of transitions, from old money to new money, from taste to fashionability, from cultivation to commerce. As Stephanie Foote notes, however, James is at pains to develop striking structural comparisons between the novel’s characters (49). Both Mona and Fleda are outsiders to the Gereths’ world, though Fleda does not share Mona’s wealth. Neither Mona nor her fiancé, Owen Gereth, possess taste, but only Mona, lacking the privilege of birth, needs to publicly assert a degree of tastefulness. Both Mrs Gereth and Mona desperately desire Poynton, though Mrs Gereth desires its aesthetic qualities while Mona desires its social caché. The shifting claims of class make the aesthetic questions the novel poses remarkably unstable. Even though James set out to write a novel about “things,” *Poynton* is as much a social and political drama as it is a materialist one. Yet it is the question of taste that confuses traditional structural distinctions most of all; while James takes obvious pleasure in cataloguing the “imbecilities of decoration” at Waterbath, it is clear throughout that there is more to taste in this novel than meets the eye.

James’s vehicle for recording this social upheaval is “that most modern of our current passions, the fierce appetite for the upholsterer’s and joiner’s and brazier’s work, the chairs and tables, the cabinets and presses, the material odds and ends, of the more labouring ages” (“Preface” 26). James’s response to this newfound interest in the decorative arts could simply have been a satire on Victorian decorating, but while he admits that initially the “things” of
Poynton were “the very centre” (26) of the drama he envisioned, James realized that inanimate objects do not make for particularly compelling protagonists, whereas “the passions, the faculties, the forces their beauty would, like that of antique Helen of Troy, set in motion, was what, as a painter, one had really wanted of them, was the power in them that one had from the first appreciated” (30). In other words, like the Trojan War, Poynton boils down to a question of allegiances, with the vulgar Mona Brigstock playing Paris to Mrs Gereth’s Menelaus. It is easy to read Poynton as merely a battle between “good taste” and “bad taste,” yet this understanding of the conflict is purely material, and overlooks not simply the facts of the novel (Mrs Gereth, the proponent of “good taste,” is hardly a sympathetic figure), but also James’s use of the materials of taste. If he insists on the “possible influence” of the spoils of Poynton “on other passions and other relations” (26-7), then James clearly directs us out of the narrow world of aesthetics into a more socialized, or ethical, view of taste. This second taste debate, between a moral or ethical “good taste” and an unfeeling, unempathetic “bad taste,” actually drives the narrative. While Mrs Gereth may possess the best aesthetic taste in the novel, she acts in the worst taste, a fact not lost on herself as she happily admits to Fleda that she is “quite coarse, thank God!” (113). In this, Mrs Gereth is aligned with her chief antagonist, Mona, who is both aesthetically and ethically bankrupt. Owen Gereth, while entirely devoid of aesthetic sympathies—as James delights in reminding us—does act in the best of taste, as does Fleda Vetch. The interactions between these two rival columns of good and bad taste forms an uneasy chiasmus that becomes the true structural centre of the novel, and, indeed, it is the corruption of the ethical at the hands of the aesthetic that leads to the literal destruction of taste itself in the novel’s concluding conflagration.

It is, in fact, Owen and Fleda’s devotion to socialized “good taste” that ultimately leads to the novel’s crisis—the destruction of Poynton. Both characters are compromised by the material
implications of taste. Fleda finds herself in an impossible dilemma, for the only way she can “save” Poynton is to forego her rigid principles. Yet, instead of marrying Owen outright, and thus preserving Poynton, she sends Mona back to Owen so that his fiancée may officially “release” him to Fleda. Fleda’s sense of decorum is not only inflexible, but infused with a stilted, legalistic jargon. She defends her position in saying she is “‘thinking [. . .] of the simple question of his keeping faith on an important clause of his contract [. . .] I’m thinking of his honour and his good name’” (111). And, for his part, Owen is equally waylaid by a perversion of his principles. Owen’s great problem is that, though he is, as Fleda recognizes, naturally just, he has never had occasion to test his innate ethical sense. He had, in fact, “never known a difficulty; he had taken all his fences, his world wholly the world of the personally possible, rounded indeed by a grey suburb into which he had never had occasion to stray. In this vulgar and ill-lighted region he had evidently now lost himself” (91). This psychic suburb—no doubt the vulgar realm of the Brigstocks—ultimately overwhelms Owen. So, even though his instincts are, as James suggests, naturally right, it is Fleda’s dogged refusal to give in to what might be presumed to be propriety, coupled with his own inexperience and meekness, that imprisons Owen in that “grey suburb,” just as Fleda finds herself “imprisoned in [Mrs Gereth’s] torment of taste” (86).

*Poynton* seems, from such a reading, to be yet another parable of the conflict between spirit and matter—between Fleda and Owen’s sense of justice and Mona and Mrs Gereth’s sense of possession. The idea of beauty and the substance of beauty never harmonize within the book, and in the end, it is the worst of taste—Mona Brigstock—that seems to triumph. This reading makes for a particularly frustrating novel, for the conventional romance plot flounders in futility, Poynton is irrevocably “spoiled,” and the Philistines win out. Yet the point of the novel is not, simply, that middle-class tastes will corrupt beauty; indeed, the novel poses a significantly more complex argument in which neither Poynton nor Waterbath rules. It is easy to overlook the “third
way” between two tastes, but it is, in fact, Ricks—the compromise house—that is James’s central focus. This dower-house to which Mrs Gereth is exiled is, of course, an insult to her aesthetic sensibilities, with its odd proportions, conventionally “suburban” décor, and needlessly sentimental bric-a-brac. Yet, when Fleda and Mrs Gereth visit Ricks for inspection, Fleda sees something important there. It was, she admits, “not so bad as she had feared” (68). The collection of furnishings that Mrs Gereth’s maiden-aunt had left gave the impression that “they had been gathered as slowly and as lovingly as the golden flowers of the other house” (68). Thus, Fleda sees past the inferior quality of the maiden-aunt’s possessions and recognizes in their collection a familiar process. Just as Mrs Gereth had cultivated a life through art, so too had the maiden-aunt. Ricks has a powerful effect on Fleda and as she explores the modest home she feels an affinity for its accoutrements, thinking, “she too, for a home, could have lived with them” (68). She feels she “should have adored the maiden-aunt,” who “passed shyly, yet with some bruises, through life; had been sensitive and ignorant and exquisite: that too was a sort of origin, a sort of atmosphere for relics and rarities, though different from the sorts most prized at Poynton” (68). Fleda’s empathetic reaction to the home finds little sympathy with Mrs Gereth, for whom “one of the deepest mysteries of life was the way that—given certain natures—hideous objects could be loved” (68). But Fleda recognizes that there is something else at work at Ricks—“it wasn’t a question of love at present for these [objects]; it was only a question of some practical patience” (68). In other words, it was the sense of making the best of what one has—of cultivating a life, rather than a collection—that initially attracts Fleda to the curious charms of Ricks. This “practical patience” is the only thing in the novel more powerful than the conventional love of possession or love of beauty.

---

1 Owen also thinks he could make a home of Ricks, telling Fleda, “‘I think it’s awfully nice here, [. . .] I assure you I could do with it myself’” (100).
While the novel ends with a fire, James’s argument concludes earlier and much more happily. After Mrs Gereth returns her collection to Poynton (prematurely, as it turns out), she is forced to “fish out” the maiden-aunt from “an empty barn” (202) in order to furnish Ricks once again. When Fleda visits the restored Ricks, she is touched by its renewed beauty, enhanced by Mrs Gereth’s skilful arrangement of the modest collection. She remarks, “‘ah, there’s something here that will never be in the inventory! [. . . ] It’s a kind of fourth dimension. It’s a presence, a perfume, a touch. It’s a soul, a story, a life. [. . .] Somehow there were no ghosts at Poynton, [. . .] that was the only fault’” (203). This “fourth dimension” Fleda perceives is, in fact, the compromise between two tastes that James offers us. It is the maiden-aunt’s practical patience coupled with Mrs Gereth’s aesthetics. Ricks becomes, in the end, a dream home—transformed rather than destroyed by the intersection of two tastes—one ethical and one aesthetic. James can end the novel with Poynton’s destruction because Poynton was never fully the “taste” he wanted to promote; the spoils “were nobody’s at all” (194). Poynton was not a home but a museum that could only ever house a curator; Ricks is, fundamentally, a home—a place which fuses the natural longing for beauty with the desire for the humane.

Poynton is not about the defeat of taste, but of the creation of a new taste, a new “origin.” And this “third taste”—the taste between beauty and vulgarity—is the same kind of model that Huxley, Waugh, and Betjeman will all try to define and understand in the context of the twentieth century’s own taste debate. This “dissident taste,” to apply a classification more suited to the highly politicized inter-war years, is an attempt to supplant the rigid limitations of traditional taste. Yet, this dissidence is distinct from its close relatives, camp and middlebrow culture, in that it neither reverses nor amalgamates the traditional terms of taste. “Bad taste” is not exalted without grave qualifications, and neither is “good taste” watered down to a more accessible plane. Dissident taste at once defers to the value of traditional taste judgement while
remaining skeptical of the hegemonic and homogeneous tendencies of any taste system. In describing, in very different ways, this “third taste,” all three writers make clear that there is in it, to echo James, something “that will never be in the inventory.” This dissidence recognizes the extra-artistic values that inhere in taste—the same values that inhere in Ricks: practical patience (or “making do”), domesticity, identity, and belonging. Rather than universally villifying the “maidens aunts” of the twentieth century, Huxley, Waugh, and Betjeman try to account for the phenomena that allow one’s taste to be neither good nor bad, neither correct nor aberrant. Throughout this study I will attempt to explain and examine, contextualize and particularize the efforts of these three taste dissidents to create a new taste for the modern era—to build, in essence, a Ricks for the twentieth century.

* * *

This study seeks to explore the network of connections between literature, art, architecture, and design in Britain in the early-twentieth-century. At the core of this network lies the phenomenon to which I will refer as the “good taste movement,” that is, the critical development and dissemination of a public and consensual definition of aesthetic taste. Public taste, of course, was a matter of popular concern in Britain from the eighteenth century on, though, as Deborah Cohen argues, the twentieth century saw a widespread and unprecedented “codification of taste.” Cohen traces several factors that contributed to this development of a consensual taste in Britain. The economic instability of the years immediately following WWI, coupled with the slow process of re-directing industrial production from military to domestic products, inflated the price of household goods. Many were forced to downsize to smaller homes and apartments, and the clean, uncluttered traits of modern design were well suited to smaller spaces (188). Moreover, spurred on by the success of similar developments in continental Europe, the newly created official “bodies” of taste, such as the Design Industries Association
(DIA) or the British Institute for Industrial Art (BIIA), were rigorous in their promotion of a
“modern” taste in Britain. Perhaps most influential, however, were the decorating advice
columns and home magazines that began to populate the periodical press. Cohen notes that over
twelve home magazines were founded during the 1920s and 1930s (188). This taste movement
gained momentum in the 1930s especially, as anxiety over national efficiency, coupled with
growing consumerism, drove government and public alike to reconsider the social value of
design, leading to an increasingly orthodox conception of taste (Hayward 223). Critics and
designers, who had long decried the state of Britain’s taste, were only too happy to lend their
services in the battle against “bad taste.”

The inclusion of literature in the network of “good taste” may seem a little out of place.
After all, literature faced its own “taste crisis” in the modernist period, the grounds of which
were not necessarily complementary to the issues faced in the design world. To look at debates
over aesthetic taste through the lens of literature may appear hemeneutically flawed, exalting
what the art critic Geoffrey Scott derided in 1924 as “the literary fallacy” (57), or the
interpretation of plastic form through an otherwise unrelated symbolic scheme. Yet the deep
connection between literature and architecture needs no justification, for despite Scott’s fervid
objections to literary aesthetics,² one need not look too far into the literary canon to discover
aesthetic polymaths, from Edith Wharton’s books on interior decorating to Thomas Hardy’s
apprenticeship in architecture. Even the professional world of architects and designers noted this
close connection; The Architectural Review, in fact, included an “Anthology” section in most
issues, in which the editors printed an excerpt from current poetry or fiction that responded to
current issues in design. Besides, taste has never been a purely aesthetic issue, for all too often

² For instance, the literary fallacy, Scott argues, “neglects the fact that in literature meaning, or fixed association, is
the universal term; while in architecture the universal term is the sensuous experience of substance and of form”
(57).
questions of distinction give rise to moral or ethical interpretation. One need only to consider the close etymological relationship between the words “décor” and “decorum.” Taste, as both a theme and a signifier, an aesthetic and an ethical instrument, has long been integral to literature. And, given the turn to interiority one sees in twentieth-century literature, it is little wonder that, in Marjorie Garson’s words, “‘taste’ in the widest sense is likely to be an informing principle of novels that focus on development of the ‘deep,’ developmental self and on moral choice” (4).

The objects we choose for our surroundings take on a special meaning beyond simply their surface value; the interiors in which we dwell serve as reflections and projections of our own psychic interiors. As art historian Mario Praz puts it, our “surroundings become a museum of the soul, an archive of its experiences; it reads in them its own history, and is perennially conscious of itself; the surroundings are the resonance chamber where its strings render their authentic vibration” (24). Yet the homogenization of interiors that characterized the “good taste” movement threatened these more ephemeral aspects of design, although this rationalization and de-individualization of the domestic space was only rarely considered by design critics and art historians. Literature, with its deep investment in the psychic archive, was particularly attuned to the rift that slowly formed between these two kinds of interiority, the physical and the spiritual.

Moreover, by the end of the nineteenth century, design was not merely the purview of critics and builders; educational and economic improvement, in tandem with a growing market for affordable commercial goods, allowed a much wider range of citizens to feel not simply qualified, but also called upon, to take an interest in aesthetic matters. As W.H. Auden wrote in an article for The Architectural Review (1933) in defence of his credentials for writing on design, “architecture is willy-nilly everyman’s business. He may be colour blind, stone deaf, decline absolutely to open even a newspaper, but a roof shelters him from the night, and the walls of public buildings circumscribe his hours of earning and sickness” (66). Indeed, convincing the
average person that the design environment is not simply pertinent, but also inextricably tied to everyday life, was one of the defining goals of the good taste movement.

Never before had issues of design been as relevant or accessible to the public, and the reasons for this burst of interest in wall-paper and cruet-sets, architectural styles or rock gardens, are as varied as they are abundant. In Evelyn Waugh’s unfinished novel, *Work Suspended* (1942), the narrator notes, “it was one of the peculiarities of my generation and there was no accounting for it. [. . .] When the poetic mood was on us, we turned to buildings, and gave them the place which our fathers accorded to Nature. [. . .] There was never a time when so many landless men could talk at length about landscape gardening” (253). For Waugh, this newfound interest in what may rather unromantically be called the “built environment” was born of nostalgia—it bespoke a yearning for a time when the idea of place was, if not permanent, at least definable, in contrast to the massive upheavals—social, political, geographic, psychological—of the modern age. But there was something much more powerful than nostalgia at work in the growth of design literacy in the twentieth century. Design, and the choices implicit in it, offered the moderns a new way of reading the world around them, one not tied to the past. For instance, in his brief memoir of a late-Victorian childhood, “Lancaster Gate” (1922), Lytton Strachey argues that for the moderns’ fathers “the visible confirmation of things were unimportant; they were more interested in the mental and moral implications of their surroundings” (16). Strachey felt strongly that in contrast to that of the Victorians, the modern view “is different. We find satisfaction in curves and colours, and windows fascinate us, we are agitated by staircases, inspired by doors, disgusted by cornices, depressed by chairs, made wanton by ceilings, entranced by passages, and exacerbated by a rug” (16). While one could make the case that the
Victorians were all too likely to be exacerbated by a rug, for Strachey it was obvious that modernity was an invitation to view form on its own terms, distinct from any rigid code of interpretation. The rationalism of modern design demanded this attention to form as form, and, as will be demonstrated in chapter two, the physical revulsion that Strachey describes as a response to poor design was not uncommon amongst ultra-modern designers. Of course, as I show throughout this study, the modernists’ purported disinterest in the moral or ethical implications of design was often misleading, and the supposedly objective emphasis on physical well-being—on morale instead of morals—often merely cloaked more conventionally ethical concerns. In contrast, Huxley, Waugh, and Betjeman were interested in making manifest the ethical undercurrents of design discourse.

Just as literature is capable of drawing attention to the psychic and ethical possibilities of design, so too is it capable of calling out the social conventions embedded in décor. No longer, though, did writers need to rely solely on the encyclopedic and fetishistic strategies of nineteenth-century realism in order to make use of interiors in fiction. As Chiara Briganti suggests, the de-emphasis on the domestic environment in much twentieth-century literature was not merely a reaction against the previous century, but it was also indicative of “the author’s assumption that readers would naturally decode the class, status and location of these domestic spaces and objects through the domestic symbol systems of net curtains, terraced housing, the number of servants, or the ‘stoppered, sand-filled lighthouse’ on the mantelpiece” (54). In other words, modern readers were design-literate; the smallest reference, whether it be Elizabeth Bowen’s reference to “jazz tapestry” furniture (521) in “Attractive Modern Homes,” or E.M. Forster’s description of the Wilcoxes’ “gilded wall-paper, amid whose foliage parrots sang” (129), could convey a wealth of ancillary information to readers. These “symbol systems” were

---

3 One need only think of Holman Hunt’s “The Awakening Conscience” (1853), in which the gaudy, overstuffed
not new, but the widespread familiarity with them made them a potent tool of the modern writer. Design was a portal into a whole host of cultural signifiers, and when yoked to the interpretive strategies of modernist literature, made for a juggernaut of cultural reference.

While it is not unusual to consider painting and sculpture as necessary cultural referents for studies of modernist literature, and while modern design itself has spawned nearly a century’s worth of critical investigation, only recently has the connection between design (by which I mean domestic and industrial products as distinct from the “purer” plastic arts) and literature been afforded much critical attention. Certainly modernist spaces have been amply discussed in literary criticism, but the historical specificity of such spaces is often lacking in favour of more metaphorical readings of interiors and interiority. The reason for such a critical gap is not simply that, as David Spurr contends, “modernist literary works have little to say about contemporary architecture” (469). On the contrary, the relevance of design to literature is almost taken for granted by both writers and critics in the period. Nevertheless, there are valuable prototypes for the interdisciplinary study of modernism, such as Victoria Rosner’s *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*, which seeks to reclaim and redefine interiority by tracing the “interarts foundation of modernist literary aesthetics” (11). Similarly, Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei’s *Domestic Modernism* offers a compelling model for combining historical and literary analysis. Christopher Reed’s *Bloomsbury Rooms*, while primarily a work of art history, is also crucial in its exploration of the counter-cultural Bloomsbury in terms of both visual and literary modernism.

---

interior is supposed to somehow mirror the guilty conscience of the “kept woman.”

4 Huxley, for instance, frequently refers to Brighton Pavillion as a tool for understanding the Romantics. In “Fashions in Visual Imagery” (1924), he notes that *Endymion* “is far too rococo to have come out of a Greek imagination. What Keats saw when he wrote it may be guessed by studying the art and decoration of his period—the Regency. Brighton Pavillion, the furniture and decoration of some of the State Apartments at Windsor Castle—these give us the clue” (156)—a sentiment to which he returns in *After Many a Summer.*
One of the pitfalls of “reading” modernist design is the tendency to view the period through the lens of its later critical assessments. Modernism as both a visual and literary movement may conjure visions of glass houses and impenetrable prose. “New,” “radical,” “revolutionary,” “untraditional”—these are all words used—both then and now—to suggest that modernism manifests itself primarily as an irreversible break with the past. And this version of modernism, like most assessments of modernism, is partly true, but too often critics mistake the part for the whole, confusing intent and effect. While much recent work in modernism has sought to complicate and expand more conventional readings of the period, the relationship between the Victorians and the moderns has proved difficult to sort out. Too many studies tend to overinflate modernism’s reactionary tendencies. For instance, in contextualizing the modern reaction against Victorian interiors, Rosner insists that “the values enshrined in the Victorian domestic interior” were “respectability, status, social hierarchy, etiquette, and comfort,” while “taste and self-expression were subordinate” (46). She is quite right, except for one detail: these were the values the modernists themselves tended to ascribe to the Victorian domestic interior. For instance, the myth of monolithic Victorian design tends to discount the dissident voices—the decorators and advice columnists, often female, who were instrumental in shaping the taste of the home. This group was active in challenging the largely patriarchal (and patronizing) taste reform movement, for this influential group of women fought against the rigid theorization, homogenization, and moralization of domestic taste (Cohen xv). Thad Logan, among others, points out that the domestic interior was one of the few outlets of self-expression afforded Victorian women (214). Yet the effusiveness and novelty of such expressiveness does not often

---

³ In reality, as Richard Weston notes, Britain was largely hostile to modernism in design in the first part of the century (174).
⁶ Even into the twentieth century this connection between women and design remained strong; in H.G. Wells’s 1912 novel, The Marriage, the university-educated female protagonist finds herself stifled with married life and turns her attention towards decorating, noting that “now out of the chaotic skein of countless shops she could choose and pick and mingle her threads in a glow of feminine self-expression” (243).
factor into modernist accounts of the suffocating volume of chintz and aspidistra plants they associated with the era. This is not to say that modernist criticisms of Victorian aesthetics were unfounded, but rather, they often oversimplified the motivations behind Victorian interiors, in much the same way that modernism itself has been simplified to signify nothing more than steel and concrete. In reality, the average middle-class villa in 1920 did not look remarkably different from its 1880 counterpart. Perhaps there is a little less clutter, a little less upholstery, and a few more “modern” conveniences, but it would hardly be an alien sight for a Victorian to behold. As Cohen notes, the average British family of the 1920s was not terribly interested in modernism, and “did not wish to live [. . .] in a ‘flat without a past,’ accompanied only by a cactus for comfort” (172). The relationship between modern and Victorian was, like the literary relationship, exceedingly more complex than groaning references to anti-macassars and commonplace books would lead one to believe. It is more profitable to view modernism, both literary and aesthetic, in Jessica Feldman’s terms, not as “a rupture from the immediate Victorian past, but its flowering” (468). Feldman’s conception of a Victorian modernism helps to deflate the mythic juxtaposition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as two irreconcilable entities. While modernism certainly reacted against its Victorian roots, it was also content to transmute and transform Victorian design values into modern values. In this study I consider historical periods, like taste itself, to be a continuum rather than a binary.

I suggest, in fact, that the key features of the twentieth-century taste movement were, to an extent, merely the perfections of nineteenth-century attempts to define and ameliorate public taste. And, truly, it is the publicness of the taste debate that ultimately links the two centuries, for prior to the social and industrial upheavals of the early nineteenth century, taste was, if not precisely private, then certainly the special preserve of the monied classes. Edward J. Duveen, in his 1911 decorating manual, _Colour in the Home_, quotes Sir J. Gardner Wilkinson’s assertion
that “taste, to be of use, must pervade all classes” (2). This sentiment found as much favour in the twentieth century as the nineteenth; writing in 1934, art critic and educator John Gloag proclaimed, “what the eighteenth century achieved for that small class we must achieve for all. And we can” (97). Though I do not wish to oversimplify, the rise of the middle-classes did bring about the need for a more democratic approach to taste; “public taste” was no longer simply applicable to the commissioning of statues in public places. Once the power of taste—the personal act of distinction—was extended beyond the elite classes through greater access to and affordability of commercial goods, “public taste” could also connote the “public’s taste.” There was no longer simply “taste”—there was now a variety of tastes, and this multiplicity of distinctions led to much confusion. As was clear in Poynton, the middle-classes, situated on the border of class, desired “taste” even as they lacked the conventional cultural shorthand to achieve this goal. They stood on uneasy ground between inventing a new taste and subverting the old taste. The history of taste in the nineteenth century is very much a story of tension between cultural capital and economic capital, as hereditary taste gave way to public taste.

One of the first attempts at understanding this new taste problem was the formation of the Select Committee of 1835. William Ewart, a member of the government, proposed “‘a Select Committee be appointed to inquire into the best means of extending a knowledge of the Fine Arts, and the principles of Design among the people—especially among the manufacturing population of the country’” (qtd. Sproll 106). Ewart’s proposal was instigated by the slump in sales of English-made goods, and the committee found that foreign goods sold better in England not because they were made better, but because they were more attractive (Saunders 2). Industrial manufacture was most advanced in Britain, but its producers were not, in any conventional sense, artistically inclined. Consumers did not simply want quality, they wanted beauty—or, at least, fashionability—and so they turned to Continental goods. The Committee
found that the best way to improve the taste level of domestic goods was to train a generation of industrial designers sensitive to the finer points of aesthetics, and thus they opened a series of regional schools of design that were open to the public (Saunders 29). This first attempt at yoking together art and industry through education would prove vastly influential.7

The Select Committee’s findings demonstrate that the central problem faced in both the nineteenth- and the twentieth centuries with regards to public taste was the uneven footing between consumers, manufacturers, and the taste reformers. Consumers may have wanted more beautiful objects for the home, but the market’s definition of beauty often jarred with the “expert’s opinion.” Here the rift between “fashion” and “taste” becomes apparent, for the former is largely the concern of the consumer, whereas the latter is the traditional preserve of the expert. In the middle were the manufacturers, whose primary goal was to please customers, not experts. The factions in Britain that worried over the loss of market share for consumer goods were comforted when Britain’s manufacturers began producing goods British people wanted to buy, but the taste reformers remained dissatisfied, as the “fashions” that captivated consumers left much to be desired for the tasteful. Consumers wanted goods that connoted ingenuity, novelty, and, above all, social standing; reformers wanted goods that denoted quality, fitness-for-purpose, and, above all, aesthetic “correctness.” Taste reform met its match in the marketplace.

The truly defining moment for mid-Victorian taste was the Great Exhibition of 1851. This exploration and celebration of design and industry was truly an exhibition of public taste—a taste defined, by and large, by the middle class. The exhibits featured, such as kitchen appliances and home furnishings, a Jacquard loom, elaborate jewellery, a primitive fax machine and an early voting machine, say much about the values of the Exhibition’s audience: commerce, industry, comfort, democracy, ingenuity, luxury. But, especially when it came to the exhibits of

7 For more on the influence of the Select Committee, see Paul Sproll, “Matters of Taste and Matters of Commerce:
decorative objects, taste did not exist for this class as it did for the traditional keepers of taste; as Bill Risebero suggests, “to the Victorian middle class, taste—in the sense of observing theoretical rules of design for their own sake—was not of prime importance” (76). Instead, Risebero adds, “the main purpose of a work of art was extra-artistic” (76). In other words, for the new tastemakers, taste was a reflection of social, rather than hereditary and aesthetic, values. Likely for this reason, the Great Exhibition, while a great success, drew the ire of the more rigid aesthetic critics, who wanted increased access to the objects of taste, without at the same time compromising the quality and nature of taste.

The figure who stands as the most memorable of this initial reform movement is Henry Cole—civil servant, inventor, and progenitor of the commercial Christmas Card. He was rigorous in his promotion and control of public taste. Cole had been a Commissioner for the Great Exhibition, his success in which occupation led to him being named first General Superintendent of the Department of Practical Art. Cole, like other critics (Ruskin included), found many of the offerings of the Great Exhibition to be vulgar at best, so, using funds from the Great Exhibition, he and a group of like-minded reformers opened the Museum of Ornamental Art at Marlborough House in 1852 (later to be the Victoria and Albert Museum). This gallery was comprised of the best offerings of the Exhibition, from textiles to porcelain and glassware, and was free to the public on Mondays and Tuesdays, the principle being that these best objects would prove instructive. But Marlborough House is notorious not for its good taste, but rather for its bad taste; Cole was inspired to fill the corridor that led to the main gallery with the objects he considered to be the worst offenders of the Exhibition (‘Instances of Bad Taste’), such as Minton’s elaborately decorated ‘Silenus’ jug, or a pair of shears fashioned to resemble a stork (Cohen 20-1). Thus this “Chamber of Horrors” was designed as a purgative passage preceding,
Cole assumed, a tasteful rebirth. That was the plan, at least, but it did not go off quite as Cole had hoped. His notices explaining why the objects in the Chamber of Horrors were distasteful served only to alienate most of the visitors, who saw themselves—and their homes—reflected in the objects singled out for contempt. Those who were not offended by the Chamber missed the point entirely, assuming that the objects were on display as examples of fine workmanship, indistinguishable from the sacred goods in the main gallery (Cohen 22).\(^8\)

Cole and his followers were not the only ones to tackle public taste in the nineteenth century. John Ruskin, William Morris, Walter Pater, and others were equally influential in the definition and control of public taste in the nineteenth century. Despite the best efforts of the Victorian taste reformers, the period is unlikely, even in the most charitable of reckonings, to be remembered as a proud hour—even a middling hour—in the history of British aesthetics. But the objective value of Victorian taste is entirely beside the point; what is of use to this study is the way in which the Victorians’ interest in decorative art and public taste set the foundation for the modern taste reform movement. In spite of the antipathy many modernists felt towards the previous century, the “good taste movement” approached the formation of taste by a nearly identical process to that of the Victorians. As will be discussed in chapter three, twentieth-century taste reformers also looked to improved education as the most efficacious means of improving public taste, but the definition of education could be expanded to include radio broadcasts, pamphlets, magazines, and a dizzying array of decorative “self-help” books. Modern taste reformers also used public exhibitions and contests\(^9\) to promulgate the new tastes, such as the Ideal Home Exhibitions that commenced in 1908, or the Britain Can Make It Exhibition of 1946. An echo of the Select Committee can be found in the development of quasi-official bodies

---

\(^8\) This failure exercise was ridiculed in the popular press by such writers as Charles Dickens and Henry Morley.

\(^9\) The contest that proved most influential on the general public was Shoolbred & Co.’s modernist furnishing competition in 1928, which the ailing furniture company hoped would boost its public profile.
to govern design. Inspired by the success of the Deutsche Werkbund, the Design Industries Association (DIA) was formed in Britain in 1914 in an effort to promote good design in industrial manufacture. Similarly, the British Institute of Industrial Art was established in 1918 with a mandate to collect and preserve instances of “good” modern design, with a view to inclusion in the Victoria and Albert Museum.¹⁰

These “official bodies” were instrumental in promulgating an idea of “good taste” amongst designers and manufacturers, though, as was the case for the Victorian era, one cannot overestimate the influence of the interior decorator, who had gradually acquired by the twentieth century the status of “expert.” As design became increasingly industrialized over the turn of the century, department stores and established upholsterers lost their domination over the economy of home decorating (Battersby 59). Moreover, with the decreased demand for “art,” coupled with the increased ranks of trained artists, many talented figures sought other, more lucrative, creative outlets (Battersby 60). The interior decorator was, then, a byproduct of changing conditions in production and the distribution of domestic furnishing, plus the evolving role of the artist in the early twentieth century. Thus the “culture of taste” was born. As Battersby notes, the requirements for this new position “were few: a good appearance—ugly interior decorators had to rely upon talent—a fund of small talk, the ability to last out at interminable cocktail parties and a reputation for that mythical quality ‘natural good taste’” (59). The vast potential for profit from a public convinced by home magazines and educational campaigns of its own “tastelessness” attracted amateurs and trained artists alike to the field. By the 1930s, “good taste” was a lucrative commodity.

Perhaps the best illustration of the role of the decorator can gleaned from the following advertisement from The Architectural Review in 1927:

¹⁰ For more on the BIIA, see Yasuko Suga’s “‘Purgatory of taste’ or Projector of Industrial Britain? The British
To Architects

Art Dealer and Interior Decorator <University man> with exceptional connection among English nobility requires colleague <preferably an architect> to cope with increasing work. Business transacted from a private house, not a shop. Applicant should be a gentleman of some social experience, and he should have a good knowledge of old furniture and interior decoration. He will not be required to practise architecture. (lxxiii)

The emphasis placed on “good breeding,” the snobbish disdain for the “shop,” the need for qualifications (even if they are not to be used) would seem to paint a rather gloomy picture of the role of decorators in British taste reform. Yet, in some ways, this advertisement does help to illustrate an important point about the “good taste movement”: despite the degree of specialization and academicism that underwrites so many documents of the movement, taste is, ultimately, a social, rather than aesthetic, concern. Regardless of whether it was posh decorators trying to attract wealthy clientele, or shop girls and bank clerks eager to adopt the latest “trends” to be found in popular magazines, the desire for “taste,” however one defines it, is, fundamentally, an effort to engage with others. “Tell me what you like,” Ruskin muses, “and I’ll tell you what you are” (51). Whether we want our tastes to express individuality, or whether we merely want to fit in with the majority, we are trying to tell the world something about ourselves. Yet in the eyes of the authors studied here, the major figures of the design movement sought to conceal the social or ethical implications of taste reform, relying instead on more objective claims about the rationality and fitness of modern design. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that some of the most thorough social analysis of the “good taste movement” comes from literature,


11 This question of the social status of decorators confuses the servants in Evelyn Waugh’s *Vile Bodies*, leading one butler to assert, “‘decorators are either guests or workmen’” (79).
which provides an apparatus for assessing the effect of a phenomenon like modern design on the imaginative life of a community. For this reason, I pose this study as an exploration of modern design’s more elusive qualities, such as its ethical, social, and spiritual implications. In particular, I will explore the debates between authentic and “sham” culture, individuality and conformity, expertise and self-expression. Though I rely on the historical record to offer context for the criticism and fiction of the writers studied, I do not claim to offer an exhaustive historical account of the “good taste movement.” Instead, I am interested in asking a series of questions about such a movement’s larger legacy: what does a democratic taste look like? What is the psychological cost of a homogeneous aesthetic environment? How can one reconcile “good taste” and individuality? Why is design such a pervasive topic of discussion in the early-twentieth century, and for what is this newfound fascination with aesthetics a substitute?

These are the questions that concerned Huxley, Waugh, and Betjeman. While the answers they provide may be unsatisfactory, improbable, or even, in some cases, absurd, they are important to consider because each in his own way was internally divided by the paradox of taste distinctions, which Geoffrey Scott summarizes aptly: “either […] we must resign ourselves to chaos, […] or we must reduce taste to terms of something more constant and reliable” (37). In navigating the strait between chaos and reduction, Huxley, Waugh, and Betjeman manage to chart a third “point of origin” for taste. What is particularly striking in each author’s articulation of taste is that, lacking the vocabulary to describe that which is “not in the inventory,” they each resorted to the language of faith to express the more numinous qualities of this “dissident taste” they sought to define. It is, after all, remarkable that three of modernism’s most polarizing writers, writing on the most polarizing subject—taste—can find so many points of correspondence. Huxley, Waugh, and Betjeman alike share a skepticism of experts, a mistrust of the market, and a disdain for “sham” culture. While, more often than not, it is their failures, their
lack of vision, their petty prejudices, that prove most noteworthy, these writers are nonetheless valuable for their commitment—conscious or otherwise—to yoking together traditionally disparate categories. Their refusal to view taste as a pure binary offers us a new vocabulary of taste, one with the potential for broad—and surprising—applications.
Chapter One: Aldous Huxley, Taste Mystic

“... and more and more does one thank God for Wren.”
—H.G. Wells, Tono-Bungay

Despite his well-recognized role as an avid aesthetic critic, Aldous Huxley might not be the most likely standard-bearer in the battle for “good taste.” He is certainly the least domestically minded of the three writers studied here, and his artistic interests throughout his career—Christopher Wren, Piero della Francesca, landscape painting—seem considerably too esoteric to engage in the debate over taste in twentieth-century design. Indeed, the most convincing evidence of Huxley’s commitment to the problem of public taste comes from the unlikeliest source: his final novel, the utopian Island (1962). Of all his texts, Island would seem to be at the furthest remove from aesthetic concerns. Most of the novel is comprised of lectures on Eastern philosophy loosely fitted into a narrative. The central conflict in the novel, the annexation of the fictional island of Pala’s oil supply by the Rendang dictator, Colonel Dipa, is political and economic. This conflict, facilitated by the “false mystic,” Rani, and her materialist son, Murugan, culminates in the boy’s ascension to the throne of Pala, backed by Rendang’s military. Aside from a brief discussion of the spiritual efficacy of landscape painting, Huxley rarely addresses any aspect of aesthetics in Island.

Rarely, but not never. In the novel’s final, apocalyptic pages, Huxley unexpectedly inserts an extended, hallucinatory vision of “bad taste.” Will Farnaby, the English journalist sent to Pala by Dipa, arrives at the island only to become enchanted with its Buddhist-inspired organization and he comes to regret his clandestine alliance with the dictatorship. Growing increasingly convinced of the wisdom of Pala’s traditional way of life, Will begs Dr. MacPhail, one of the prominent islanders, to allow him to partake in the moksha medicine—a
hallucinogenic drug. Will’s experience with the *moksha* medicine comprises the last chapter of the book, and his progression from vision to vision says much about Huxley’s true preoccupations in the novel. At first Will is overcome by a feeling of ecstasy; he hears the Fourth Brandenburg Concerto as “a manifestation at one remove of the luminous bliss” (311); the table before him becomes a “breathing apocalypse [. . .] by some mystical Cubist” (317); a bookshelf becomes a lapidary delight, and an amateurish attempt at landscape painting becomes a transcendental conduit. Will’s newfound mystico-aesthetic vision offers him solace until, as he had been warned it might, his vision darkens. Huxley describes this turn at length:

> The Essential Horror glared out of everything he looked at. Those compositions by the mystical Cubist—they had turned into intricate machines for doing nothing malevolently. That tropical landscape, in which he had experienced the union of his own being with the being of God—it was now simultaneously the most nauseating of Victorian oleographs and the actuality of hell. [. . .] Everything still pulsed with life, but with the life of the infinitely sinister bargain basement.

(318)

Will’s vision of this Essential Horror—so acutely and, in light of the novel’s subject-matter as a whole, so unexpectedly aesthetic in nature—is concurrent with the violent military overthrow of Pala’s utopian government. And yet, Will’s vision does not reveal violence, corruption, and enslavement, but rather only the conclusion that “Omnipotence was perpetually creating [. . .] a cosmic Woolworth stocked with mass-produced horrors. Horrors of vulgarity and horrors of pain, of cruelty and tastelessness, of imbecility and deliberate malice” (318). In other words, Will’s great spiritual awakening to the Essential Horror is not, as one might expect under the circumstances, an awakening to the evilness of human acts, but rather an awareness of the evil of bad taste. For most of the novel, Pala is a spiritual and political paradise; in its conclusion, it is
merely “the Agony in the Bargain Basement. The Crucifixion among the Christmas tree decorations” (323). Pala becomes dystopian by taste, not politics.

Huxley’s apocalyptic treatise on taste in Island seems, at first glance, decidedly beside the point. By the 1960s, Huxley’s work was concerned almost exclusively with the exploration of mysticism and spirituality. Even his art criticism at this point was fixated on spiritual questions; in an essay on El Greco in Themes and Variations (1950), for instance, he almost ignores the painter’s technique and criticizes instead El Greco’s flawed theology. At this time, only landscape painting interested Huxley for its complementarity to mystical practice. As Vijaya explains to Will in Island, one discovers “‘those more than human facts [. . .] when the mind is confronted by the outer distances of nature, or by the simultaneously inner and outer distances of a painted landscape’” (214). Huxley was hardly in the mainstream of aesthetic criticism.

And yet, the tendency to read Huxley’s later work solely through the lens of his mysticism obscures the centrality of questions of taste and aesthetics to the development of his philosophic writing. The reconciliation of art and spirit—or, more simply, the reconciliation of aesthetic endeavour with “those more than human facts”—was a tenet of Huxley’s work even from the outset of his career, before his interest in Eastern philosophy became his defining interest. This chapter will demonstrate precisely how Huxley develops his philosophy of taste in the midst of the “good taste” movement, mapping the correspondences between his seemingly esoteric aesthetics, his quest for immanent human values, and the design climate in post-war Britain.
1.1 “Il faut cultiver notre jardin”: Laying the Foundation at House & Garden

“The function of House & Garden will be to show by precept and pictorial example how harmony may be achieved between Life and its surroundings” (“House & Garden” 8). Such is the founding principle of the inaugural issue of House & Garden magazine’s London edition, which commenced publication in November 1920. This first incarnation of the British edition lasted only a few years\(^{12}\) and was largely forgotten in the shadow of the current manifestation of the magazine, which has been in continuous publication since 1947.\(^{13}\) Indeed, the 1920-24 run of House & Garden UK should elicit little interest were it not for a curious fact of its publication history: Aldous Huxley was its first editor.

Huxley’s tenure as House & Garden editor remains an unexplored period of his career. There is good reason for this critical gap. While Huxley worked for several Condé Nast publications in the 1920s (including Vogue and Vanity Fair), his involvement in House & Garden lasted only about six months. Moreover, the magazine in its early stages was comprised of anonymous contributions—most of which, Caroline Seebohm notes, were imported from the US edition (132)—and its marked files were shredded for recycling in a paper-saving effort during WWII. The extent of Huxley’s authorship remains frustratingly obscure. His biographers only mention in passing his work on House & Garden, and the major bibliographies contain no references to the magazine, largely because, as David Bradshaw points out in his supplementary bibliography, the California-centred editors were unable—or unwilling—to access the vast store of information from the British periodical press (237). Recently, James Sexton has taken up the task of identifying Huxley’s anonymous contributions to various Condé Nast publications,

\(^{12}\) As Caroline Seebohm observes, “with a small circulation and little, if any, promotional activity on its behalf, British House & Garden began to fail almost immediately” (132).

\(^{13}\) Indeed, the current editors were at first incredulous at the suggestion the magazine was published before 1947.
relying on repeated phrases and ideas from Huxley’s signed work.¹⁴ Huxley was, happily, not above recycling material.

Huxley first mentions the magazine in a letter to Naomi Mitchison in 1920; he writes, “I have just helped to float a marvellous paper belonging to the *Vogue* people—*House & Garden* (run by a ‘staff of experts’ as the advertisement says, or otherwise by me and a young girl)” (*Selected Letters* 191). One could assume, given this description, that Huxley penned much of the edition’s original material himself. In fact, he later reminisced about this work in a 1930 interview with Louise Morgan, saying, “I used to do brilliant articles in *House & Garden*, all about incinerators and how to put plaster on ceilings” (264).

While on the surface Huxley’s views on incinerators may not seem to possess much critical value, his work at *House & Garden* offers a unique glimpse into his dissident position in modernism. In this section I hope to elucidate the tension between Huxley’s aesthetics and the consensual model of “good taste” promulgated by design experts. Nowhere is this tension more readily apparent than in Huxley’s early editorials for *House & Garden*, in which he negotiates the fine balance between his de facto position as “taste expert” and his eccentric critical attitude.¹⁵ These editorials are formal and thematic embodiments of this tension, as the argument

---

¹⁴ See, for instance, “Aldous Huxley: Condé Nast’s ‘Staff of Experts’” (*Aldous Huxley Annual* 5 [2005]: 1-10) and “Part Two: Huxley's Condé Nast Essays on Architecture, Applied Arts and Sculpture.”

¹⁵ The authorship of the editorial pages is, of course, open for debate, though Sexton identifies at least two as the work of Huxley. I would suggest that all four are Huxley’s. Firstly, the editorials appear in the November to February issues of the magazine—the months that correspond to Huxley’s tenure at the magazine. Secondly, that key word—harmony—appears throughout the editorials, as it does throughout much of Huxley’s identified work on aesthetics. The greatest evidence for his authorship, however, is not the editorials themselves, but rather the poems selected to accompany the editorials. The poets are all friends or acquaintances of Huxley’s and all of their poems make their first published appearance in *House & Garden*. The November 1920 poem, “Summer Night,” is by Huxley himself, so the connection is obvious there; the December poem is Robert Graves’s “The Patchwork Bonnet,” which is listed in the bibliographies as appearing first in 1921 in *The Pier-Glass*. Huxley met Graves at Garsington Manor and Graves contributed to Huxley’s *Palatine Review*. The January 1921 issue features “Bells,” by Russell Green, who was an Oxford friend of Huxley’s and with whom, at the time of publication, Huxley was living. This poem does not seem to have been published elsewhere. Finally, the February issue contains Edith Sitwell’s “Late Snow,” a poem that does not otherwise appear until its “official” publication—in altered form—in *Bucolic Comedies* in 1923. Huxley’s own work had previously been published in the Sitwells’ *Wheels*. Given the rarity of the poems included and the close connections between poet and editor, it is reasonable to assume that Huxley was instrumental in orchestrating their publication.
of each editorial is triangulated between three competing media: prose, verse, and image. In exploring the relationship between media in these editorials, I hope to demonstrate how Huxley domesticates his aesthetic eccentricity by adopting and subverting the conventions of home magazine discourse.

The most striking feature of these editorials is their structural organization, in that they seem to borrow elements of the emblem tradition. Each page contains an image, underneath which is found a short poem, and the whole is surrounded by the editorial prose. The page layout encourages the reading of the poem as the inscriptio and the prose as the subscriptio. This emblematic form mimics the magazine’s stated methodology of demonstrating good taste by “precept and pictorial example.” In particular, Huxley’s first article in the November 1920 issue operates seamlessly as a didactic emblem instructing readers in the proper cultivation of one’s interior environment. The pictura features a moss-covered archway in full, verdant bloom. The poem, Huxley’s own “Summer Night,” concerns the speaker’s experience of his natural surroundings, in which stars, wind, and trees appear psychically connected: “all things seem / The thoughts and passions of a secret mind” (ll. 10-11). The subscriptio then builds on this notion of environmental unity, for the argument of Huxley’s editorial is that to live “artistically” and, by extension, tastefully, requires one to “harmonize one’s surroundings with one’s soul—that is the art of life” (8). The harmony of nature and structure in the pictura reflects perfectly the harmony of nature and mind in the poem, which in turn reflects the harmony of soul and domestic environment that the editorial advocates. Each element of the emblem builds on the others to complete a coherent lesson in taste—a civilizing lesson in, as Point Counter Point’s (1928) Mark Rampion might say, “‘harmony and completeness’” (103).

One would assume, given that Huxley continues this formal schema in all four of his editorials, that each emblem would function in a similar manner. Yet, with each issue, the
tension between *inscriptio* and *subscriptio* mounts, and the emblematic neatness of the first issue devolves into ironic dissonance. The January 1921 editorial, “The Union of Crafts,” aptly demonstrates the dissolution of Huxley’s emblematic editorial form. This address concerns a perennial topic of design discourse in Britain, the relationship between art and industry. The grave state of England’s industrial arts had been a concern since the early nineteenth century, but the success of such continental endeavours as the Bauhaus school or the Deutscher Werkbund exhibition of 1914 once again drew attention to the dire need for higher aesthetic standards in England’s industrial output. Huxley’s point in the article is that the Morris-Ruskin ideal of the craftsman toiling to produce singular objects of beauty for the home is unthinkable in an industrial age, since “the remedy for the almost universal ugliness which pervades the industrialized England of the present day lies solely in the hands of the manufacturers and the men who design the goods” (24). The universal ugliness can only be avoided, Huxley argues, if the formal standards of the artist—the solitary craftsman—are combined with the efficiency of the machine. Yet, as Huxley is quick to note (unlike many other reformers of industrial design), “the artists who go in for industrial art are for the most part the second-rates who are incapable of achieving success in the realm of pure, unapplied art” (24). In other words, only once the rigid divisions between “applied” and “unapplied” art fall, Huxley argues, can one ever expect to find beautiful and affordable objects for the home.

Huxley’s argument is straightforward enough, if not a little banal. But once the eye turns from the prose to the poem, Huxley’s editorial position becomes increasingly murky. The poem, Russell Green’s “Bells,” is accompanied by an image of cupid resting next to a skull on the crossbeam of a tower bell, surrounded by roses. What on earth, one wonders, could such a consciously dated image have to do with the manufacture of tasteful wall sconces? The text of

---

16 Clearly Huxley’s, as he makes nearly the same arguments in “Art, Industry, and Craftsmanship” in *Literary*
the poem itself is even more arcane. It consists of the speaker’s reminiscences of “Old quiet
gardens under silent hills / Of England in another century” (ll. 1-2), which rouse in the speaker
“the sadness sweeter than all happiness / Returning with remembered happiness, / The holy spirit
of my sweet lost years” (ll. 10-13). The poem then concludes, rather dramatically, with the
speaker’s wish: “And I would be contented even to die / If bells would bear me over into death”
(ll. 14-15). How very odd. Perhaps the poet neglected to mention that said bells ought to be
artfully designed and cheaply produced in a factory outside of Bristol. Or perhaps this poem does
not quite ring true in the context of this editorial.

Fortunately, Green was not a poet disposed to diverse subjects, so a certain amount of
context may help to clarify the poem’s relation to the editorial. Green, an Oxford contemporary
of Huxley’s, won the Newdigate Prize in 1916 for his poem “Venice” (narrowly beating out
Huxley himself). He was active in Huxley’s Palatine Review at Oxford, and later co-edited the
magazine Coterie, which also counted Huxley as a board member. Green never achieved the
success he sought as a poet and resigned himself to a life as a clerk in the Foreign Office. One of
his early contributions to the Palatine Review, however, may shed some light on the poem at
hand. In 1916 Huxley published Green’s “Bells” in prose-poem form. This meditation on
“reality”—which can be most charitably described as “undergraduate” in skill—expands on the
philosophical underpinnings of its 1921 successor in verse. In this first version, it is the sound of
Oxford’s bells that rouses the poet into reverie over “that world over the hills whither the bells
take [him]” (27). The speaker questions whether this bell-begotten dreamworld may be more real
than “the world which [his] feet tread” (27). In contrast to the latter world, which is “detestably
measured,” in the world beyond the hills, “nothing [. . .] is so many yards long, so many yards
broad, so many yards high” (27). The bells in both versions of the poem act as the psychic

America (1935).
conduit into a numinous world beyond that is not merely “more real” than the physical world, but “more beautiful for its disorder” (27). Its beauty lies in its pastoral simplicity, its resistance to such human impositions as time and industry, and its sympathetic acceptance of the poet-artist.

If we consider, then, the treacly romanticism of Green’s poem, we find a new route to understanding its place in the editorial of January 1921. For the ethos of the poem, rather than supporting the argument of the article itself, actually speaks to the argument Huxley rejects. Huxley begins the piece by dismissing “the palmy days of romanticism [that] saw the birth of the notion that artists are not as other men are, but beings apart—spiritual hermits who have to live far removed from the hubbub of the vulgar world in private dream snuggeries of their own” (24). He continues, “it is not the least true that [the artist] must separate himself from the common world of politics and commerce” (24). Indeed, Huxley compares the changing status of the artist to the changing arena of post-war international politics, in which isolationism is no longer a viable strategy, just as handcraftsmanship is no longer a viable method of production in an industrial era.

Something does not quite add up. One could hardly find a more apt description of Green’s world beyond the hills than a “private dream snuggery,” and Green’s apocalyptic yearning for a permanent union with this otherworldly realm reeks of romantic isolationism. The emblematic structure of the editorial falls in on itself once we realize that the inscriptio and the subscriptio undo each other. But why would Huxley choose a romantic poem to illustrate the defects of the romantic attitude towards industrial production? Huxley, having published “Bells” in prose form, having been on the board of Coterie, and having lived with Green, would surely have been aware of the poet’s peculiar campanian obsession. It seems unlikely that Huxley would publish the poem only to humiliate his friend. Moreover, one wonders whether the typical

---

reader of *House & Garden* would have been aware that this page is, at heart, at odds with itself. After all, the closing line of the editorial asserts “it is only by the amicable union of the various branches of art that we can hope to achieve the perfect harmony which is our ideal goal” (24). Yet the union here of two branches of literature—poetry and prose—falls far short of harmony.

I suggest that the ironic dissonance of this editorial reveals much about Huxley’s ambiguous position as arbiter of domestic taste, and I argue that this example sets the foundation for Huxley as a dissident taste reformer. Huxley’s views on romanticism are here crucial to understanding the didactic and dissident purposes of the editorial. Huxley made no secret of his contempt for the romantic attitude. In art, he links romanticism with the Baroque, a feature of his aesthetics that will be explored later in this chapter. Speaking generally, however, Huxley associates the romantic outlook with one-sidedness, with a solipsism that must canalize one aspect of the individual at the expense of all others (“New Romanticism” 212). The characters of Huxley’s *Point Counter Point* and, indeed, most of his novels, are romantic in this sense; they all pursue their hobby-horses at the expense of a harmoniously complete individuality. Robert Baker suggests that Huxley’s views on this eclectic romanticism were “inseparable from his endeavour to probe and anatomize the intellectual and psychological matrices of postwar culture” (“Fire” 25). Indeed, the romantic hobby-horses Huxley’s characters pursue speak directly to this postwar experience, whether it be Maurice Spandrell’s nihilism or Everard Webley’s fascism—the discordant notes are tied to the modern experience. Of course, these romantic tendencies seem a far cry from the Romantic philosophies of the eighteenth century. Yet Huxley’s use of romanticism is not anachronistic; unlike many of his contemporaries, he sees it not merely as the historical period which gave rise to a strain of late-eighteenth-century thought, but as, more generally, an ahistorical, “perennial state of mind” that, Baker argues, “he identified with seventeenth-century baroque aesthetics and twentieth-century cubism” (“Dark” 12). In “The
New Romanticism” (1931), Huxley argues, “modern romanticism is the old romanticism turned inside out, with all its values reversed” (212). Thus, the disproportionate valuation of the soul for the Romantics has been inverted in the twentieth century to a disproportionate valuation of the machine; both tendencies deny the value of “life lived on a human [. . .] scale” (Baker, “Fire” 41). This phenomenon operates both politically and aesthetically. On the one hand, the romantic communist requires “not men, but cogs and ratchets in the huge ‘collective mechanism’” (214), while the romantic democrat exalts the common, or “ordinary” man as the ideal consumer and, as Huxley explains in “Machinery, Psychology, and Politics” (1929), aims for the mass production of the individual, the creation of a standardized human mean (221). Both political romanticisms deny the human plane. Likewise can modern romantic tendencies be found in art: “the whole ‘Cubist’ tendency in modern art [. . .] is deeply symptomatic” of the valorization of the external, mechanical, and unnatural (“New Romanticism” 216). Scogan, the chilly rationalist of Crome Yellow (1921), is the prototypical “cold-blooded romantic” in his wholesale fascination with the mechanical and rational: “‘I like to see pictures from which nature has been completely banished, pictures which are exclusively the product of the human mind. They give me the same pleasure as I derive from a good piece of reasoning or a mathematical problem or an achievement of engineering’” (117-8). In this inverse romanticism, Nature and Industry switch roles; as Scogan concludes, “‘yes, give me the Tube and Cubismus every time; give me ideas, so snug and neat and simple and well made. And preserve me from nature, preserve me from all that’s inhumanly large and complicated and obscure’” (118). Scogan perfectly demonstrates Huxley’s assertion that “the Cubist dehumanization of art is frequently accompanied by a romantic and sentimental admiration for machines” (“The New Romanticism” 217). And yet, this romanticism is as destructive as the psychic romanticism, for “the machine murders fantasy

---

18 “Cold-Blooded Romantics” was the original title of “The New Romanticism.”
and suppresses personal idiosyncrasies” (“This Community Business” 223), just as Baroque art relies on “the exploitation of the inordinate” (“Variations on a Baroque Tomb” 396) for effect. The old romanticism takes us out of the world to a fantasy realm of unreality; the new romanticism imprisons us in a mechanical realm of rational uniformity. In each case, the merely human level is sacrificed.

While Huxley gestures towards a modern argument about design in “The Union of Crafts,” then, he also makes clear how inadequate the modern solution is. He does this by parroting mainstream ideas and subtly undermining them. For instance, in describing the object of the Bauhaus school— the gold standard, so far as modernists were concerned, in the union of art and industry—Walter Gropius writes (1934) that we must “liberate the creative artist from his otherworldliness and reintegrate him into the workaday world of realities; and at the same time to broaden and humanize the rigid, almost exclusively material mind of the modern business man” (682). This is ostensibly also the aim Huxley pursues in his editorial, though he has to add that “the good artist is a rare bird and a shy one” (24), so one cannot expect the liberation of the creative mind to be easy. Moreover, the world of realities Huxley describes is one in which “the prime necessity is to have an abundance of cheap goods” which the manufacturers “turn out cheaply by the thousands” (24). In other words, Huxley hints, the push to improve the industrial production of objects for the home has little to do with beautifying the domestic sphere; rather, the mass-production of taste serves only to fuel consumption.

Huxley’s position as editor of a mainstream decorating magazine no doubt compelled him to pay lip service to the ruling precepts of the modern movement, such as fitness-for-purpose or minimal ornamentation, but he effectively undermines this position through subtle juxtaposition. In embedding Green’s Wordsworthian effort within the modernist discourse of the
editorial, Huxley draws an implicit comparison between the two otherwise distinct modes, suggesting that the modern movement merely substitutes an industrial utopia for a romantic one. The “modern” ideas he promotes are not, Huxley suggests, viable or necessarily laudable, just as Green’s bell-induced snuggery is neither realistic nor palatable. Huxley might agree with the mainstream of modernism in calling for the harmonization of artist and machine, but he demonstrates the sheer impossibility of effectively fusing these two romantic models. Aesthetic and economic interests cannot be so easily accomodated, but rather than explicitly pronouncing this judgment on this key tenet of design discourse, he illustrates this tension through formal incongruity. The dissonance of this editorial emblem, then, is only illusory; the arguments of both poem and prose are harmonious in their shared romantic inefficacy. But it is only once one attempts to reconcile the two parts that one realizes the harmony is ironic.

Huxley was clearly unhappy in his position as editor; he writes in March 1921 to H.L. Mencken, indicating he has been doing “the most fantastic hackwork (happily well paid) for an American fungoid growth which has established itself here recently, called House & Garden” (Selected Letters 102). Yet he was not in a position to decline a steady pay cheque, so he employs this ironic emblem to subvert the didactic principle of the magazine by using precept and pictorial example to demonstrate a negative lesson. In this way, Huxley domesticates his dissident aesthetic position. He caters to the expectations of “good taste” without fully committing himself to it. Like a true satirist, Huxley uses formal conventions to encode an ironic message, balancing the demands of the consumer with those of the critic. This object-lesson demonstrates Huxley’s dual position as both taste-maker and taste-critic—a position he shares with both Waugh and Betjeman.

19 Founded in Germany by Walter Gropius in 1919. This influential design school operated until 1933, when it closed under the pressure of the decidedly anti-modernist Nazi Party.
While Huxley’s views on romanticism are undoubtedly central to understanding his aesthetics, the critical attention given to the Baroque and to romanticism often overlooks a more deeply rooted aspect of Huxley’s aesthetics: the value of taste. As might be expected, given his criticisms of modernism and romanticism, this value is explicitly humanistic; it is the value not of the machine or the fancy but of the merely human. This humanism forms the basis of Huxley’s criteria of aesthetic taste as distinct from the consensual models of taste espoused by contemporary taste reformers. Rather than focusing on what Huxley disavows—the romantic, the modernist—my next section will elucidate the positive values Huxley proposes for design.

* * *

“‘Let us cultivate our gardens,’ said Voltaire at the end of his wisest book. And he might have added: ‘Let us cultivate our houses too.’ For happiness, like charity, begins at home” (“House & Garden” 8). Huxley commences his first editorial for House & Garden with this infamous conclusion to Voltaire’s Candide. It is fitting that even as he is in the reluctant position of editor of a home magazine, Huxley’s decorative instincts are primarily ethical. For Voltaire’s invocation to cultivate one’s garden is, at heart, an ethical proposition. After the panorama of misery that comprises Candide, its ultimate lesson is to focus on the small scale and to forego public grandeur in favour of local responsibility and enrichment.

For Huxley, the cultivation of a domestic aesthetic is fundamentally an ethical act. After all, the thrust of his argument in the first House & Garden issue is not, as one might suppose of a commercial home magazine, about defining public taste; it is, rather, about the principle that “harmony may be achieved between Life and its surroundings” (8). Harmony for Huxley is an ethical value; a fully harmonious individual is a complete whole—a being equipped to live an

---

empathic, balanced life in a multifarious world. A discordant soul is one in which one aspect of the individual is allowed to grow out of proportion to all other aspects—the discordant being will favour materialism, or spiritualism, or aestheticism in a higher key. He is, as Point Counter Point’s Lawrentian Mark Rampion would have it, “uncivilized” and, by extension, “uncivic.” His psychic misbalance acts as a barrier to social intercourse. In Voltaire’s terms, he has cultivated not a garden but only the weeds of egocentrism.

For Huxley, beauty—the aesthetic manifestation of harmony—is a kind of ethical hermeneutic; it is a mode of conceptualizing the correspondences between the inner realm of spirit and the outer world of reality. That the aesthetic impulse is for Huxley fundamentally ethical in this sense is no great revelation. He describes the “good artist” in a pamphlet on Artists Against Fascism (1935) as “a special case of the good citizen; in his studio and while painting, he is self-controlled, scrupulous, conscientious—he practices, in a word, the virtues which, practiced in all circumstances, make the ideally good citizen” (“Artists” 105). Though we cannot all be good artists, Huxley contends, we can follow their lead and be good citizens, and domestic aesthetics is one way of achieving this goal.

When Huxley turns from the harmony of the home to a discussion of art generally, his aesthetic endorsements always come down to a question of ethics. Beauty, whether in home furnishings or frescoes, consistently carries a humanistic burden, for, as Baker notes, good art, in Huxley’s view, is “an aesthetic expression of ethical integrity” (“Dark” 17). Perhaps the strongest expression of Huxley’s ethical aesthetics is his essay “Sir Christopher Wren,” first published in Vogue in 1923, then in his collection On the Margin in the same year. This essay takes the form of an apologia for the seventeenth-century architect, who, Huxley complains, is too often overlooked. Huxley describes Wren’s technique as “three-dimensional designs which should be seen, from every point of view, as harmoniously proportioned wholes” (177). Here
Huxley implicitly contrasts Wren’s work with the sham facades of the Baroque which were designed to be seen only from one point-of-view, as well as the discordant accretions that characterized neo-Gothic designs. Yet, beyond the aesthetic superiority of Wren, what Huxley most admires in the architect is a “quality rather moral than aesthetic” (179). Wren’s great contribution to English architecture was his idiosyncrasy within the ruling Baroque style, and his refusal to capitulate to the dictates of florid fashion was, Huxley argues, rooted in a particular ethic. He writes:

Everything that Wren did was the work of a gentleman; that is the secret of its peculiar character. For Wren was a great gentleman: one who valued dignity and restraint and who, respecting himself, respected also humanity; one who desired that men and women should live with the dignity, even the grandeur, befitting their proud human title; one who despised manners and oddity as much as vulgar ostentation; one who admired reason and order, who distrusted all extravagance and excess. (179)

In contrast to the baroque architects of the continent who “strained after impossible grandeurs, unheard-of violences” (179), Wren’s art strove to house a humanist ethic. Wren was, so far as Huxley was concerned, responsible for expressing in three dimensions the very best of seventeenth-century humanism while avoiding the very worst of seventeenth-century self-aggrandizement. As such, Huxley argues, it is through Wren that “the golden mean of reasonableness and decency—the practical philosophy of the civilized man—has received its most elegant and dignified expression” (182). If harmoniousness is Huxley’s prime value, then it is no wonder that he demands all arts—even architecture—to partake in this practical philosophy.
Huxley infuses his fiction with fleeting examples of this aesthetic-ethic. *Antic Hay* (1923), his second novel, can be read as an extension of “Sir Christopher Wren.” Gumbril Senior, father to the failed Rabelaisian protagonist, Theodore Gumbril, is an architect who devotes many hours and his best bedroom to recreating a model of Wren’s proposed plans for rebuilding London after the Great Fire of 1666. Gumbril Senior, perennially disgusted with the architectural state of London, explains to the scientist, Shearwater, why Wren’s plans were rejected in favour of the recreation of its medieval origins: “‘Wren offered them open spaces and broad streets; he offered them sunlight and air and cleanliness; he offered them beauty, order and grandeur. He offered to build for the imagination and the ambitious spirit of man. [. . .] But they preferred to re-erect the old intricate squalor’” (135). For Gumbril Senior, “the last survivor of the old inhabitants” (17) of a formerly respectable square, his model of Wren’s hypothetical London is the small consolation of practical philosophy; it is the “ideal city” (136) to which he can retire and dream of a civilized environment, an environment where his own designs—“unexpected and beautiful and human, human in the surrounding emptiness” (30)—could find both a spatial and an ethical home. Yet Gumbril Senior’s model does not merely represent the gentlemanly dignity of Wren, it also becomes an instrument of gentlemanly charity. By the end of the novel, Gumbril Senior sells his model to the Victoria and Albert Museum so that he can recover some of this friend’s library—a library that was sold to cover the reprobate son’s gambling debts. The model takes on a humanistic currency that can preserve even just a small sliver of order in the frenzied world of modern London.

But Wren’s was not the only work Huxley admired. Alberti’s work is a “hymn to intellectual beauty, an exaltation of reason as the only source of human greatness” (“Rimini and Alberti” 201). Compared to Bernini’s Rome, Florence’s arch is “simply dung” (*Letters* 201). In a letter to his father, Huxley indicates he “know[s] of few things more beautiful than [Campden’s]
long grey street of houses [. . .] all built of Cotswold stone and Stonesfield states” (97). Even the Morrells’ Garsington Manor, whose architecture inspired in part the house of *Crome Yellow*, is haunting, for “its pleasures” are “singularly intense” to Huxley (*Letters* 32). But architecture was not the only medium to arouse Huxley’s ethical aesthetics. All visual media were, for Huxley, capable of expressing civilized and civilizing truth, which “is always a beauty-truth; a beauty-truth is a mystical entity” (*Letters* 233). Although for Huxley the “gentlemanliness” of fine art is a function of its humanness, its acknowledgement of human—rather than super-human—qualities, this humanism functions positively by taking the spectator out of his own personality. For instance, in his short story “After the Fireworks” (1922), the protagonist, Miles Fanning, an aging bachelor intent on seducing his young admirer, Pamela Tarn, introduces his quarry to the Etruscan statue of Apollo at Veii. When Pamela, skeptical of ancient history, asks what the Etruscans have to do with her, Fanning replies, “‘the Etruscans will keep you sane’” (233), for the simple reason that they have *nothing* to do with her. “‘That’s the definition of culture,’” he explains, “‘knowing and thinking about things that have absolutely nothing to do with us [. . .] for when you’re utterly without culture, every fact’s an isolated, unconnected fact [. . .] you’ll go mad if you think only of what has something to do with you’” (233). This disinterested notion of culture (surely Huxley betrays here his Arnoldian lineage) is, for Huxley, an ethical value. Culture allows people to step outside of themselves—to make connections between otherwise irreconcilable experiences. Here again does beauty perform a hermeneutic function; it allows us to make sense of the world from a perspective other than our own. This is why, for Huxley, the humanist aesthetic is so crucial in the twentieth century, for, as Fanning explains to Pamela, “‘in the past [people] had organized religion, which meant that somebody had once been cultured for them, vicariously. But what with Protestantism and the modernists, their philistinism’s absolute now’” (233). In other words, in undoing the traditional structures of culture—an otherwise
positive movement—Europe has dismantled the perennial bodies of disinterested culture that made connections for people.

The Apollo at Veii, like Gumbril Senior’s model of Wren’s London, embodies these disinterested values. Fanning describes how the statue was only unearthed after the war, and that its discovery was “a brand new experience, a new and apocalyptic voice out of the past” (239). He describes the nature of this apocalypse at length:

It was just after the War that I first saw him—just after the apotheosis and the logical conclusion of all the things Apollo didn’t stand for. You can imagine how marvelously new he seemed by contrast. After that horrible enormity, he was a lovely symbol of the small, the local, the kindly. After that extravagance of beastliness—yes, and all that extravagance of heroism and self-sacrifice—he seemed so beautifully sane. A God who doesn’t admit the separate existence of either heroics or diabolics, but somehow includes them in their nature and turns them into something else—like two gases combining to make a liquid. (240-1)

Apollo here stands for culture’s ability to synthesize difference, to harmonize within the soul the disparate human elements. It is, in Baker’s terms, “an aesthetically realized embodiment of emotional and intellectual equipoise” (14). And, so far as this equipoise goes, Etruscan civilization\textsuperscript{21} is Huxley’s gold standard—“what a lot our world has to learn from the Etruscans,” he writes to his pen pal, Flora Strousse (220): the small, the local, the kindly—these are the lessons gleaned from Apollo, god of culture.

Huxley was fervent in his belief in the ethical power of good art. In his notorious essay, “The Best Picture in the World” (1925), Huxley drops the mask of critical coyness and

\textsuperscript{21} Huxley is no doubt influenced by his friend, D.H. Lawrence, who published \textit{Etruscan Places} in 1932. Of course, Lawrence’s interpretation of the little-known civilization tended towards the Dionysian, while Huxley, ever the classicist, put an Apollonian spin on the Etruscans.
proclaims, “the best picture in the world is painted in fresco on the wall of a room in the town hall” (210). This picture is, in fact, Piero della Francesca’s “Resurrection” (approx. 1460) in the Museo Civico of Sansepolcro. Huxley sidesteps the common assumption that in art criticism one cannot make such blanket assertions since art is, after all, a matter of taste. “And up to a point this is true,” Huxley concedes, “but there does exist, none the less, an absolute standard of aesthetic merit. And it is a standard that is in the last resort a moral one. Whether a work of art is good or bad depends entirely on the quality of the character which expresses itself in the work” (210). Such a critical attitude coming from such a modern skeptic as Huxley seems wilfully antique. Surely he would not endorse the antiquated view that the artist’s moral character is relevant to aesthetic discussion? Yet, Huxley uses the word character, rather than the more modern personality, deliberately. The personality of the artist is, indeed, irrelevant to art in Huxley’s view, but there is, he argues, something in character—a predisposition, an impulse, a disinterestedness—that can be expressed in art. Character implies a set of ingrained values, whether implicit or not, whereas personality suggests the willed cultivation of values. It is the immanence of character that attracts Huxley, and the character in Francesca to which he is drawn is the “intellectual power; [. . .] his capacity for unaffectedly making the grand and noble gesture; by his pride in whatever is splendid in humanity” (214). The grandeur that distinguishes Francesca from later artists—particularly, for Huxley, Baroque artists—is the human scale of such grandeur. Francesca’s work, like Wren’s, instinctively strives for an ennobling, yet not unattainable, beauty—the kind of beauty that finds a natural home in, for instance, a town hall or

---

22 As Deborah Cohen points out, “personality” was to an extent a new understanding of selfhood for the moderns: “By the 1890s, there was a new, seemingly secular way of thinking about the self, expressed in the concept of personality. If character was demonstrated by self-control and self-denial, a display of ‘personality’ required individuality” (125). “Character,” for the Victorians, was a stable, unchanging method of describing the self. One’s character was not a malleable element; rather, one’s character was a moral category. Personality, on the other hand, offered seemingly limitless versions of selfhood, but, as Cohen notes, this capacity for infinite change tended to ally personality with fashion, and too often “individuality” was externalized; rather than a psychic element, personality...
a city church. Francesca’s “Resurrection,” so starkly simple and, frankly, unassuming, is for Huxley, “the resurrection of the classical ideal, incredibly much grander and more beautiful than the classical reality” (212).

We may justly question the validity of Huxley’s character-driven art criticism. We may reasonably debate the aesthetic merits of the fresco itself; the grandeur in it which Huxley extols may not move us. And yet, in a curious way, history did vindicate Huxley’s thesis about this picture. During WWII, Captain Anthony Clarke, instructed to shell the town of Sansepolcro, remembered reading Huxley’s essay on the “Resurrection” and realized that he had been ordered to destroy the very town in which the “best picture” is housed. He disobeyed his orders, called off the shelling, and the “Resurrection” remained intact. Not only had he saved the fresco, but he also saved the town: the British found out later that the Germans had already retreated and the shelling had been unnecessary all along (Barnard 112-13). It may have only been a brief glimmer of the small, the local, the kindly in the midst of barbarism, but, like Fanning’s first vision of the Apollo statue, it was nevertheless an ethical apocalypse.

Of course, in Britain in 1920s few individuals would have had the option of decorating with frescoes or Etruscan statuary (save, perhaps, for the Sitwells). It is difficult to imagine achieving such ethical self-transcendence through the choice of wallpaper or linens. And yet, as the early issues of House & Garden demonstrate, beauty was—even on a small scale—accessible to the average consumer. The push to inform the public in matters of taste was as much a response to the growth in production of “consumable art” as it was a response to the public’s newfound access to culture. The readiness to decorate and the interest in aesthetics amongst the masses was not simply a function of a democratized marketplace; the desire to elevate the spirit through beauty has persisted across classes. In an essay on the architectural gardens at Kessel, became a consumerist element (i.e. dress, décor, art, etc.). Whereas character was typically associated with moral
for instance, Huxley attempts to understand why the starving peasants did not rise up against
their prince for squandering such vast sums on a purely decorative fountain: “they were probably
grateful to him,” Huxley writes, “for having realized in solid stone and rainbow-flashing water
their own vague day-dreams of a fairy-tale magnificence” (“Waterworks and Kings” 264).23
These peasants—now, in the twentieth century, middle-class workers—could build their own
fountains or, as one issue of House & Garden suggests, dig their own fishponds. Despite his
ambivalence about the precepts of “good taste,” that harmony of self and surroundings that
Huxley describes in his first editorial is the same kind of achievement as St. Paul’s Cathedral—
different in degree, but not in kind. Perhaps this is why Huxley, though an unlikely critic, was so
invested in the discourse of taste in the 1920s and 1930s, for, as strong as his belief was in the
humanizing and ennobling effects of beauty, equally strong was his despair at the disintegration
and devaluation of culture. Despite his genuine enthusiasm for his ethical aesthetics, he was only
too aware how absent these values were from modern culture. This is why he conceives of no
aesthetic utopias in his fiction; it is why Wren’s model cannot save the devolution into chaos that
concludes Antic Hay and the Etruscans cannot save Fanning from self-destruction and vice:
Huxley was, ultimately, despondent about the character of “good taste” in the early-twentieth
century. Il faut cultiver notre jardin, but, Huxley notes in his essay, “On Re-Reading Candide”
(1923), “the only trouble is that the gardens of some of us seem hardly worth cultivating” (16).

---

23 Huxley expands on this idea, adding, “the church was a place where, besides obtaining spiritual consolation, the
poor could also find more mundane satisfaction. Amid the magnificences of ecclesiastical pomp they could feel
themselves rich—could enjoy vicariously the gold of the sacred vessels, the silk and velvet of the vestments, the
marble of monuments, the gems that glittered on rig and crozier and reliquary. Of all the builders of churches, it is
the Jesuits who seem most clearly to have understood the poor man’s longing for vicarious royalty and riches
(“People’s Palaces” 30). Of course, we must always be skeptical of Huxley’s attempts at understanding the lower
classes. He is rather like Balzac, whom Huxley describes below: “The great old house is pulled down, and what
were once the gardens and the noble park become a patchwork of small gardens. Something grand and splendid is
destroyed, and something sordid and small takes its place. Balzac feared and hated democracy because he loved
1.2 “This strange vale of tears and guffaws”: Antic Hay’s Dystopian Aesthetics

Good taste is for Huxley, as it is for Waugh and Betjeman, as much moral and social as aesthetic. And, like Waugh and Betjeman, Huxley’s conception of “good taste” lies in opposition to more consensual notions of taste in the period. While there are, of course, correspondences between Huxleyan and mainstream “good taste,” Huxley’s insistence on the ethical ground of taste was inconsistent with the primarily market-driven aesthetics of other taste reformers. Huxley devotes much attention to criticizing the consumerist corruption of aesthetic value—a tendency as much reflective of his elitist bias as it is reflective of his genuine desire to see culture triumph. While Huxley is generally hailed as the master of social and political dystopian fiction, much of his writing actually engages with the idea of aesthetic dystopia—he focuses, especially in his early fiction, on the consequences of inhumanness in art and design. And, for Huxley, these aesthetic consequences are of supreme importance for, as he argues in Texts and Pretexts (1933), “we tend to think and feel in terms of art we like; and if the art we like is bad, then our thinking and feeling will be bad. And if the thinking and feeling of most individuals composing a society is bad, is not that society in danger?” (1). Just as exercising good taste can be a civic act, so too can the pursuit of bad taste, in the Huxleyan sense, be an uncivic act. By studying what Huxley identifies as the aberrations of taste in Antic Hay as well as in his stories and essays, we can understand the central, if complex, role taste plays in Huxley’s aesthetics.

Although not primarily considered a particularly “aesthetic” modernist, Huxley was well connected in artistic circles. Huxley worked at Ottoline and Philip Morrell’s Garsington Manor during the war, where he cultivated relationships with D.H. Lawrence, Mark Gertler, and others. He was also familiar with the Bloomsbury set—Clive and Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry, Duncan
Grant—a set of relationships fostered, as Jane Garrity explains, through his connections at British *Vogue*. As such, Huxley was stationed between two models of aesthetic taste in 1920s Britain: Bloomsbury and Garsington. As Christopher Reed points out, however, these two sets hardly saw eye to eye. Bloomsbury questioned the authenticity, the “odd taste” and collector’s aesthetic of the Morrells, while, for her part, Ottoline could not understand the disheveled chic of the Bloomsbury lifestyle (191). Reed explains, “[Ottoline] Morrell’s determination to acquire a finished product from an individual artist directly opposed the Charleston artists’ ethos of spontaneous pleasure in creativity enjoyed for its own sake” (191). Huxley, ever the classicist, tended to side with the Morrells aesthetically, but just as he could complain to Ottoline of the “wet blanket of Bloomsbury” (*Letters* 71) and rather brutally admit he was “trying not to look at the exhibition of copies and translations hanging in hideous gloom upon the walls” of the Omega Studio,²⁴ so too could he lampoon the pretensions of Garsington in *Crome Yellow* and satirize Ottoline’s “collector’s aesthetic” in *Those Barren Leaves*. Huxley may have had his allegiances in the artistic community, but taste was, apparently, a universal malady. His familiarity with these modern tastemakers offered him insight into how, even with the best of intentions, bad taste can colour even the most refined eyes.

To see how Huxley formulates his theory of the bad taste epidemic, it is best to return to *Antic Hay*. While on the one hand this novel contains one of the most developed of Huxley’s aesthetic utopias—Gumbril Senior’s model of London—the architect’s plight for humanized and humanizing architecture is never—*can never*—be realized in the novel. As Baker puts it, “Gumbril Senior has achieved the vision but lacks the capacity to proclaim it” (*Dark* 67). While his model of London may literally be an instrument of good will in its sale on Porteous’s behalf, Gumbril Senior is incapable of extending the ethical imperative of Wren’s London any further.

---

²⁴ civilization have always been paid for by slavery in one form or another” (“Aristocracy and Literature” 22).
He may in his spare time design ideal cities, but his pavilions and garden houses remain “scattered confusedly, like the elements of a jumbled city” (29). Wren’s London is purely an ethical artifact—a fact emphasized by the model’s removal to The Victoria and Albert Museum. Gumbril Senior’s own designs, while “beautiful and human” (30), are meaningless within the larger pattern of London’s “senseless discord” and “horrible disorder” (168). Vision without deeds, Huxley argues, accomplishes little. Instead of publicly championing the vision of Wren and challenging London’s discordant spaces, Gumbril Senior condescends to make his living “designing model cottages for workmen at Bletchley” (32) and making Tudor houses “more Tudor than they are” on behalf of his “capitalist” backer (25). Gumbril Senior cannot harmonize his vision with the real world—cannot see how to express Wren’s values in anything beyond the miniature scale, and this inability is indicative of a crucial flaw in character. Of the workmen for whom he builds Gumbril Senior complains,

‘In the old days these creatures built their own hovels, and very nice and suitable they were too. The architects busied themselves with architecture—which is the expression of human dignity and greatness, which is man’s protest, not his miserable acquiescence. You can’t do much protesting in a model cottage at seven hundred pounds a time. A little, no doubt, you can protest a little; you can give your cottage decent proportions and avoid sordidness and vulgarity. But that’s all; it’s really a negative process. You can only begin to protest positively and actively when you abandon the petty scale and build for giants—when you build for the spirit and the imagination of man, not for his little body.’ (32-3)

Gumbril Senior’s weakness is his desire to abandon the human scale, to build for giants, not men. And while, of course, Huxley would insist that good design builds for the spirit and

---

24 In reference to their exhibition, *Copies and Translations* (1917).
imagination, good design is not exclusively the province of the grand. Wren wasn’t planning ornate fountains for the peasants to gawk at before returning to their hovels; he was planning a city. And Huxley, while hardly a democrat, saw the value of spirit and imagination in seemingly mundane domestic design. In conceiving of workmen’s cottages as a “negative process,” Gumbril Senior ensures Wren’s London will never see the light of day, for it is the workmen who will define the climate of design in an ever increasingly democratic London. He cannot understand why “‘people are so little affected by the vile and discordant architecture around them’” (169). Likening the city streets to a cacophony of street music, he complains that when “‘contractors run up enormous palaces of steel and stone that are every bit as stupid and ignoble and inharmonious as ten brass bandsmen each playing a different tune in a different key, there is no outcry’” (169). And yet Gumbril Senior, as guilty of architectural crime as the designers he maligns here, refuses to see the connection between his unwillingness to build for the spirit of the average person and the average person’s inability to reject the inharmoniousness of modern building. In Huxley’s view, Wren built on the human scale so as to facilitate and foster a giant spirit, not the other way around. Gumbril Senior, in his snobbery, is little better than Mr. Mercapitan, the eighteenth-century devotee whose favourite theme is “‘the pettiness, the simian limitations, the insignificance and the absurd pretentiousness of Homo soi-disant Sapiens’” (53). Wren “respected humanity” (“Wren” 179); Gumbril Senior respects only an ideal humanity that can never correspond to lived reality.

Gumbril Senior, in his pursuit of a flawed and unattainable vision, mirrors closely Huxley’s romantic buffoon, the painter Casimir Lypiatt, who theorizes at length about art: “‘the artist rushes on the world, conquers it, gives it beauty, imposes a moral significance’” (77). He claims, “‘passionately I paint passion. I draw life out of life’” (78), and yet, as every character but himself can realize, “there was a flaw in the conduit; somewhere between the man and his
work life leaked out” (97). As the temptress, Myra Viveash, concisely puts it, “‘so many of Casimir’s things remind [her. . . ] of those Italian vermouth advertisements’” (87). Lypiatt is all bombast, but, whereas Gumbril Senior cannot break out beyond the miniature scale of his ambitions, the painter cannot live up to his vocation of exceptional proportions. Baker notes how one of Huxley’s subtle clues—the comparison of the entrance to Lypiatt’s apartment (in a “heavenly mews”) to “the entrance of one of Piranesi’s prisons” (Dark 87)—alerts us to this shared flaw. Baker notes the allusion to Piranesi is “a fitting emblem of a cultural dead end, an aesthetic impasse that Lypiatt, despite his consciousness of having a ‘mission,’ will fail to recognize” (Dark 68). Like Lypiatt, Gumbril Senior finds himself called to a mission, and he, too, is linked to a Piranesian prison; his son, Gumbril, remarks how he “could imagine he saw before him the passionate and gesticulating silhouette of one of those old shepherds who stand at the base of Piranesi’s ruins demonstrating obscurely the prodigious grandeur and the abjection of the human race” (177). While Lypiatt and Gumbril Senior have diametrically opposed missions, the “baroque illusion,” in Baker’s phrase, links them in their failure (Dark 69). Both Lypiatt and Gumbril Senior lack that local and kindly character that allows art to elevate the spirit, and it is this character—more than any aesthetic discernment—that truly informs Huxley’s dissident conception of a taste that is not simply “good.”

London is, in Antic Hay, the ultimate ruin—it is, like the characters who populate it, frenzied and chaotic. Gumbril Senior complains that walking the city’s streets is “like listening to a symphony of cats [. . . ] Senseless discords and a horrible disorder all the way. [. . . ] Order has been turned into a disgusting chaos. We need no barbarians from outside; they’re on the premises, all the time” (168). The novel concludes with Gumbril Junior’s “Last Ride” (247) in a taxi with the decidedly inhumane femme fatale, Myra Viveash. This meandering journey through the city is punctuated with haunting reminders of a saner time in the form of the looming dome
of St. Paul’s Cathedral. A visit to Shearwater’s laboratory reveals the scientist, in the midst of his attempt at transcending the limits of the human body in a grueling endurance experiment, hallucinating a vision of Gumbril Senior “in the road before him, clutching his beard, crying out, ‘Proportion, proportion.’ He trod and trod and trod at his building machine, working up the pieces of his life, steadily, unremittingly working them into a proportionable whole, into a dome that should hang, light, spacious and high, as though by a miracle, on the empty air” (251). Gumbril and Myra look out of the laboratory window to see that very dome: “like time the river flowed, stanchlessly, as though from a wound in the world’s side. For a long time they were silent. They looked out, without speaking, across the flow of time, at the stars, at the human symbol hanging miraculously in the moonlight” (253). For Shearwater, too, St. Paul’s “hung there, proportioned and beautiful in the dark, confused horror of his desires, solid and strong and durable among his broken thoughts” (254). Yet, despite Shearwater’s hallucinatory yearning for proportion, or Gumbril Junior’s inbred fondness for Wren’s cathedral, none of the characters can absorb the message of this miraculously human sign. Shearwater could never attain the harmonious proportion at which Wren excels in three dimensions, for he is so consumed with science and reason to the exclusion of all other aspects of character that he remains, literally, trapped in his aimless pursuits, pedalling away into the night on a stationary bicycle. And, for Gumbril and Myra, St. Paul’s can elicit no deeper reflection on their own aimlessness; instead, Myra suggests only to continue their wanderings with a “drive to Hampstead” (254). Finally Gumbril Senior, the one who could have at least responded to this “human symbol” of St. Paul’s, is merely a ghost, “stalk[ing] across the room” (293). The endpoint of this manic run through London is actually a Piranesian ruin.

But the London that opposes St. Paul’s is not entirely tasteless; indeed, Huxley makes clear that modern Londoners are ruled by a system of taste. Huxley introduces this theme in
typically sardonic fashion. Gumbril Junior, after meeting with the impeccably styled misanthrope, Mercaptan, decides that in order to make the most of his post-school-mastering life he ought to embody the Rabelaisian spirit. He elects to sport a false beard in order to achieve the full effect. And, in keeping with the spirit of the novel, Huxley describes this transformation in architectural terms:

The proportions of his face were startlingly altered. The podium, below the mouth, had been insufficiently massive to carry the stately order of the nose; and the ratiocinative attic of the forehead, noble enough, no doubt, in itself, had been disproportionately high. The beard now supplied the deficiencies in the stylobate, and planted now on a firm basement of will, the order of the sense, the aerial attic of ideas, reared themselves with a more classical harmoniousness of proportion.

(118)

It is telling that the only “harmoniousness of proportion” achieved in the novel is the result of a false beard—the proportion is merely a sham, like one of the Baroque façades Huxley so resented. Yet Gumbril Junior’s Rabelaisian proportions introduce another kind of sham: the vagaries of fashion. Gumbril Junior, buoyed up in confidence as the “Complete Man,” follows an attractive woman he spies gazing longingly at the “New Season’s Models” in the shop fronts. He pursues her as she flits from window to window in search of the latest incarnation of fashionability. Gumbril reflects on how his newly proportionate façade has altered his own tastes. The pre-beard Gumbril would “have drifted to the top of the road, sharing, with that community of tastes which is the basis of every happy union, her enthusiasm for brass candlesticks and toasting-forks, imitation Chippendale furniture, gold watch-bracelets and low-waisted summer frocks” (98). “That was,” the narrator notes sardonically, “what the Mild and Melancholy one would have done. But the sight, as he gazed earnestly into an antiquary’s
window, of his own powerful bearded face reflected in a sham Heppelwhite mirror, reminded him that the Mild and Melancholy one was temporarily extinct, and that it was the Complete Man who now dawdled [ . . . ] up the Queen’s Road” (99). Ironically, it is only once Gumbril Junior has himself acquired a sham façade that he has the confidence to deride the sham tastes of others. He confronts the woman of his pursuit: “‘How revolting this sham cottage furniture is,’ Gumbril remarked. The shop, he noticed was called ‘Ye Olde Farme House.’ The stranger, who had been on the point of saying how much she liked those lovely Old Welsh dressers, gave him her heartiest agreement. ‘So v-vulgar’” (100). As instantaneously as the false beard completes the proportions of Gumbril’s face does the Complete Man himself effect a change in taste in the stranger. Confronted with a more authoritative version of tastefulness, Rosie, the stranger, abandons her true tastes:

This was excitingly new. Poor Aunt Aggie with her Arts and Crafts, and her old English furniture. And to think she had taken them so seriously! She saw in a flash the fastidious lady that she now was—with Louis whatever-it-was furniture at home, and jewels, and young poets to tea, and real artists. In the past, when she had imagined herself entertaining real artists, it had always been among really artistic furniture. Aunt Aggie’s furniture. But now—no, oh no. This man was probably an artist. (126)

Rosie who, we later learn, is Shearwater’s wife, modifies not simply her taste in furniture, but also the social currency of that taste, with alarming alacrity. “‘Yes it’s funny,’” she tells Gumbril Junior, “‘to think that there are people who call that sort of thing artistic. One’s quite s-sorry for them,’ she added, with a little hiss” (100).

Huxley here cleverly plays with notions of authority and taste. The Complete Man, though farcical within the story, exists for Rosie as an exemplary model of “good taste.” He is—
or he purports to be—the “expert,” and, like so many decorators, designers, and columnists, he holds a powerful sway over consumers like Rosie—a position Huxley develops in the 1929 essay “Art and the Critic.” And yet, of course, we are reminded that Gumbril’s authority is entirely specious and, while Huxley might agree with the character’s taste, he has no use for the façade-like principles upon which this false Rabelais instructs Rosie. More than anything, though, Huxley criticizes the paranoia that a culture which values the “expert’s” opinion above all else induces. When Gumbril and Rosie return to her apartment, she feels the need to distance herself from her actual belongings: “‘It’s a dr-dreadful little maisonette,’ she explained. ‘Full of awful things. We had to take it furnished!’” (102-3). This obvious lie reveals Rosie’s insecurity about her own tastes, for “the maisonette in Bloxam Gardens was certainly not very splendid—six rooms on the second and third floor of a peeling stucco house. And the furniture—decidedly Hire Purchase. And the curtains and cretonnes—brightly ‘modern,’ positively ‘futurist’” (103). Huxley’s employment of the mass-market shorthand for modernist good taste recalls his earlier condemnation in “The Union of Crafts” of modern industrial design as merely the production of cheap goods under the auspices of reformed taste. As he suggests in a later essay, “Functional or Ornamental,” these catch-words operate as ideological “key words” that mask underlying motivations; of mass produced furnishings, he writes: “What has happened, in a word, is that we have made an aesthetic virtue out of an economic necessity—or merely an economic convenience. Like the tailless fox in the fable we have proclaimed that our altogether abnormal lack of taste for ornament and of an ornamental style is a mark of superiority” (188). In other word’s, the “expert” opinion that modern design’s eschewal of ornament is somehow morally superior is as false as Gumbril Junior’s beard. What he objects to is not the preference for minimalist style (indeed, he would occasionally profess an interest in modernist designs of this sort), but rather the false cause of this preference. The ridiculousness of modern design’s
“philosophical” abhorrence of ornament is all too apparent when the principles of modern design are translated into the language of the mass-market. Rosie’s curtains are a far cry from “futurism,” but she has been sold on a catch phrase, just as the experts have been sold on the theoretical catch phrase of “functionalism.” It is not so much that Huxley rejects modern design outright, but that he resists the distillation of its precepts into marketable key words that obscure the motivation behind the change in taste. The proverbial false beard which cloaks the true operations of industrial design ensures that “good taste” is always merely the façade of “good taste”; one’s true taste will always, for the consumers convinced of the importance of consensual taste, be withheld from public view—a tendency Waugh will explore at length. Rosie, confronted with what she thinks is a new set of “key words” in the Complete Man’s taste, reflects on this continual struggle to keep up appearances: “‘What one has to put up with in furnished flats!’” The lady made a grimace as she ushered him into the sitting-room. And while she spoke the words, she really managed to persuade herself that the furniture wasn’t theirs, that they had found all this sordid stuff cluttering up the rooms, not chosen it, oh and with pains! themselves, not doggedly paid for it, month by month” (103). Rosie’s agony at having to disown her possessions, her shame at displaying the incorrect tastes to the Complete Man, dramatizes Huxley’s concerns over the dishonesty of good taste. Indeed, the best piece in Rosie’s apartment—the one that reflects Rosie’s own tastes—is an eighteenth-century reproduction of Domenichino’s St. Jerome: “grave in its solemn and subtly harmonious beauty, the picture hung over the mantelpiece, hung there, among the photographs of the little friends of her own age, like some strange object from another world” (136). The piece, bought on a whim from a street vendor—not for its perceived taste value, but for its spontaneous and seemingly natural appeal to Rosie—causes even Gumbril Junior to drop his Complete Man mask. The picture, familiar to him from childhood, takes Gumbril out of his “façade-self” and affords him a tiny glimpse into
Rosie’s true character, allows him to witness her own “practical patience.” Here Huxley changes the rules somewhat; while he can lambast the sham furniture of the shopwindows, he can also reserve some sympathy for this artistic reproduction, suggesting that for Huxley authenticity does not require the aura of the “original.” For Huxley, to be authentic is to be true to one’s own tastes, rather than the market’s tastes—it is to express humanism rather than commercialism.

And yet, it is only one picture; Rosie’s desire to constantly “improve” her tastes ends in disaster. In seeking out Gumbril Junior—who was scared off after discovering he had seduced his friend’s wife—Rosie encounters the irresistibly tasteful Mr. Mercaptan, Gumbril Junior’s own Rabelaisian inspiration. Rather than directing her to the man with the false beard—her sought-after “Toto”—Mercaptan delivers Rosie into the hands of the man with the real beard—the brutish Coleman who, delighted with such an unexpected prize as Rosie, rapes her. And, surely, while it might be too much to draw a direct link from decorating to violence, Huxley was convinced that the modern tendency to value a mere façade suggests an “as yet undefined lesion of the modern soul” (“Functional” 188); fiction affords him the opportunity to dramatize what happens when the façade must confront the underlying reality.

_Antic Hay_ is not the only work in which Huxley embodies the clash of opposing value systems. “The Farcical History of Richard Greenow,” from the 1929 collection of stories, _Limbo_, is probably the most salient example of Huxley’s symptomatic exploration of taste. Richard Greenow, a studious, classically austere undergraduate, has been troubled his entire life by strange outbursts of inexplicable desire. In childhood, he finds himself obsessed with his sister’s dollhouse—the dollhouse she herself ignores. At Oxford, Greenow finds himself inexplicably smitten with a fellow student, the ethereally handsome Francis Quarles. This sudden violence of affection transforms Greenow’s entire life; overcome by waves of saccharine romanticism, he shuns his cynical and intellectual friends. Greenow takes to writing poetry, becomes
uncharacteristically devout, and seems, according to Mrs Cravister, the wife of his tutor, like “a little gargoyle from the roof of Notre Dame de Paris” (16). In other words, he seems to her to be the very caricature of Gothic romance.

Greenow is unable to reconcile his newfound romanticism with his former intellectualism until at a dinner party a witty remark about Walter Pater stirs him into self-reflection: “it was as though some mysterious obstruction in his brain, which had dammed up and diverted his faculties from their normal course during the past three weeks, had been on a sudden overthrow” (21). Greenow realizes that the crack at Pater “was just the sort of remark he might have made, three weeks ago, before the crisis” (21). It was as if “his own authentic voice, carried across the separating gulf of days, had woken him again to life!” (21). Greenow, newly stripped of his sentimental fog, no longer yearns for the “monstrous animal” of Francis Quarles, abandons his poetry and swooning and resumes his life as a man of unassailable intellect.

Or so he thinks. After a few days Greenow soon finds himself “hysterically sobbing” (26) after watching Francis in a musical performance. As quickly as a cutting jibe at Pater draws him out of romanticism, a tear-jerking choral performance pulls him right back in. So begins his mad descent away from the “good taste” of a rigorously intellectual Oxonian. Soon Dick finds himself avoiding his friends and covertly playing—horror of horrors—Mendelssohn in his rooms. He hides “photogravure reproductions from various Old Masters” (32) in his drawers, carefully gazing at the work of Torwaldsen, Alma Tadema, and Holman Hunt by moonlight while “the Cezanne lithograph, the three admirable etchings by Van Gogh, the little Picasso looked on, unmoved, from the walls” (33). Dick’s split tastes between, on the one hand, a sentimental attachment to art and music befitting an Edwardian grandmother, and, on the other hand, the dry intellectualism of a modern student, are inconvenient enough for a young man eager to impress with his carefully cultivated “good taste,” but only once he awakes to discover
he has unconsciously written a chapter and a half of a sentimental novel, *Heartsease Fitzroy: The Story of a Young Girl*, does Greenow begin to panic.

The student, horrified at both his somatic prolixity and mawkishness, decides, ultimately, that the only explanation is that “he was a hermaphrodite. [. . .] not in the gross obvious sense, of course, but spiritually”; he is “a new William Sharp and Fiona MacLeod—a more intelligent Sharp, a vulgarer Fiona” (37). His spiritual hermaphroditism, rather than repulsing him, actually comforts Greenow, who decides to make the best of a bad situation and publishes his fictional output under the pseudonym, Pearl Bellairs, becoming wildly successful as both a novelist and columnist: “after midnight he would write with a feminine pen, earning the money that would make his unproductive male labours possible. A kind of spiritual *souteneur*. [. . .] Like a gentleman of the East, he would sit still and smoke his philosophic pipe while the womenfolk did the dirty work” (38).

At first the story seems to be little more than the farce one might expect from its title; aside from being a goldmine of material for a study of gender, it might not appear to be immediately relevant to a debate about taste. But at the heart of this obscure story lies an exploration of one of Huxley’s central concerns: the marketing of tastelessness and the concomitant retreat of the intellectual from the public sphere. The first clue to the critical thrust of this story is Greenow’s spiritual hermaphroditism, which is a farcical exaggeration of what Huxley calls the discontinuous personality; he explains in “Personality and the Discontinuity of the Mind” (1927), “in order to create a personality one must discover some principle of continuity, one must devise an ideal framework in which the naturally discontinuous materials can be harmoniously fitted” (262).25 Greenow finds no “principle of continuity” in his personality; instead, Greenow creates a sort of spiritual bulkhead separating the discordant

---

25 Mark Rampion, the Lawrentian character in *Point Counter Point*, expounds a similar theory.
elements of his psyche; femininity, commerciality, and sentimentality are aligned on one side, while masculinity, intellectualism, and realism are aligned on the other. This fundamental separation and profound inability to synthesize the intellect with sentiment is what drives Greenow mad and leads, ultimately, to his death in the asylum.

But what does this have to do with taste? Well, beyond literalizing Huxley’s theory of personality, the story also illustrates the discontinuity of modern culture. The work of “Pearl Bellairs” is just the sort of commercial, jingoistic, and sentimental demagoguery against which Huxley so often rails. The ravenous market for her work is a symptom, Huxley argues, of a wider misapplication of reading practice. Here Huxley reveals his anti-democratic snobbery, for he maintains that the push towards mass education in the nineteenth century created not readers but consumers, for, he suggests, intellectualism is not a universal value. Widespread literacy did not correspond to an increase in the number of “thinkers,” though it did create a demand for “culture,” but a culture stripped of intellectualism: “the over-taught child is the father of the newspaper-reading, advertisement-believing, propaganda-swallowing, demagogue-led man—the man who makes modern democracy the farce it is” (“Education” 205). Revealing his disdain for the confusion of literacy and culture, Huxley argues culture “is not derived from the reading of books—but from the reading of good books” (“Reading: the New Vice” 48). He explains:

Reading—the reading of newspapers, magazines, and fiction [i.e. the literary province of “Pearl Bellairs”]—is our universal opiate and deadener. We read, not to stimulate ourselves to think, but to prevent ourselves from thinking; not to enrich our souls, but to kill time and bemuse awareness; not for the sake of being fully alive, but in order to be less vitally conscious of the surrounding reality.

(“Reading” 48-9)
Greenow’s death at the hands of his schlocky alter ego symbolizes a curiously Freudian revenge of culture. The Pearl Bellairs of this world are only, Huxley argues, mass-producing culture—a fact underscored by Greenow’s prolific psychosomatic writing sessions. Almost by definition, these mass-produced texts—these “standardized ideas” are culturally void—“the higher the degree of standardization in popular literature and art, the greater the profit for the manufacturer” (“The Outlook for American Culture” 190). “The Farcical History of Richard Greenow” enacts the takeover of culture by cheap, easily accessible and homogeneous “product”—a situation necessitated by the growing appetite for reading material. But the democratic principles that made mass education possible are also the root of the problem for Huxley; the sheer volume of material produced for the literate mass ensures that books and newspapers will be nothing more than disposable commodities. This is why Huxley calls for a 4000-5000% tax on paper which would eliminate the production of consumerist ephemera and would, Huxley speculates, “make the masses take an interest in the best that has been thought or said and would tend to raise the level of culture throughout the world” (“Reading” 49). The one value more prized than affordability, the cynical Huxley assumes, is rarity, so the artificial increase in commercial value of cultural production would naturally, in his admittedly unsound scheme, lead to an increase in intellectual value as well.

Against this monstrous mass man for whom Pearl Bellairs writes, the Highbrow Dick Greenow would seem not to stand a chance. As Huxley explains in “Foreheads Villainous Low” (1931), in a nation ruled by the market, “highbrows, being poor consumers, are bad citizens” (208)—a fact confirmed at Greenow’s trial for consideration as a conscientious objector. “The word ‘highbrow,’” Huxley explains, “has become in our age, which is the age of cheap printing, libraries, and encyclopedias, a term of mockery and insult” (“Reading” 49). Greenow’s death struggle with Pearl Bellairs in the asylum, which actually culminates in a dramatic “write-off”
between the two personae, certainly emphasizes the threat Huxley perceives highbrows face. Yet the real issue in the story is not so much the advance of a mass-produced culture, but rather the retreat of highbrow culture in the wake of that “uniquely modern snobbery—the snobbery of stupidity and the snobbery of ignorance” (“Foreheads” 203). In other words, Greenow’s gruesome fate is a consequence of his own decision—the decision to enter into a commercial contract with his hermaphroditic helpmeet, Pearl Bellairs. In agreeing to this Mephistophelean transaction, Greenow effectively gives in to the anti-intellectual current of the market. In refusing to harmonize his personality and playing into the “the snobbery of stupidity” for financial gain, the highbrow Richard Greenow is as guilty of corrupting taste as his populist double.26

“Richard Greenow,” then, is a fable about the root cause, in Huxley’s view, of distorted taste values: the retreat of the intelligentsia from the public sphere—a sphere increasingly defined by the marketplace. Huxley explores the consequences of such a development in another of his early short stories, “Little Mexican.” Even more so than “Richard Greenow,” this story dramatizes the effect commercial value has on taste value. “Little Mexican” begins with a case of mistaken identity; the narrator, a student on a European tour, buys a hat—a comically large hat to shield him from the sun—while on holiday in Ravenna. This hat—inaptly named “little Mexican”—attracts the attention of Count Tirabassi, a local aristocrat who, like Rosie in Antic Hay, mistakes the student for an artist under the assumption that “all painters wear large black hats. [. . . ] It was syllogistic, unescapable” (157). The two strike up a conversation, and the student soon discovers the Count is very anxious to have him visit him villa to examine his collection of artwork. The Count purports to be a great admirer of art and the narrator, despite his misgivings at being taken for an artist, is eager to visit the villa once he learns of the Veroneses

---

26 Although, as his willingness to work for Condé Nast indicates, Huxley himself was not above “selling out” in his
and Tiepolos it contains. He does not, however, pick up on the some of the hints that ought to alert him to the Count’s ulterior motives, not least of which is his reference to his paintings as an “enormous capital” (161). The imposter-narrator is not the only dishonest player.

The narrator eventually arrives at the Count’s villa and finds it “correctly, coldly even, Palladian” (176)—it is an exemplary architectural specimen. While the exterior might be “correct,” there is something amiss in the rest of the house; the drawing-room, the narrator finds, “was a fine big room, nobly proportioned,” and “round the walls ran a frieze, painted in grisaille; in a graceful litter of cornucopias and panoplies, goddesses sumptuously reclined” (177-8). Yet, the guest observes, “the furniture was strange mixed”; he narrates,

Round a sixteenth-century dining-table that was a piece of Palladian architecture in wood, were ranged eight chairs in the Viennese secession style of 1905. A large chalet-shaped cuckoo clock from Bern hung on the wall between two cabinets of walnut, pilastered and pedimented to look like little temples, and with heroic statuettes in yellow boxwood, standing in niches between the pillars. And then the pictures on the walls, the cretonnes with which the arm-chairs were covered!

(178)

This curious motley of taste—the cheap, overwrought, turn-of-the-century furnishing in the midst of impeccable classical structures—is jarring and indicates that the Count’s pretences to art connoisseurship are more than a little suspect. The specificity of the “bad taste” objects in the room is crucial, however, for they are all products of industrialized, late-nineteenth-century European design. In other words, these are the products of a market-driven taste.

The narrator’s misgivings about the Count’s taste level are soon set aside once he sets eyes on the famed frescoes. He observes, “the walls of the enormous room were completely own financial interest.
covered with frescoes which it did not need much critical judgement or knowledge to perceive were genuine Veroneses. The authorship was obvious, palpable. Who else could have painted these harmoniously undulating groups of figures set in their splendid architectural frame?” (179). For Huxley, frescoes are fascinating for their perfect alliance of art and architecture, culture and domesticity. Their very rootedness in space—indeed, their sheer unportability—lends them a special value, as evidenced in the narrator’s exclamation to the Count, “‘What a marvellous thing to possess! [. . .] I envy you!’” (180). The Count, however, can only “grimace and laugh” (180) at the narrator’s enthusiasm. For, as we discover, the Count invited him to the villa to view the frescoes because he needs help in arranging their sale, for, as far as capital goes, frescoes do not lend themselves easily to liquidation; the Count hopes the narrator, with his “artistic connections,” will be able to find a wealthy buyer to relieve his walls of their potential value.

The Count, after all, is not a man of taste, though he inhabits a (mostly) tasteful home. He would much rather use the funds from the frescoes to build a cheese factory on his estate so he could turn his dairy farm into a profitable business. The frescoes and the Palladian architecture fail to register with the Count’s entrepreneurial nature: “in a couple of years,” the Count thinks, “he’d be netting eighty or a hundred thousand a year from his cheeses. And then, ah then, he’d be independent, he’d be able to get away, he’d like to see the world” (183-4). Until then, the Count is pinned to his gentlemanly villa by a feudal burden enforced by his philandering father, prodigal brother, and ever-expanding family. “But meanwhile the frescoes were still on the walls—beautiful, no doubt [. . . ] but futile; a huge capital frozen in plaster, eating its head off, utterly useless. Whereas, with his cheese-factory. . . ” (184). The frescoes, with their aristocratic and domestic associations, literally and figuratively imprison the Count in his home.

---

27 Huxley frequently discussed frescoes in his work—not least in “The Best Picture in the World.” He also contributed “A Modern Fresco Painter”—an essay about the restored frescoes in the Sitwells’ Italian retreat, Montegufoni—to British *Vogue*. 
“Little Mexican” is in many ways a fable about the value of taste. The narrator, of course, can never find a buyer for the Count’s frescoes, and the Count’s luck goes from bad to worse. At one point he manages to set up looms with money from the sale of a parcel of land, but the factory is destroyed by Communists in an uprising (“and they were such beautiful machines” [201, the heartbroken Count laments). In an industrialized world, the taste of his ancestors can only oppress the Count; his is a modern spirit in an aristocratic form. He is bound to a model of “good taste” that no longer has any value, whether pecuniary or aesthetic—now it is only machines that can be “beautiful”; they are both valued and valuable. While the Count grows old and poor as his once stunning frescoes peel and fade, his father—the one who saddled his son with the burden of “good taste”—thrives. The narrator stumbles upon the patriarch on holiday with his mistress in Salzburg and finds the old man rejuvenated in this city of profoundly modern taste:

Salzburg at the moment is all in the movement. There are baroque churches in abundance; there are Italianate fountains; there are gardens and palaces that mimic in their extravagantly ponderous Teutonic way the gardens and palaces of Rome. And, choicest treasure of all, there is a tunnel, forty feet high, bored through a precipitous crag—a tunnel such as only a Prince Bishop of the seventeenth century could have dreamed of, having at either end an arch of triumph, with pilasters, broken pediments, statues, scutcheons, all carved our of the living rock—a masterpiece among tunnels, and in a town where everything, without being really good, is exquisitely ‘amusing,’ the most amusing feature of all. (206-7)

Salzburg is, for Huxley, the baroque portent of modern “good taste”; once again he links the romanticism of seventeenth-century taste to the cold-blooded romanticism of the machine age.
This “good taste” stands in direct opposition to the—in Huxley’s view—true “good taste” of the villa’s frescoes, and the Count’s impoverished life at home compared to his father’s flourishing life at Salzburg is proof that Huxley’s idea of good taste simply does not pay. The Count’s plight is unique to the modern era; stripped of spiritual significance and devoid of commercial marketability, good art must necessarily be valueless.

Of course, art has always, to an extent, been implicated in the marketplace—a fact not even Huxley can ignore. “Little Mexican” is an exaggerated account of the fate of art in a mass-market world. Yet, wealth affords other values besides the merely commercial when it comes to art. In other words, the culture-commerce relationship can move in the opposite direction, as in another story from *Little Mexican*, “The Portrait.” This story begins a theme to which Huxley will return in *After Many a Summer*, that of the attempts of the newly monied class to purchase cultural capital. In this case, a philistine industrialist approaches Mr. Bigger, an art dealer, to buy “real pictures, old pictures. Rembrandt and Sir Joshua Reynolds and that sort of thing,” but not, the client makes clear, any of the “modern stuff” (247) that the dealer initially suggests. The customer has, as he tells the dealer, “just bought a rather large house—a Manor House” (247). He is in effect the inverted Count Tirabassi, who inherits a house full of old masters only to find this inheritance keeps him from the capitalistic success he so desires. The “Lord of the Manor,” as Mr. Bigger ironically refers to his customer, made his fortune free from any cultural baggage and now feels the need to acquire the sort of intellectual capital that so oppresses the Count in “Little Mexican.” “An Old Master is,” as Mr. Bigger cynically notes, “a symbol of social superiority” (248). Unlike the Count, who is trapped in a historical model of wealth that no longer applies to the modern world, the capitalist is entirely history-less. This attitude is typical, Huxley notes, of the industrial class, for whom the devotion of time to cultural pursuits is financially unsound. Culture-snobbery—the preserve of the highbrow—runs counter to capitalist
interests. As he argues in “On the Charms of History and the Future of the Past” (1931), the only kind of snobbery permitted to a worshipper of the new divinity—industry—is the snobbery of possessions, for “in the eyes of the Industriolator, the first duty of man is to collect as many objects as he can” (131). In other words, culture does still have value in the industrial age, but it is a property value, not an intellectual one. And while, no doubt, this has been the case throughout history, what separates the “culture-objects” of modernity from, say, the Count’s frescoes is the continuity of history. The Veroneses are not “objects” to Huxley in the same way that Rembrandts are objects to the industrialist; the frescoes’ parasitic relationship with the villa is a testament to their historical coherence; they may have an outdated value, but they exist within a comprehensible unfolding of time. Moreover, as part of the house itself, the frescoes are associated—resentfully, in the Count’s mind—with the domestic drudgery of family life, rather than the heroic success of the self-made man. In a world which, according to Huxley, “hates history” (“Charms” 138), the frescoes’ cultural capital is worthless. But the Lord of the Manor’s collection of cultural capital, on the other hand, has no connection to time—there is no distinction in his mind between Reynolds and Rembrandt and the “late Venetian” Mr. Bigger encourages him to buy; and they will hang, no doubt, in his Manor completely devoid of historical context. The capitalist’s Manor House exists in spite of time, not because of it.

Huxley, the self-professed highbrow, does have the last laugh in “The Portrait,” for the Lord of the Manor does not realize just how “history-less” the portrait he intends to buy is. Mr. Bigger spins the yarn about the “late Venetian” portrait he unloads on the industrialist, trying to entice the buyer with a romantic tale, even though this “late Venetian” was only recently painted by one of Mr. Bigger’s stable of starving artists who copy Old Masters to sell to philistines like the industrialist. Mr. Bigger, purported arbiter of taste, has, like Richard Greenow, given in to the market; he rejects the original work of the poor artist who appears at the end of the story by
saying “‘there’s no money in modern stuff. But I’ll take any number of those sham Old Masters of yours’” (278).

Huxley continually derides “luxury value” as the basis of taste; this sentiment is especially evident in Jestling Pilate (1932), his Asian travelogue. He criticizes the insistence on opulence at the expense of proportion and harmony in much Indian architecture. For the inhabitants of and tourists to the East, wealth value seems, in Huxley’s estimation, to be the only worthwhile value. But, as “The Portrait” makes clear, grandeur is not always what it seems. Huxley describes with great glee the tourists “clambering among the roofs” of the Taj Mahal, only to find “evidence to show that the marble is only a veneer over cheaper masonry, not solid. It is a swindle!” (59). Meanwhile, Huxley notes, genuinely “good,” if less “flashy” architecture in India remains unnoticed, as in, for instance, Jaipur. But this oversight is not merely an Eastern phenomenon, Huxley is quick to point out; “expensiveness is everywhere admired. The average tourist is moved to greater raptures by St. Peter’s than by his own St. Paul’s. The interior of the Roman basilica is all of marble. St. Paul’s is only Portland Stone. The relative architectural merits of the two churches are not for a moment considered” (59). Once again, Huxley laments, the façade of good taste prevails.

It is difficult to avoid the spectre of capitalism in discussing taste in the period. Huxley was certainly not alone in his criticisms of the “taste market.” Indeed, most proponents of the “good taste” movement against which Huxley often wrote were attempting to educate the public in non-commercial taste value. But the theorists who were attempting to redefine taste could, Huxley suggests, be just as harmful as enterprising industrialists. Replacing commercial value with exclusively intellectual value was not Huxley’s aim, for while he may have associated with the most prominent art critics of the day, he was reluctant to endorse wholesale the theories they expounded. While he saw the value of theories “at moments when old traditions are breaking up,
when all is chaos and flux” (“Ben Jonson” 120), Huxley warned against the consequences of purely reactionary theories. As he laments in “Notes on the Work of Vladimir Polunin” (1923), “the modern reaction from realism has aimed at asserting—violently and perhaps with excessive zeal, like all reactions—the supreme importance of composition and construction [. . .] It has insisted so much on the importance of form that it has forgotten the just claims of representation” (42). What Huxley continually fights against in defending the “just claims” of representation is the sense of “total conversion” in modern theories of art: “every propounder of a new theory of aesthetics,” he writes in “The Unknown God,” “is a St Paul preaching to the Areopagites” (48).28 As is also the case for Waugh, it is not so much the theories of form and abstraction themselves that Huxley opposed, it was the totalizing effect these theories had on the imagination—their ability to be reduced to commercial or theoretical shorthand—that truly disturbed these writers. Moreover, these theory values, in their all-encompassing application, necessitate a revision of historical values: “reversing the historical process, we attack the fact forearmed with theoretical prejudice. Instead of considering each fact on its own merits, we ask how it fits into the theoretical scheme. At any given moment a number of meritorious facts fail to fit into the fashionable theory and have to be ignored” (“Breughel” 193).29 Huxley realizes that aesthetic fashions have always existed, but when fashion begins to rewrite history—when the present dictates the past—“good taste” suffers. “The only prejudice,” he continues, “that the ideal art critic should have is against the incompetent, the mentally dishonest, and the futile” (194). Yet, as Huxley sees it, modern art critics are too invested in promulgating their theories to make objective, qualitative judgements.

28 In the story, “Eupompos Gave Splendour to Art by Numbers,” the “Philarithmics” dictate aesthetics under the theory that “to count was the one thing worth doing, because it was the one thing you could be sure of doing right. Thus, art, that it may have any value at all, must ally itself with reality—must, that is, possess a numerical foundation” (201-2). The eponymous artist, in a fit of temporary sanity, commits suicide after realizing the absurdity of such a theory.

29 Compare this argument to Waugh’s defense of Rossetti discussed in the following chapter (p. 123).
The prominence of formalist tastes in art make critics, both amateur and professional, apt to forget art: “So much is talked about nowadays about aesthetics—about the theories and underlying principles of art—that we are liable to forget that art, to be satisfying, must possess other things besides principles. It must possess life” (“Art and the Quality of Life” 16). Modern theories tended not to value liveliness for its own sake, and the taste for non-representational art spread right down to the “Futurist” curtains of Rosie Shearwater. Not only did these theorists change tastes, they changed the meaning of art; whereas commerce made art a commodity, theory made art a cult. Many aesthetically minded people, convinced of the Importance of Art and encouraged by the apparent ease with which one could create non-representational art, flocked to the altar of this new religion. Huxley derides the “enormous number of people [who] profess themselves ‘artists’ and produce ‘works of art’” (“The Spread of Bad Art” 168). In “Art and the Quality of Life” (1923), Huxley speculates “photography has killed the art of engraving, and the contemporary artist who would, in an earlier century, have applied his talent to interpretation, now tries to lash himself into creation and very naturally fails” (16). Just as the number of literate people in no way corresponded to the number of “thinkers,” so too do the numbers of artists in early-twentieth-century Britain exceed the number of “good artists.” For the occasionally narrow-minded Huxley, this phenomenon was a symptom of the democratic encouragement of mediocrity. In contrast to the almost defunct arts of engraving or reproduction, “which were at any rate worth something, for they had an other than aesthetic value,” the “young talentless painter of the present time gives us nothing but boredom” because he is “aiming [. . . ] at some mythical ideal of pure aestheticism, to which all but form is sacrificed” (“Conxolus” 208). Here again that call for an “other than aesthetic” value hearkens back to the humanist aesthetics Huxley read in Wren’s work. Yet this value was, Huxley feared, too often excluded in

---

30 Waugh makes a similar point in “The Death of Painting” (1956).
theories of art that sought to render humanity exclusively in aesthetic terms. Worse yet is the alienation of aesthetic “heretics” at the hands of these nouveau puritans:

The Cubists and other Pharisees of modern architecture refuse to admit the existence of such trifles as national traditions, long-established habits and the congenital peculiarities of human nature. For them, man is made for modern technique, not modern technique for man. Thus, in the name of modern technique, Le Corbusier would compel us all to inhabit a mixture of green-house and hospital ward, furnished in the style of a dentist’s operating chamber. [. . .] No mercy for those who find that polished steel furniture, however elegant, has a deadening effect on the spirits of those who use it. No mercy for those who pine for the stimulating life-flow that proceeds from even a humble piece of individual craftsmanship. (“Puritanism in Art” 201)

Theory, while inherently useful at times such as this, takes on a kind of Cromwellian power in Huxley’s view; it is a revolution taken too far.

In every criticism of good taste, Huxley’s desire for a harmonious balance makes it difficult to grasp just what he was actively promoting. Just as the retreat of intellectual tastes from the public sphere disconcerted Huxley, so too did the over-intellectualization of art pose a threat for the gentlemanly values Huxley saw retreating from the built environment. Similarly, accessibility to beauty was, for Huxley, crucial for a civilized society, yet the too-widespread availability of “beautiful objects” in the good taste market only undermined the disinterested values he sought in art. Huxley asks us to “cultivate our gardens,” but he makes it very difficult to do so on his idealized terms.
1.3 “Art is for beginners”: *After Many a Summer* and Spiritual Good Taste

Huxley was most prolific in his art criticism throughout the 1920s. Questions of taste colour both his fiction and journalism from this period. Over the course of the 1930s, however, aesthetic issues appear to fade into the background of Huxley’s work. Certainly the publication of *Brave New World* in 1932 marks an important transition in Huxley’s career. This dystopian satire of a Fordian future is a stylistic and thematic departure from his first four novels. Indeed, Huxley’s typical appeal to the visual sense is conspicuous by its absence—a fact central to his satire, as Sexton points out (“Background” 1). The lack of any meaningful aesthetic in *Brave New World* is certainly one consequence of the standardized consumption that his earlier novels anticipate. *Brave New World*, however, looms large over Huxley’s career, and in many ways its significance has been overstated in the decades since its publication. Judging solely from this novel, Huxley’s greatest concerns for the future were scientific—a fact unsupported by the sheer breadth of his interests throughout his career. It is unfortunate that what is in many respects the anomaly of Huxley’s career should dominate his critical reception, for, although an important novel in a larger cultural context, *Brave New World* does not fully explain Huxley’s seemingly abrupt transition from the society satires of his early career to the darker, more philosophic fiction of his later work. A far more insightful example of Huxley’s evolving style is the much less often cited—and much more difficult—novel, *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936). This largely autobiographical novel is a conversion narrative told out of chronological sequence. The book describes Anthony Beavis’s awakening from cultured cynicism to spiritually tempered pacifism. This “conversion” mirrors closely Huxley’s own interest in pacifism through Dick Sheppard’s movement, as well as his growing interest in contemplative religions. *Eyeless in Gaza*, more so than *Brave New* ...
World, defines the second half of Huxley’s literary career. It adapts the formal complexity of Point Counter Point to a moral philosophic system. Questions of spirit take the place of aesthetics in his later works, including his two books on seventeenth-century mysticism, Grey Eminence (1941) and The Devils of Loudun (1952), his epic metaphysical treatise, The Perennial Philosophy (1945), his account of psychedelic drug experimentation, The Doors of Perception (1954), and his experimental novel, Time Must Have a Stop (1944).

There is just one curious exception to this pattern and, like all curiosities, it gains its significance from its idiosyncrasy. After Many a Summer (1939) is Huxley’s first “Hollywood” novel, written shortly after he and his wife Maria moved to California. The novel describes the academic Jeremy Pordage’s attempts at cataloguing the collection of Hauberker papers recently acquired by the millionaire, Jo Stoyte, a very thinly veiled William Randolph Hearst. Stoyte inhabits a hideous castle full of priceless treasures, and in addition to collecting artifacts for which he has no aesthetic sympathy, Stoyte is also obsessed with the evasion of death. He hires a live-in doctor, the shady Dr. Obispo, to use any means necessary to artificially prolong his life. Dr. Obispo experiments with the ingestion of carp guts—an experiment that gains momentum after Jeremy’s discovery of a similar attempt in the diary of the Fifth Earl of Hauberker, the success of which is confirmed by the discovery of the Earl living, though half-devolved, in a dungeon on his estate, over a hundred and fifty years later.

In tone and form, After Many a Summer appears to be a curious amalgamation of Crome Yellow and Brave New World, with a poorly integrated philosophic diatribe sandwiched between. As such, it poses several problems for the critic wishing to make sense of the novel in the context of Huxley’s work. On the one hand, the novel is obsessed with art and culture, from the jumbled

---

31 Dick Sheppard, a pacifist and clergyman, formed the Peace Pledge Union in 1934, which solicited postcards from the public pledging pacifism.

32 After Many a Summer Dies the Swan in the United States.
collection of *bibelots* in Stoyte’s basement, to the orgy of acontextual cultural references that
comprise the Beverly Pantheon—an exaggerated Forest Lawn Cemetery." Yet, at the same time,
the presumed moral centre of the novel would seem to deny the very validity of *any* standard of
taste; the sententious proclamations of William Propter, the Jeffersonian contemplative who,
somewhat preposterously, establishes an experimental farm on Stoyte’s estate, warns against the
cult of personality and human achievement indicated in cultural capital and favours instead a
selfless union with godhead. As a result, Stoyte’s castle seems to exist in a post-taste world in
which the very act of aesthetic appreciation—formerly a supremely civic and disinterested act in
Huxley’s writing—becomes entirely futile. This final part of the chapter will address and attempt
to resolve such a critical vacuum, for *After Many a Summer* is, despite its puzzling inconsistency,
the key to reconciling the two seemingly opposed tenets of Huxley’s thought: art and spirit.

*After Many a Summer* revolves around three thematic poles: Stoyte’s castle-museum, the
interpolated diary of the Fifth Earl of Hauberk, and William Propter’s mystical teaching. The
central focalizer in the novel is Jeremy Pordage, the prototypical highbrow, whom Stoyte recruits
to catalogue the Hauberk Papers. It is through Jeremy’s eyes that we first encounter Stoyte’s
castle; as he approaches the house by car, Jeremy describes its exterior:

> On the summit of the bluff and as though growing out of it in a kind of
efflorescence, stood a castle. But what a castle! The donjon was like a skyscraper,
the bastions plunged headlong with the effortless swoop of concrete dams. The
thing was Gothic, a medieval, baronial—doubly baronial, Gothic with a Gothicity
raise, so to speak, to a higher power, more medieval than any building of the
thirteenth century. For this. . . Object, as Jeremy was reduced to calling it, was

---

33 In keeping with his habit of “re-writing” Huxley, Waugh would “improve” (as far as he was concerned) Huxley’s
satire on Forest Lawn in his 1948 novel, *The Loved One.*
medieval, not out of vulgar necessity, like Coucy, say, or Alnwick, but out of pure fun and wantonness, platonically, one might say. (15-6)

Jeremy, the man of consummate taste, is initially horrified by this “nightmare of the hilltop” (16); he was disconcerted not merely by the look of the thing, but by what this thing portended: the “humorous Puritanism of his good taste was shocked; he was appalled at the prospect of meeting the person capable of committing such an enormity” (16). The closer Jeremy gets to this Object, this unnamable, unclassifiable entity, the more ineffable it becomes in its curious admixture of ur-Gothicity and ultra-modernity. Jeremy discovers, for instance, that the Object is surrounded by a moat, though the antiquity of this detail is offset by the sophistication of its operations: “some few hundred yards from the water’s edge, the car passed between two pillars, topped by heraldic lions. Its passage, it was evident, interrupted a beam of invisible light directed on a photo-electric cell; for no sooner were they past the lions than a drawbridge began to descend” (21). For Jeremy, the Object is particularly upsetting because he can find no reference in his cultural index that would help explain it, since, for Jeremy, “things assumed meaning, only when they had been translated into words and confined between the pages of a book” (23). Stoyte’s castle, however, offers no cultural frame of reference that might soothe Jeremy’s intellectual distress: “the Object impended, insolently enormous. Nobody had dealt poetically with that” (23). Jeremy tries, helplessly, to find some correspondence between the man who built this complex and himself, but “between that person and oneself, what contact, what community of thought or feeling could possibly exist?” (16), for “Mr. Stoyte had baboons and a sacred grotto, Mr. Stoyte had a chromium portcullis and the Hauber Papers, Mr. Stoyte had a cemetery like an amusement park” (24). The Object, and the man who willed it into being, were entirely irresolvable to Jeremy.
But if Jeremy finds the exterior of the castle troubling, its interior proves to be at once comforting and alienating. Unlike the exterior, which denies all cultural referents, the interior exhibits a profusion of culture for Jeremy as it is stuffed with a vast collection of European art:

Then, inside the castle, the Rubens and the great El Greco in the hall, the Vermeer in the elevator, the Rembrandt etchings along the corridors, the Winterhalter in the butler’s pantry. [. . .] Then Miss Maunciple’s Louis XV boudoir, with the Watteau and the two Lancrets and the fully equipped soda-fountain in a rococo embrasure [. . .] The library, with its woodwork by Grinling Gibbons, but with no books, because Mr. Stoyte had not yet brought himself to buy any. The small dining-room, with its Fra Angelico and its furniture from Brighton Pavilion. The large dining-room, modelled on the interior of the mosque at Fatehpur Sikri. (29)

Despite its haphazard arrangement—Watteau and a rococo soda-fountain, Vermeer in an elevator—the sheer wealth of culture impresses and excites Jeremy. While architecturally and conceptually troubling, the castle at least affords Jeremy the opportunity to mine its riches.

Jeremy’s stated purpose at the castle—the cataloguing of Stoyte’s latest acquisition, the Hauberk papers—provides the link between the millionaire’s obsessive collecting and his pathological fear of death. These papers belonged to the Fifth Earl of Hauberk, noted sadist and criminal. In the collection Jeremy discovers a notebook of the Earl’s, which includes his thoughts on death, violence, the French Revolution, et cetera. As the eighteenth century draws to a close, the last Earl of Hauberk becomes increasingly preoccupied with his health; specifically, he is captivated by the longevity of the carp in his pond. Jeremy, aware of Dr. Obispo’s own experimentation with carp, is intrigued by this coincidence and encouraged by the Fifth Earl’s curiously long life. Alerting Obispo to the strange experiment, the two discover the Earl began ingesting “each day not less than six ounces of the raw, triturated viscera of freshly opened carp”
Jeremy and Obispo are shocked to discover that at age 81 the Earl fathered three illegitimate children; not only did the Earl live significantly longer than the average Englishman of the eighteenth century, he seems to have become younger as the years pass. He buys a home in 1831, complete with catacomb vaults which are, Jeremy comments, “a bit sinister” (253), and he proceeds to add a neo-Gothic wing to his new estate. At the end of the diary, the two discover the Earl fakes his own death to avoid punishment for an egregious sexual scandal and he retreats to his catacombs with his mistress, only to be discovered—horrifyingly regressed—at the end of the novel by Obispo and Stoyte.

Finally, at the background of the novel lies William Propter, the back-to-the-land Jeffersonian democrat, mystic, and author of Jeremy’s favourite book, *Short Studies in the Counter Reformation*. Propter, a former schoolfellow of Stoyte’s, lives on the capitalist’s property and experiments in creating schemes for self-sufficiency. Huxley introduces his philosophizing through several “visits” Jeremy makes to Propter’s ranch, during which Propter counsels against the cult of personality, the enslavement to time, the reliance on capitalism, and the denial of Reality. He is, fundamentally, skeptical of the fruits of merely human endeavour, which pits him against Stoyte, the self-made man, Obispo, the biologist, and Jeremy, the scholar.

These three elements of the novel cohere to form what most critics deem to be a powerful argument. The Beverly Pantheon, especially, figures as an important link between the novel’s two central themes. As Christopher Ames argues, Huxley connects “a jumbled and corrupted cultural tradition to a bizarre and materialist quest for immortality” (413). Indeed, the obvious link to the cultural graveyard neatly ties together Stoyte’s two obsessions: death and culture. Stoyte collects objects of “culture” as a way of warding off death, thus creating a timeless past-present museum, in which the lack of historical structure allows Stoyte to ignore futurity. As Baker notes, in contrast to a museum, in Stoyte’s castle “history is presented as a static
assemblage of indecipherable fragments, a petrified collection haphazardly organized” (Dark 198). Or, to borrow Jeremy’s own memorable phrase, “it’s as though one were walking into the mind of a lunatic [. . .] or, rather, an idiot [. . .] this is a no-track mind. No-track because infinity-track. It’s the mind of an idiot of genius. Positively stuffed with the best that has been thought and said” (153). Stoyte’s castle is the Arnoldian best without the supervision of the Arnoldian critic; in the absence of any organizing principle Stoyte’s selections convey merely unmeaning, as evidenced in Jeremy’s inability to make sense of the space in terms other than, simply, the Object. This epistemological impasse is emphasized in the narrator’s description of the portrait which hangs in entrance hall, El Greco’s “Crucifixion of St. Peter” and Rubens’s portrait of Helene Fourment:

Jeremy looked from one to the other—from the ectoplasm of the inverted saint to the unequivocal skin and fat and muscle which Rubens had so loved to see and touch; from unearthly flesh-tints of green-white ochre and carmine, shadowed with transparent black, to the creams and warm pinks, the nacreous blues and greens of Flemish nudity. Two shining symbols, incomparably powerful and expressive—but of what, of what? (38)

This question—“expressive—but of what?”—haunts After Many a Summer. Every cultural juxtaposition Huxley creates offers some hope of meaningful coherence, but the ultimate meaning is elusive. Jeremy, the best candidate for the Arnoldian critic, remains unable to organize the ahistorical jumble into anything approaching sense. The suspension of cultural time carries through his collection, to the perversities of the Pantheon, to the hyper-real city itself. And, just as the attempt at arresting cultural time proves futile, so too does the attempt at arresting biological time. Stoyte finds the fountain of youth in the Earl of Hauberk, but the body without history is also denied meaning. Both culture and biology play the role of “Tithonus” in
the novel; both, seeking immortality, devolve into incoherence. It is only Propter who, while equally skeptical of time, can provide a solution; in his insistence on getting outside “time and craving,” he offers a type of meaning which is both immanent and transcendent; his is not the quest for immortality but rather for Eternity.

Of course, this conclusion poses several problems for Huxley’s theory of taste. On the one hand, Stoyte’s castle—and America generally—represent the logical extension of Huxley’s fears of a “post-taste” world in which everything is pastiche and there are no traditions. The Los Angeles that Jeremy encounters on his ride to the castle is just such a world; in the absence of any system of taste, the mere simulation of things that, at some time and place, were once tasteful is a sufficient substitute. The British Los Angeles is, as it is also for Waugh, Stratford-Upon-Avon, in which the context-less recreation of the past provides thousands with this taste substitute: “A bus trip to Stratford-on-Avon is for thousands of Shakespeare’s fellow-countrymen sufficient excuse for never looking into Macbeth or Hamlet. They feel that they have done enough by paying an idolatrous visit to the shrine of the Bard; to read him would be a work of supererogation” (“Modern Fetishism” 105). Actual cultural objects and their imitators are indistinguishable; Stoyte’s collection, while impressive, is inherently tasteless; it is mere consumption without reflection. Stoyte has no idea what he possesses: “‘you know, those papers I bought this summer. Roebuck? Hobuck?’” (25). He manages to turn “authentic” culture into “sham” culture by virtue of his complete disconnection from his possessions. Stoyte is, simply, the industrialist of “The Portrait” writ large.

As a point of satire, then, After Many a Summer seems consistent with Huxley’s earlier career. But there is a complication: William Propter. For the philosopher does not merely indict Stoyte’s materialism and self-involvement, he would seem to indict the very grounds of taste as well. The gentlemanly, humanistic taste Huxley promoted earlier in his career finds no place in
Propter’s mysticism—and Propter stands in, in fact, for Huxley’s newfound philosophical system. He lumps “all humanists” in with “all romantics” (146). Even though Propter admits there may be “a hierarchy of idiocies,” even the “classiest variety” (154)—the best of culture—is still idiocy, and inherited cultural traditions—the sort that Huxley once valued—are “compulsory idolatry” (156). Propter denies the category of personality since it is “a negation of reality, the denial of God” (156)—an assertion backed up by Huxley’s own writings on the subject. Propter admits, “art can be a lot of things,” but concludes, “in actual practice most of it is merely the mental equivalent of alcohol and cantharides” (160). As Baker describes, after Huxley began exploring Eastern philosophy, “the entire humanist tradition of Western art, philosophy, religion, and politics has for Huxley become synonymous with something evasive and contrived, an improperly conceived substitution of ‘inspiration from and self-sacrifice to strictly human “ideals,’” or ‘cause,’ for the ‘spiritual grace’ of the mystic” (Dark 191). In effect, then, the destruction of “taste” symbolized by Stoyte’s castle is not, as it might have been in Antic Hay, cause for concern; the philosophizing of William Propter signals Huxley’s disavowal of taste, and the human “ideals” Huxley championed in the work of Wren or della Francesca are merely distracting substitutions for the true ideals immanent in Reality.

In After Many a Summer, then, “good taste” is no longer the ground of philosophical significance; Propter’s commune boasts no aesthetic embellishments. One is tempted to consider, then, the spiritual efficacy of consciously pursued “bad taste.” For instance, in Eyeless in Gaza, Anthony Beavis’s friend and philosophical interlocutor, Mark Staithes, “lived in a dingy house off the Fulham Road. Dark, brown brick with terra-cotta trimmings; and, within, patterned linoleum; bits of red Axminster carpet; wallpapers of ochre sprinkled with bunches of cornflowers, of green, with crimson roses; fumed oak chairs and tables; rep curtains; bamboo stands supporting glazed blue pots. The hideousness, Anthony reflected, was so complete, so
absolutely unrelieved, that it could only have been intentional” (195). For Beavis, who reflects on Staithes’s purposive poor taste before his own conversion from the human level, cannot imagine a man of Staithes’s intellectual ability choosing to live in such an environment except as an ascetic tool—a way of denying the visual sense in order to stimulate mental activity. Indeed, as several of his friends have commented, for all his interest in aesthetic matters, Huxley and his wife were never particularly concerned with the look of their homes—certainly not to the extent Betjeman and Waugh were (Bedford 231). Upon moving to California, the Huxleys found themselves renting the “ugliest house in Hollywood” (Bedford 365). In a letter, Maria Huxley describes it as such:

a large rambling house in wood inside and out and Angiolino calls it the wagone di terza classe. And the man [who owned it] was German and collected horrors in European ‘kitsch’ and specialized in women’s bosoms. [. . .] Then there is a bar in the cellar. Covered with more bozomed women and clocks which tick up and down a fan on a naked lady and luminous dogs as lamps and a full-sized painting of a gorilla carrying a woman in a chemise to a very easily guessed purpose; there also stands a harmonium next to the gorilla. (qtd. Bedford 370)

The house was, in Christopher Isherwood’s memorable phrase, “log-cabin decadent” (154). And yet, if even the best art in the world is metaphysically unsound, it would seem unlikely that Huxley could find aesthetic representations of Godzilla to be spiritually efficacious. Is there really no room for taste in Huxley’s metaphysics?

To answer this question, one must return to the question Jeremy asks himself when confronted with the juxtaposition of Rubens and El Greco in Stoyte’s entrance-way. The surface reading of these contrasted paintings is that they represent a bifurcation of flesh and spirit; Rubens betokens the world of the flesh—the world of Stoyte and Obispo—while El Greco
symbolizes the world of the spirit—of Propter. But, as Baker argues, “the two paintings are not antithetical extremes, [. . .] Rather, they symbolize an illusory choice between two subtly related forms of enslavement to the desires and fears Huxley associated with the solely human level of time and craving” (Dark 203). In other words, both paintings operate exclusively on the human level; Rubens’s fleshly materialism and El Greco’s “centripetal” metaphysics (“Variations” 402) are merely two sides of the same coin. Baker draws attention instead to the third painting—the Vermeer in the elevator—as a more productive figuration of Huxley’s argument in After Many a Summer. In Baker’s terms, Vermeer, alongside the other exceptional figures of the Baroque period—Wren and Rembrandt—ascended to an aesthetic “that placed at the center of its vision a resolutely sustained emphasis on rational order and mathematical proportion, as well as the prim Huxleyan values of ‘solidity’ and ‘mass’” (Dark 206). Vermeer’s relegation to the elevator in Stoyte's castle is indicative of the status of such values in the castle itself. Baker argues Vermeer’s painting is a “denial of personality” (Dark 206), and, as such, exists as a model of metaphysical good taste. But how, one might wonder, is “logic” mystical? After all, Propter discounts the validity of the “calculus of eternity” (161). To understand this system we can consider the role the Vermeer plays in the novel’s climactic scene, in which Stoyte, convinced of his mistress’ infidelity with Dr. Obispo, returns to the house to get his gun, and in the moments preceding his mistaken shooting of Obispo’s lab assistant, is forced into contact with Vermeer’s work: “Mr. Stoyte glared at the Vermeer; and from her universe of perfected geometrical beauty the young lady in blue satin turned her head from the open harpsichord and looked out, past the draped curtain, over the black-and-white tessellated floor—out through the window of the picture-frame into that other universe in which Mr. Stoyte and his fellow-creatures had their ugly and untidy being” (266-7). Yet Stoyte’s primal, incomprehensible rage can find no correspondence in the logical perfection of Vermeer’s painting. In other words,
it is the Vermeer portrait’s refusal to meet Stoyte’s gaze on its own, too-human terms, its inability to interact on anything other than the level of eternity, that lends the painting its metaphysical superiority. In denying the personality, it denies other personalities. Only once one has shed the petty trappings of personality can one look upon the Vermeer with understanding. It is not merely “culture” that has this personality-denying effect, for “the stillness of that world was not the mere immobility of old paint and canvas; it was also the spirited repose of consummated perfection” (269). Neither the fleshly extravagance of Rubens nor the paranoid asceticism of El Greco can achieve the same spirited repose, for they lack the logical harmony of Vermeer that mirrors, in Huxley’s mind, the repose aimed at through mystical contemplation.

Yet, while on the human level there may be room in Huxley’s metaphysics for qualitative judgements, in the sense that Vermeer exceeds Rubens in the approach to perfection, it would seem that, on the level of eternity, taste value has no application. In The Doors of Perception, for instance, Huxley describes his first experiment with mescaline—a description that mirrors closely Will Farnaby’s use of moksha medicine in Island. Huxley writes on his contemplation of the vase before him,

Fortuitous and provisional, the little nosegay broke all the rules of traditional good taste. At breakfast that morning I had been struck by the lively dissonance of its colors. But that was no longer the point. I was not looking now at an unusual flower arrangement. I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence. (161)

When Huxley’s examiner asks him whether the sight is agreeable, Huxley replies, “‘neither agreeable nor disagreeable, [. . .] it just is’” (161). In other words, the traditional ground of taste—agreeableness—is completely irrelevant to the visionary’s perception. “Good taste” is, fundamentally, a moot point in the throes of mystical contemplation. Huxley considers this fact
at length, when he wonders what kind of art the great “knowers of Suchness”\textsuperscript{34} contemplated in their visions. He concludes,

I strongly suspect that most of the great knowers of Suchness paid very little attention to art—some refusing to have anything to do with it at all, others being content with what a critical eye would regard as second-rate, or even, tenth-rate, works. [. . .] Art, I suppose, is only for beginners, or else for those resolute dead-enders, who have made up their minds to be content with the ersatz of Suchness, with symbols rather than with what they signify, with the elegantly composed recipe in lieu of actual dinner. (167)

In other words, for those who can access visions of the Divine Ground, there is no difference between a Vermeer and a vermouth advertisement—both are mere substitutes for Suchness. The difference between the second-rate and the tenth-rate is a matter of interest only on the human level, thus fussing about questions of taste would seem, for the mystic Huxley, to be exercises in futility.

And yet, even Huxley concedes that living exclusively on the plane of Eternity is hardly practical; when, under the influence of mescaline he gazes in wonder at the folds of his trousers, Huxley comments to himself, “This is how one ought to see, how things really are,” he reflects later that “if one always saw like this, one would never want to do anything else. Just looking, just being the divine Not-self of flower, of book, of chair, of flannel. That would be enough. But in that case what about other people? What about human relations? In the recording of that morning’s conversations I find the question constantly repeated, ‘What about human relations?’ How could one reconcile this timeless bliss of seeing as one ought to see with the temporal duties of doing what one ought to do and feeling as one ought to feel?” (169). Huxley struggles

\textsuperscript{34} Or, Tathata, the experience of the self as pure Being and the appreciation of the true reality.
with the conflict between ethical obligations on the human plane and spiritual obligations on the mystical plane. In *The Devils of Loudun*, Huxley admits that, for the practical purposes of civilization, “horizontal self-transcendence” is necessary; in other words, “civilization demands from the individual devoted self-identification with the highest of human causes” (333). If Huxley was right in his early work that “good taste” is a means of achieving ethical civility, then the appreciation of the best art can be “self-transcendent.” Yet, transcendence on the merely human plane is not enough for, as he writes, “if this self-identification with what is human is not accompanied by a conscious and consistent effort to achieve upward self-transcendence into the universal life of the Spirit, the goods achieved will always be mingled with counterbalancing evils” (333; Huxley’s emphasis). And so, the values of good taste are not inconsistent with “vertical transcendence,” but the appreciation of art must be judged on two planes simultaneously, the ethical and the spiritual.

But why account for art at all? After all, in *After Many a Summer* William Propter manages to achieve horizontal and vertical transcendence without the aid of art. But few of us are William Propters—the true “knowers of Suchness” do not require visual prompts in accessing the Divine Ground. This is why Huxley’s comment that “art is for beginners” is so crucial; we cannot all spend our days contemplating the folds of our trousers without regard to “human relations.” We must exist in the world of humans even as we try to attain the world of Spirit. Contemplating art is practice for contemplating Eternity and this is where, finally, Huxley makes the case for the necessity of taste values even in a mystical approach to aesthetics. In *The Doors of Perception* he suggests that “the nearest approach” to a mystical vision “is a Vermeer” (171): appreciating art is simply practice for appreciating Spirit. Yet, as *After Many a Summer* makes clear, not all art can approximate the mystical experience, just as not all people can be full-time visionaries, and so there exists in Huxley’s metaphysics a sense of spiritual good taste.
Vermeer, Rembrandt, Francesca, Wren—these are the creators who can facilitate the horizontal self-transcendence that prepares the eye for vertical transcendence, for they deny personality, pretension, and temporality, even as they exist in time. In Huxley’s metaphysics, “bad taste” stands in for the petty world of human ambition and obsession; when, during the course of his mescaline experiment, Huxley is asked to contemplate his own mind, he finds “the field of vision was filled with brightly colored, constantly changing structures that seemed to be made of plastic or enameled tin. “‘Cheap,’ [he] commented. ‘Trivial. Like things in a five-and-ten.’ And all this shoddiness existed in a closed, cramped universe” (174). He continues, “and as I looked, it became very clear that this five-and-ten-cent ship was in some way connected with human pretensions [. . .] This suffocating interior of a dime-store ship was my own personal self; these gimcrack mobiles of tin and plastic were my personal contributions to the universe” (174).

Purely centripetal aesthetics—art that concerns only the human level—is little better than shoddy tin toys. And this is where Huxley’s disdain for the modern valuation of nonrepresentational art enters into his metaphysics; he observes that in modern art, there has “been a retreat from the outward Datum into the personal subconscious, into a mental world more squalid and more tightly closed than even the world of conscious personality. These contraptions of tin and highly colored plastic—where had I seen them before? In every picture gallery that exhibits the latest in nonrepresentational art” (176). “Bad taste” cannot prepare us for self-transcendence, for it dwells—revels, even—in the self. And so, while the gentlemanly humanism Huxley espoused early in his career is no longer the basis for his theory of good taste, the ethical values Huxley felt “good taste” could cultivate still apply to his mystical theory of taste—the best art will take us beyond ourselves, on both the human and the spiritual planes. Like Waugh and Betjeman, Huxley found the traditional understanding of “good taste” limiting, since it tended to discount the “extra-artistic” value of fine works of art. The “third” or “dissident” taste Huxley ultimately
promotes is the taste that compels the spirit to contemplate Reality, but this contemplative act has ethical implications, fostering, as it does, a community of spirit.
Chapter Two: Evelyn Waugh’s Orthodoxies and Paradoxes

The valley is all paved and inlaid with rivers of steel. No trees, for they have been abolished.

‘Glorious unnature,’ cries the watcher at the parapet. His voice launches into the abyss, following the curve of the bridges. ‘Glorious unnature. We have triumphed.’

But his laughter as it descends is like a flight of broken steps.

—Aldous Huxley, “Beauty”

And all delight in art, and all love of it, resolve themselves into simple love of that which deserves love.

— John Ruskin, “Traffic”

Although, by all accounts, their relationship was tumultuous at best, Arthur Waugh, in dedicating Tradition and Change (1919) to his younger son, offered a startlingly prescient glimpse into Evelyn Waugh’s character. This dedication, written when Evelyn was sixteen, begins with a description of the Waugh family nursery, the “treasure-house of [their] happy home life” (vii). He contrasts the half of the nursery covered with Alec Waugh’s sporting memorabilia with the other half of the room, dubbed “the Studio,” which Evelyn and Barbara Jacobs35 had covered with “strange cubist pictures” (vii). Setting aside his antipathy to his youngest son’s seemingly in-born iconoclasm, Arthur offers this telling—and sympathetic—insight into his son’s nature:

You are born into an era of many changes; and, if I know you at all, you will be swayed and troubled by many of them. But you are not yet so wedded to

---

35 Alec Waugh was five years older than Evelyn, and was the clear favourite of Arthur’s, as both Evelyn and Alec assert in their respective memoirs. Barbara Jacobs was Alec’s first wife, with whom Evelyn grew close while Alec was away during WWI. She introduced Evelyn to modern art, which Evelyn soon gave up, though...
what is new that you seem likely to despise what is old. You may copy the Cubist in your living room, but an Old Master hangs above your bed. (viii)

Arthur was correct on all counts. Waugh quickly grew tired of his Cubist phase and would forever prefer the Old Master over the bed. But, as his father predicted, he would never cease to be “troubled” by the changes that these choices seemed to embody. Arthur’s wish that his son would “change gently, like the old room where we have spent so many happy hours” (viii) may not have come true, but Arthur was quite right to frame his son’s emotional and intellectual development within a domestic space. For Evelyn, sites of dwelling always point beyond the material to the realm of values; the choices and tendencies implicit in our environment reveal our inmost beliefs. Evelyn’s obsession with taste was never purely aesthetic; while he was fascinated by the principles of art and design, at the heart of his inquiries was an exploration of the hidden element, that which cannot be “inventoried.”

It is not surprising, then, that Waugh’s approach to writing was so heavily informed by design. In a 1921 letter to his childhood friend, Dudley Carew, Waugh asserts that a successful novelist must “fit” his characters “into a design” (Letters 2). Control of one’s design never ceased to be a mainstay of Waugh’s “prose poetics.” In his notorious review of Cyril Connolly’s Enemies of Promise (1938), Waugh suggests the term “architectural” is more apt for critics to use than “creative,” for “what makes a writer, as distinct from a clever and cultured man who can write, is an added energy and breadth of vision which enables him to conceive and complete a structure” (“Present Discontents” 238). Waugh is continually defining and completing structures in his own work—structures in which to house his ideologies, however confused or willfully rancorous those ideologies may be. It is in part this

not before publishing a precocious essay “In Defense of Cubism” (1917) at the tender age of 14 (A Little Learning 117).
fixation on structure that made it so difficult for Waugh to come to terms with the paradox of taste; the “third taste” he tries to define throughout his career proved difficult to “fit” into the structures he had established. It is only once he abandoned the strict theological and aesthetic limitations upon which he leaned that he could effectively define and understand the real value of taste.

2.1 “Looking Forward to Barbarism”: *Decline and Fall* and the Apocalypse of Taste

Of all of Waugh’s novels, *Decline and Fall* (1928) remains the most directly engaged in the field of design. Specifically, the question of renovation looms over the novel. From Llanabba Castle, the half-Georgian/half-Gothic school where the protagonist, Paul Pennyfeather, finds himself a schoolmaster, to the Elizabethan-cum-modernist King’s Thursday of Margot Beste-Chetwynde, Waugh obsesses over the social and satirical implications of remodelling buildings from the past. Yet Waugh’s position on this slate of renovation is far from simple.

Perhaps with the single exception of *Vile Bodies* (1930), *Decline and Fall* stands as Waugh’s most modern novel. It is written in a near cryptic, economical prose, the dialogue is clipped and witty, the characters are, by and large, immersed in the present, and the currents of Bergsonian philosophy and Corbusierien theory run throughout. Certainly the novel cemented Waugh’s reputation as the satiric organ of Mayfair’s Bright Young Things. Paul Pennyfeather’s rise to social fame and his subsequent return to obscurity sets the template for Waugh’s bleak, objective and externalized comedy. *Decline and Fall*’s detractors found the novel incoherent at best in its satirical targets. The characters are so stylized, and Waugh’s
voice so repressed, that it seems to lack satiric content. While the message of *Decline and Fall* is subtle, there is a thread running throughout that ties Waugh’s satire to a central question. The issue of renovation, in fact, is more than merely a running gag in the background, for in Waugh’s treatment of Llanabba Castle and King’s Thursday lies the clue to Waugh’s satire on “good taste.”

The first architectural anomaly to which we are introduced in *Decline and Fall* is Llanabba Castle, the site of Dr Augustus Fagan’s school for boys. The castle as it stands is a rather ambiguous affair; while “from the back it looks very much like any other large country house, with a great many windows” (20), the façade tells another story altogether: “it is formidable feudal; one drives past at least a mile of machicolated wall before reaching the gates; these are towered and turreted and decorated with heraldic animals and a workable portcullis. Beyond them at the end of the avenue stands the Castle, a model of medieval impregnability” (20). The narrator explains how such a contradiction in architecture could come to be. During the 1860s the originally Georgian country house was owned by a wealthy millowner. At the height of the cotton famine, the millowner’s wife sought to ease the discomfort of her husband’s unemployed workers. She had little success in this charitable endeavour, and “her husband had read the Liberal economists and could not think of paying without due return. Accordingly ‘enlightened self-interest’ found a way” (20). The millowner instructed his millworkers to wall in his house with stone from a nearby quarry. The work was not completed, however, for the end of the American Civil War saw the return of workers to the mill, so “Llanabba House became Llanabba Castle after a great deal of work had been done very cheaply” (20).
Llanabba Castle is, quite clearly, a jab at one of Waugh’s pet straw men, the rise of liberalism. It is also, of course, a lesson in the futility of the Victorian Gothic revival. But what is not immediately apparent is that these two criticisms—one political, one aesthetic—are here directly linked. As Jeffrey Heath acknowledges, “motley taste is an established Waugh cue for lack of reason and discipline” (168). Nothing could be more motley than a feudal Georgian home, nor anything more irrational—so far as Waugh is concerned—than liberal humanism. The quest for the picturesque that underpinned the Gothic revival—at least in its more pernicious “1860” form—and the breed of liberalism that arose in the nineteenth century were both, Waugh contends, fundamentally romantic at heart. William Myers explains, “the bourgeois cult of success and the aggressive projection of the ego, the collapse of aristocratic pretensions and the notion of liberalism that happiness depends upon doing ‘exactly what one wants when one wants to’ contribute to the establishment of a false and romantic bourgeoisie personality” (8). The romantic approach to architecture is just as damaging; as Geoffrey Scott argues, “the first fallacy of Romanticism, [. . .] and the gravest, is to regard architecture as symbolic” (50). The Gothic houses of millowners and factory operators were symbols of a newfound, though spurious, prestige. These houses—and the liberal economics that made their construction possible—were, for Waugh at least, a picturesque wish that denied certain ineffable realities. In his biography of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1928) Waugh writes, “the romantic outlook sees life as a series of glowing and unrelated systems, in which the component parts are explicable and true only in terms of themselves; in which stars are just as big and near as they look, and ‘rien n’est vrai que le pittoresque’ (Rossetti 52). Llanabba Castle is the incarnation of this attitude—it is a picturesque attempt to mask two economic realities: one, that the millowner has an “ancient”
pedigree, though he is almost certainly of the newly affluent middle-class; and two, that “enlightened self-interest” is, in fact, enlightened, while it is, fundamentally, exploitative. The egregious taste of Llanabba Castle testifies to an entire set of social, political, and ethical criticisms. The idea of renovation, then, is ironically deployed. The attempt to express a new social consciousness in architectural form was in Waugh’s view abortive and ineffectual because the social consciousness that made such renovation possible was in itself abortive and ineffectual. As far as Waugh is concerned, Llanabba Castle is the disease of liberalism rendered in three dimensions.

Llanabba Castle is not, however, the most prominent example of renovation in *Decline and Fall*. King’s Thursday, the sixteenth-century manor house of the Pastmaster family, is perhaps the most memorable of Waugh’s renovated homes. This house had remained in the hands of the Earls of Pastmaster “since the reign of Bloody Mary” (115). The narrator explains, “for three centuries the poverty and inertia of this noble family had preserved its home unmodified by any of the succeeding fashions that fell upon domestic architecture” (115), and, as such, the house is said to be “the finest piece of domestic Tudor in England” (116). This house becomes a destination for London socialites, for, being without central heat, hot water, and nearly all modern conveniences, it promises the charm of authenticity otherwise inaccessible to the urban elite: “no wing had been added, no window filled in; no portico, façade, terrace, orangery, tower, or battlement marred its timbered front. In the craze for coal-gas and indoor sanitation, King’s Thursday had slept unscathed by plumber or engineer” (115). The house is, in effect, a time capsule—that is, until it comes into possession of Margot Beste-Chetwynde, Waugh’s socialite fatale. Margot’s purchase of King’s Thursday is met with enthusiasm across Hampshire for, being the widowed sister-in-
law of the current Earl, Margot could continue the Beste-Chetwynde name at King’s Thursday.

Of course, Margot has very different plans for King’s Thursday. She bought the house with the intention of rebuilding it, for, as she made clear to journalists, she “can’t think of anything more bourgeois and awful than timbered Tudor architecture” (118). She contracts the obscure German architect, Otto Friedrich Silenus, to build her instead “‘something clean and square’” (119). This decision is, of course radically unpopular amongst the locals, “who as the work of demolition proceeded, [. . .] became increasingly enraged, and, in their eagerness to preserve for the county a little of the great manor, even resorted to predatory expeditions, from which they would return with lumps of carved stonework for their rock gardens” (119). Margot’s breezy disregard of her tenants’ unrest confirms that she is hardly a woman-of-the-people.

The architect, Silenus, is a composite of a Bauhaus-educated, Le Corbusier-inspired architect-in-exile. Silenus exhibits all the characteristics of a parodic modernist. Margot became aware of his work after discovering his “rejected design for a chewing-gum factory which had been produced in a progressive Hungarian quarterly” (119); he is a continental European with an obscure caché, for though he was largely unknown, “all who met him carried away deep and diverse impressions of his genius” (119); he is involved with experimental cinema, as he did the “décor for a cinema-film of great length and complexity of thought” (119). Most tellingly, however, he exhibits a purely mechanistic mind, as evident in this statement of his artistic vision:

‘The problem of architecture as I see it [. . .] is the elimination of the human element from the consideration of form. The only perfect building must be the
factory, because that is built to house machines, not men. [. . . .] All ill comes from man,’ he said gloomily; [. . . .] Man is never beautiful, he is never happy except when he becomes the channel for the distribution of mechanical forces.’ (120)

Here Waugh invokes the ethos that characterized much of the International Style of architecture. Though the utilitarianism of Walter Gropius’s Bauhaus school informs much of Waugh’s characterization of Silenus, the Swiss architect, Le Corbusier, was perhaps foremost in Waugh’s mind throughout Decline and Fall. Frederick Etchells’s English translation of the French architect’s Vers une architecture in 1927 had electrifying effects on London designers and critics. Waugh depicts Silenus’s theories as the satirical—yet equally logical—endpoint of Le Corbusier’s thought. Most famously Le Corbusier pronounced, in Vers une architecture, that “the house is a machine for living in” (4). Silenus’s fervent, yet futile, attempt to transform King’s Thursday into a kind of machine shed for humans is not far from this ideal, though Silenus’s lofty ambitions falter under the mechanical limitations of the human form; he froths,

‘I suppose there ought to be a staircase,’ he said gloomily. ‘Why can’t the creatures stay in one place! Up and down, in and out, round and round! Why can’t they sit still and work? Do dynamos require staircases? Do monkeys require houses? What an immature, self-destructive mischief is man! [. . . .] How loathsome and beyond words boring all the thoughts and self-approval of his biological by-product! this half-formed, ill-conditioned body! this erratic, maladjusted mechanism of his soul.’ (120)
Silenus’s yearning for the *sachlich* man—the fully rational creature—can only express itself through a wash of misanthropy.³⁶

As is so often the case, Waugh’s parodic portrait of the architect need not stray far from reality. For the emphasis on mechanizing domestic architecture was, as Howard Robertson and Frank Yerbury point out, “an idea which presupposes not only a change in architectural standards, but a change in the human personality of the sort of tenant for whom these houses are destined” (qtd. Higgott 24). Indeed, this idea was far from implicit; Le Corbusier argues, “we must create the mass-production spirit. The spirit of constructing mass-production houses. The spirit of living in mass-production houses” (6). In other words, it is not enough to build “mass-production houses”—domestic factories, as it were—without instilling in people the ethos required to properly inhabit these structures.³⁷ This is Silenus’ great tragedy, for the people for whom he builds want only superficial change—they refuse to mechanize themselves fully, thus traditional concerns, such as staircases, continue to dominate the plan. Le Corbusier suggests, “if we eliminate from our hearts and minds all dead concepts in regard to the house, and look at the question from a critical and objective point-of-view, we shall arrive at the ‘House Machine,’ the mass-production house” (6).

Silenus’s inability to erect at King’s Thursday a House Machine, to eschew dead concepts

---

³⁶ Wyndham Lewis, in a send-up of ultra-rational modernist designs, such as “those interiors obviously designed for a particularly puritanic athlete of robotic tastes,” notes that that while these modern homes may be “ideal only for the very few,” it is still “far better to have nothing on the walls than vulgar and trivial things; and it must always be remembered that the average athlete—or tennis-girl turned wife, or golfing-motorist become home-builder—possesses no taste at all, and should if possible be restrained from buying those coloured prints of comic Bonzos he naturally favours and putting them up on his walls. For him a perfectly blank wall is the only decent solution. He is what ‘bourgeois’ civilization has made him. He should put himself humbly in the hands of a competent modernist designer, and cubist-bungalow architect, and allow them to ration him, very strictly indeed, in the matter of everything barring strict necessities—tables, chairs, lamps and bookshelves for the detritus of his ‘mystery’ literature, and to be the trash-boxes for his Crime-Club sequences” (158).

³⁷ This sentiment is echoed in the words of the Russian Futurist, Vladimir Mayakovskiy, who claimed, “we do not need a dead mausoleum of art where dead works are worshipped, but a living factory of the human spirit—in the streets, in the tramways, in the factories, workshops and workers’ homes” (qtd. Weston 141).
such as staircases, leads him, ultimately, to depression: “‘nothing I have ever done has caused me so much disgust’” (125), he bemoans of the finished King’s Thursday. Again, however, Waugh’s comic portrait is far from exaggerated. Le Corbusier also declared, “we are to be pitied for living in unworthy houses, since they ruin our health and our morale. [. . .] We shall soon need far too many sanatoriums. We are to be pitied. Our houses disgust us; we fly from them; [. . .] we are becoming demoralized” (19). Though Le Corbusier is not the militant misanthrope that Silenus is,38 Le Corbusier’s description of the human benefits of the mass-production house are purely mechanistic; these houses will make us healthier—that is, make our biological mechanism more efficient; they will improve morale—that is, improve our desire to participate in the mass-production spirit, not our psychic state. The discourse of modern design viewed humans as fleshly machines that need to operate more efficiently. In Robertson and Yerbury’s discussion of Le Corbusier’s villa at Garches, they note, “a motor-car stands before its door. One sees that the motor-car and the house are in tune, that the design of the house and car are in the natural harmony which has always obtained between manmade objects of any period which is truly an epoch” (qtd. Higgott 26). The tacit assumption here is that the occupants of the house should also be in harmony with the accompanying streamlined machines. They must become in tune with the epoch. Thus the modernist craze for vita-glass, sun catcher windows, ferro-concrete, open concept layouts, and the eradication of ornament are not exclusively aesthetic crazes; they are also engineering crazes—engineering in the sense of refiguring the human body, giving it fresh

38 Indeed, in this respect the character Silenus bears a striking resemblance to the Austrian architect Adolf Loos, who was an early “father” of modern design. Writing against the excesses of the Vienna Secession style, he argued that “A person of our times who gives way to the urge to daub the walls with erotic symbols is a criminal or a degenerate” (167). For Loos, like Silenus, modern design was a necessary step for human civilization; Loos insists “the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornamentation from objects of everyday use” (167; Loos’s emphasis).
air, sunshine, clean surfaces, and spatial freedom. Designers and manufacturers capitalized on these needs quickly; one advertisement for a decorating firm in *Harper’s Bazaar* in 1930 reads, “Go into these rooms...you can breathe there and walk about...no longer decoration sickly with charm from which the spirit turns...here there is nothing of deception...the lie is a true one...the machine works” (qtd. Battersby 69). The thrust of this copy is not aesthetic—very little attention is given to how the rooms *look*; rather, the advertisement focuses on the ease of inhabiting such space; the room is a well-oiled machine designed to accommodate humans’ own mechanical needs.

In *Decline and Fall*, however, Waugh marks the practical limits of such theory. Margot brings Silenus to King’s Thursday to effect an *aesthetic* change, while Silenus longs to effect mechanical change. King’s Thursday’s renovation is thus a neat bookend to the Victorian renovation of Llanabba Castle: the latter was a humanist renovation, while the former attempted to be an anti-humanist renovation. Both results were equally futile. Silenus’s King’s Thursday becomes not modern but modernistic; that is, it reduces the ambitions of the Modern Movement to a series of superficial touchstones: a dining-room floor of bottle-green glass, a table of vulcanite, an abstract mosaic floor, a colonnade of black glass, an aluminium balustrade, a malachite bathtub, *et cetera* (124). Silenus’s King’s Thursday is a showcase of modern materials grafted onto the shell of a Tudor home. It is an obvious statement on the impossibility of making modernism anything but a superficial style.

Yet, once again, Waugh did not have to imagine too liberally; only a year later in 1929 Raymond McGrath would finish his renovations of a non-descript Victorian villa into “Finella,” an ultra-modern home inspired by the glass palace of the eponymous Pictish
queen. This house, completely remodelled in modern materials, was covered in “silvered slabs of cast glass,” chromium plated pilasters, “an enormous serpent symbol of Finellian import” inlaid in a mosaic of “elusive blue Induroleum,” Marmorite walls, and jade green light fixtures (Strathdon 439). The major figures of the modern movement emphasized the necessity of new materials: ferro-concrete and vitrolite glass, aluminium, celluloid, steel, and so on (Pevsner 31). Both King’s Thursday and the eerily similar—yet wholly earnest—Finella abound in such materials. Yet, as the editor of The Architectural Review argues in an early criticism (1928) of Le Corbusier, “in making out a case for new materials instead of a case for a new plan,” Le Corbusier “has failed to perceive that the case for new materials hangs on the question whether he can establish in the first place the case for a new plan. [. . . ] Instead he has dressed up the house in a new concrete suit with windows, two, twenty, or two hundred feet long, and put the vegetable garden on the roof so that the soot from the chimneys may manure the soil” (“Europe Discusses” 222). In trying to apply his new materials to the traditional home, epitomized in the entirely unchanged plan of King’s Thursday, Silenus realizes the limits of his aspirations to domestic sachlichkeit. All treatments will merely be a concrete suit, because the house is so fundamentally adequate to human needs. Waugh makes this clear through the character Grimes, a reprobate schoolmaster whom Paul encounters, who thoughtfully contends the home is “‘the seed of life we carry about with us like our skeletons, each one of us unconsciously pregnant with desirable villa residences. There’s no escape. As individuals we simply do not exist. We are

---

39 Another source, Timothy Mowl argues, for Waugh’s Continental conversion of King’s Thursday was “the house ‘New Ways’ which Professor Peter Behrens of Vienna had designed for W.J. Bassett-Lowke in Northampton in 1925 and which was featured in an Architectural Review article in 1926. He had elaborated apocalyptically around that startling suburban invention to create King’s Thursday” (36).

40 From Die Neue Sachlichkeit, or the New Objectivity, a German realist art movement that inspired functionalist architecture in the 1920s and 1930s.
just potential home-builders, beavers and ants. What is this impulse of two people to build their beastly home? It’s you and me, unborn, asserting our presence’” (102-3). Thus the unlikely character of Grimes undoes the modernist discourse of the house-machine, arguing that the house itself represents an ineffable drive, a compulsion towards domesticity, not efficiency. Moreover, the home is the original and most essential element of human design, as Silenus only reluctantly admits. The “assertion of presence” far outweighs the idealistic attempts at de-humanizing the home, for, as Silenus rages in a Bergsonian flourish, “‘on one side the harmonious instincts and balanced responses of the animal, on the other hand the inflexible purpose of the engine, and between them man, equally alien from the being of Nature and the doing of the machine; the vile becoming!’” (121). This vile becoming is typified by the house itself—it is a structure suited exclusively to man, and its ineffability confounds both Grimes, who seeks to elude domesticity, and Silenus, who seeks to elude humanity.

The modernist excesses of King’s Thursday are generally read as Waugh’s admonition of all things modern; the destruction of the manor house in the name of functionalism is yet another modern assault on tradition. Given Waugh’s later invective (1938) against the “post-war Corbusier plague” (“A Call to the Orders” 216), one would assume that Margot and Silenus are objects of scorn. Yet the case is not so simple. True, Waugh later professed utter contempt for modern architecture, but he also, in 1929, favourably reviewed Le Corbusier’s Urbanisme.41 In fact, Waugh’s chief complaint about Le Corbusier’s approach to urban planning is not aesthetic but political: “perhaps the chief

---

41 Later in life, once Waugh had grown out of Corbusier, he was rankled by the editor of Harper’s Bazaar who had rejected an article Waugh wrote for her on the Palladian revival. The grounds for rejection, Waugh claims in his diary, were that the magazine “stood for ‘contemporary’ design” (428). “I could,” Waugh writes, “have
value of *Urbanisme* is as a social document which shows what the great cities of the world might have made of this decade if they had not chosen to have a war instead” ("Cities" 64). In fact, Waugh sympathetically treats the question of “snobbisme” which plagues Silenus, for in the same review he calls out Dorothy Todd and Raymond Mortimer (authors of *The New Interior Decoration*) for admiring Le Corbusier’s work as “avant-garde rather than as a logical solution to a practical problem” (64). Waugh was ever vigilant to the uncritical acceptance of modernism, but in 1928, he was not entirely immune to its charms.

Some critics argue that the renovation of King’s Thursday is, on the whole, meant to be viewed in a positive—if comedic—light. The main proof of this, as Heath and Martin Stannard point out, is that, as Stannard says, “Waugh loathed domestic Tudor” (*Early Years* 169). This assessment is, factually speaking, accurate; as early as 1925 Waugh wrote in his diary, “I find that I am beginning to detest Elizabethan architecture” (220). Most trace the source of Waugh’s general disdain for Tudor architecture to his philosophical quarrels with the Reformation. Both Heath and Wasson point to a passage in *Edmund Campion* (1935) to make this claim:

[... ] the scars of the Tudor revolution were still fresh and livid; the great houses of the new ruling class were building, and in sharp contrast to their magnificence stood the empty homesteads of the yeomen, evicted to make way for the ‘grey-faced sheep’ or degraded to day-labour on what had once been their common land; the village churches were empty shells, their altars torn and their ornaments defaced; while here and there throughout his journey [Campion] passed, as, with a different heart, he had often passed before, the

---

told her all about Corbusier fifteen years ago when she would not have known the name. Now that at last we are recovering from that swine-fever, the fashionable magazines take it up” (428).
buildings of the old monasteries, their roofs stripped of lead and their walls a quarry for the new contractors. The ruins were not yet picturesque; moss and ivy had barely begun their work, and age had not softened the stark lines of change. Many generations of orderly living, much gentle association, were needed before, under another Queen, the State Church should assume the venerable style of *Barchester Towers*. (106-7)

Wasson and Heath, among others, argue that Tudor architecture is directly linked in Waugh’s mind with the crimes of the English Reformation. In *Edmund Campion*, Waugh exposes the “raw newness of the Elizabethan period” (Wasson 328), which for modern eyes had been naturalized under the growth of ivy. Tudor architecture thus exists as a testament to the violent destruction of the Catholic tradition in England. Moreover, as Heath argues of *Decline and Fall*, “the Earls of Pastmaster are very probably the new Tudor aristocracy of whom Waugh speaks in *Edmund Campion*” (69). The name “Pastmaster” could in this scenario reflect an ironic view of this family’s status as being “past” or “beyond” the religion of the “master,” Rome.

Certainly Waugh resented, indirectly, the accession of a new social class of Protestants who had suddenly “found” vast tracts of land for their personal use and he certainly thought ill of the Reformation and England’s break with Rome. Still, there are difficulties in applying this reading to *Decline and Fall*. For one thing, Waugh did not convert to Catholicism until 1930, two years after the publication of his first novel, so his

---

42 Waugh does include some careful slights against the “new” aristocracy in *Decline and Fall*; when describing the fashionable visitors who visit the manor on weekends, he notes, “later they would drive away in their big motor cars to their modernized manors, and as they sat in their hot baths before dinner the more impressionable visitors might reflect how they seemed to have been privileged to step for an hour and a half out of their own century into the leisurely, prosaic life of the English Renaissance, and how they had talked at tea of field-sports and the reform of the Prayer-Book just as the very-great-grandparents of their host might have talked in the
anti-Reformation stance had not yet reached its fever pitch. More troubling, however, is that Waugh goes out of his way to mention that King’s Thursday was built in “the reign of Bloody Mary” (115)—before Elizabeth’s Protestant reign began in 1558. Moreover, one of the “sights” of the former Lord Pastmaster’s house tour for guests was “the priest-hole” (116). While it is possible the Pastmasters were still part of Henry VIII’s new, Protestant aristocracy and merely happened to build their home during Mary’s brief reign, it seems highly unlikely that a newly reformed Protestant family would think to include a priest-hole in their new manor house. It is, however, quite possible to imagine this family promoted to wealth because of their Catholic faith during Mary’s reign, while they strategically masqueraded as Protestants after Elizabeth’s accession. In this reading the family name is not ironic so much as it is indicative of their religious status—they continue to serve the “past master,” Rome.

One will never be able to prove the religious and political allegiances of the Pastmaster family, but if nothing else, these factual quibbles about King’s Thursday demonstrate that, contrary to Heath’s and Wasson’s assumptions, theological and architectural concerns are not inextricably linked in Waugh’s thought. Occasionally these issues coincide, but it is very likely not the case in Decline and Fall. The chief satirical target of the novel is not theological—Waugh even stifled more overt religious allusions while editing the text, for in the manuscript of the novel, Waugh included this note to his typist about a character’s name: “NOTE FOR CODDRINGTON READ CHRISTENDOM THROUGHOUT” (Box 3.1). Waugh clearly backed down from this less-than-subtle designation, for it appears in publication as the decidedly secular “Circumference.” The clue

same chairs and before the same fire three hundred years before, when their own ancestors, perhaps, slept on straw or among the aromatic merchandise of some Hanse ghetto” (116).
to the satiric content of King’s Thursday’s architecture lies, rather, in a one brief line which remains almost universally ignored amongst Waugh’s critics. When Margot arrives to take possession of King’s Thursday after only having seen it once, years before, during her engagement, she exclaims, “It’s worse than I thought, far worse [. . .] Liberty’s new building cannot be compared with it” (118). This single, seemingly negligible allusion to Liberty’s building is the most concise revelation of the structure of Waugh’s argument in Decline and Fall.

“Liberty’s” refers to the department store that opened in 1875 in Regent Street, London. Liberty’s specialized in East Asian imports, mostly textiles. The shop became famous for its notorious Pre-Raphaelite patrons who flocked to the fine and subtle silks of Japan as props for their painting. Liberty’s expanded rapidly and soon became synonymous with “Aesthetic” fashion, and its signature prints became the calling card of “artistic” ladies. Liberty’s gradually added more space and more services acquiring, by the 1920s, in-house upholsterers, drapers, decorators, clothiers, and carpenters. Liberty’s was a mainstay of the commercial Regent Street, but the government-initiated redesign of this street in the 1920s changed the face of Liberty’s. Being situated on Crown land, Liberty’s needed to observe the architectural style agreed upon for the new Regent Street, which was severely Classical. Liberty’s was not eager to comply with Reginald Blomfeld’s design, for “lofty showrooms and marble pillars they felt to be out of keeping with their specialist merchandise and the personal service of experts” (Adburgham 108). While Liberty’s façade did occupy a sizable stretch of Regent Street, it had also accumulated property “bounded by Argyll Place (later Great Marlborough St), Foubert’s Place, Little Marlborough St., and Kingly St.,” and this
property was not subject to the architectural demands of the Regent Street redesign project, so they could build in any style of their choosing (Adburgham 108).

The style of Liberty’s choosing was laden with significance: domestic Tudor. Adburgham explains that this choice was made in the interests of the store’s late founder, Arthur Liberty, for whom “the Tudor period had always had a special appeal [. . .] because of its association with the great days of merchant adventuring, and with the ancient guilds and craftsmen” (108). The massive conversion of the store into an Elizabethan showpiece was effected by the store’s own stable of stonecarvers, woodworkers, and craftsmen. The vast amounts of timbering for the store’s secondary façade was salvaged—symbolically enough—from two man-o-war ships, the H.M.S. Hindustan and the H.M.S. Impregnable. This Tudor triumph may have jarred awkwardly with the store’s sombre, Regent Street frontage, but it assured the store an almost legendary status in architectural forums. Liberty’s Argyll Street façade was the crystallization point of the Tudor revival of the twentieth century.

The craze for building in half-timbering lasted from the 1920s well into the late 1940s. It was a particularly popular style for suburban building estates; what the Queen Anne villa was for the nineteenth century, the Tudor bungalow was for the twentieth. Of course, this style was the bête noire of both modernist reformers and classicists alike, evident in its derisive designation as “Stockbrokers’ Tudor.” The inherent historical vagueness in the adaptation of the style to the modern home is perfectly captured in the Betjeman-esque descriptor, “Tudorbethan.”\(^{43}\) The style, which developed out of the Arts and Crafts movement—particularly the work of Sir Edwin Lutyens—became popular after WWI once cheaper production methods allowed it to reach beyond the affluent country-house set. Of

\(^{43}\) Anthony Bertram took it one step further in designating the style “Tudoristicism,” for, as he rationalized it, “one may as well invent a bogus word for a bogus thing” (25).
course, the style soon became emptied of all reference—the nostalgic desire for an “olde tyme” homestead was rendered redundant once the production methods of the materials shifted to mechanization, and the uniqueness of the cozy style disappeared once it became ubiquitous. Elizabeth Outka designates this phenomenon as the “commodified authentic,” which “does not imply a search for authenticity per se but rather a search for a sustained contradiction that might allow consumers to be at once connected to a range of values roughly aligned with authenticity and yet also to be fully modern” (4). Osbert Lancaster describes this strange contradiction at work in the Tudorization of the English suburban landscape:

when the young passer-by is a little unnerved at being suddenly confronted with a hundred and fifty accurate reproductions of Anne Hathaway’s cottage, each complete with central-heating and garage, he should pause to reflect on the extraordinary fact that all over the country the latest and most scientific methods of mass-production were, only a few years ago, still being utilized to turn out a stream of old oak beams, leaded window-panes and small discs of bottle-glass, all structural devices which our ancestors lost no time in abandoning as soon as an increase in wealth and knowledge enabled them to do so. (142)

Lancaster here perfectly summarizes the sheer futility involved in applying the most advanced technology to cheaply reproduce the most defunct materials in an effort to recapture the charm of a vernacular style. Ironically, though it ran counter to all of Le Corbusier’s architectural aspirations, the Tudorbethan revival of the twentieth century was the closest Britain came to the “mass-production house.”
We find, then, that Margot’s comment about King’s Thursday—that “Liberty’s new building cannot be compared with it”—is triply inflected in Waugh’s satire. Margot herself means, quite simply, that not even Liberty’s is as bad as King’s Thursday in terms of that “awful and bourgeois” domestic Tudor style. On the other hand, the surface irony of the line would indicate that King’s Thursday and Liberty’s cannot be compared because they differ in kind: one is genuine Tudor, the other mock-Tudor. Yet, lying behind both these inflections is Waugh’s intended meaning: there can be no comparison between these two buildings because they can no longer be distinguished.

This question of comparison troubled Waugh early in his career and it is integral to his theory of taste. In 1929, Waugh wrote an article on one of his signature topics, the younger generation. In it he regrets the “almost complete lack of any qualitative standards” (“Matter-of-Fact Mothers” 7) amongst his contemporaries. He traces this phenomenon to the war, during which time everything “was a substitute for something else,” so that “it is not to be wondered at that they have grown up with an instinctive acceptance of—sometimes almost a preference for—the second-rate” (7). This levelling of standards has reached, Waugh argues, the linguistic level, for “the use of the word ‘real’ as it may be overheard in any tube lift to-day is typical of this debased standard. People no longer speak of ‘pearls’ and ‘artificial pearls’ but of ‘pearls’ and ‘real pearls’” (7). In other words, the value of comparison is negated by a culture of substitution. Here Waugh echoes the concern of Alexis de Tocqueville, who dismissed the erosion of taste in democracy; speaking of the peculiarities of American consumerism, de Tocqueville writes, “[industry] has already succeeded in imitating diamonds so perfectly that it is easy to confuse them with the real thing. The instant the art of manufacturing false diamonds is possible so that they are
indistinguishable from real stones, both will probably be disregarded and will revert to their status as pebbles" (540). This is precisely the fate of domestic Tudor in *Decline and Fall*: the tyranny of the replica devalues all.

This is the crux of Waugh’s argument about King’s Thursday—when he says he loathes Elizabethan architecture, he explains that it is “owing to the vulgarities of Stratford-on-Avon” (*Diaries* 220). This distinction is crucial. It is not, *contra* Heath and Wasson, the architecture itself that is abhorrent, but rather the cult of the picturesque, the culture of the “pseudo,” that renders places like Stratford little more than Shakespearean themeparks—a sentiment Huxley also explored in his 1936 essay, “Modern Fetishism.” Waugh suggests in a later essay (1938) that “it is now impossible to take any real delight in Elizabethan half-timber—logical and honourable as it is—because we are so sickened with the miles of shoddy imitation with which we are surrounded” (“A Call to the Orders” 217). Waugh explores the source of this revulsion in his first travel book, *Labels*:

The detestation of ‘quaintness’ and ‘picturesque bits’ which is felt by every decently constituted Englishman is, after all, a very insular prejudice. It has developed naturally in self defence against arts and crafts, and the preservation of rural England, and the preservation of ancient monuments, and the transplantation of Tudor cottages, and the collection of pewter and old oak, and the reformed public houses, and the Ye Olde Inne and the Kynde Dragon and Ye Cheshire Cheese, Broadway, Stratford-on-Avon, folk-dancing, Nativity plays, reformed dress, free love in a cottage, glee singing, the Lyric, Hammersmith, Belloc, Ditchling, Wessex-worship, village signs, local customs, heraldry, madrigals, wassail, regional cookery, Devonshire teas,
letters to *The Times* about saving timbered alms-houses from destruction, the preservation of the Welsh language, etc. (55-6)

This detestation of “picturesque bits” derives from the fact that, as Alder argues, they rely for their effect on the “sentimental substitution for the authentically traditional” (121). Reviving quaint things in an effort to tap into a nostalgic impulse is futile, for any substitute we may devise is ultimately false, like the artificial ruins of the Gothic revival, or the acres of suburban Tudor reproductions. And yet, Waugh argues, we are becoming increasingly unable to distinguish the real from the sham, so these revivals render both the real and the sham meaningless.

The architecture of King’s Thursday is crucial for it serves as the pivot-point of Waugh’s argument on the dangers of sentimental reproductions. In fact, later in life when he was trying to convince Betjeman that the poet’s position on High Anglicanism was wrong because the similarities between the Catholic and the High Anglican churches are merely superficial, he argued that it was like comparing “a genuine Tudor building” and “a piece of Trust House timbering” (*Letters* 243). Waugh’s point is that in settling for Anglo-Catholicism, Betjeman had in fact settled for the “pseudo,” and Waugh appeals to Betjeman’s architectural acuity to make the case. But this distinction was, Waugh lamented, easily lost on others. In a letter to his wife during the war he recounted a meeting with his ill-liked Brigadier, saying, “at 12.30 he picked us up in his motor-car and drove all over the road to his house which was the lowest type of Stockbroker’s Tudor and I said in a jaggerring way, ‘Did you build this house, sir?’ and he said ‘Build it! It’s 400 years old!’” (137). In this context, Margot’s line about Liberty’s is at once acutely perceptive and morbidly symptomatic of the age, for it refuses to distinguish between the pseudo and the genuine; in
fact, it exhibits that preference for the pseudo in that the real—King’s Thursday—is even more repulsive to her. In the wash of Tudorbethan reproductions, King’s Thursday is merely another shabby, inconvenient *version*; its status as the finest piece of domestic Tudor is rendered void once it becomes indistinguishable from its Stockbroker’s Tudor substitute, just as the multiple incarnations of the novel’s hero, Paul Pennyfeather, obliterate any real sense of the authentic Pennyfeather.

Waugh signals this devaluation of the authentic in somewhat difficult ways. Firstly, he uses Margot’s black “companion,” Chokey, as an apologist for vernacular architecture. The irony is here difficult for it relies on a set of Waugh’s racist assumptions. When Margot brings Chokey to Llanabba’s sports day, she introduces him by subverting the other guests’ assumptions about this “wild” man. She recounts their sight-seeing trips across Britain to the sports guests, adding, “‘you can’t move Chokey once he’s seen an old church. He’s just crazy about culture, aren’t you darling?’” (77). Moreover, “‘He’s just crazy about England, too. We’ve been around all the cathedrals and now we’re going to start on the country houses’” (79). Chokey, the “cultured primitive,” is thus the perfect modern accessory for the *provocateur* Margot. Yet his quaint fondness for the architecture Margot loathes proves problematic, for as we learn later from Margot’s son, “‘apparently [Chokey] doesn’t like the way [Margot] rebuilt [the] house in the country’” (94). Chokey, a sort of precursor to the Emperor Seth in *Black Mischief*, eagerly seeks admittance to English culture, but this culture exists for him only in a picturesque vision of Merrie England. He tells the guests at the sports day, “‘When I saw the cathedrals my heart just rose up and sang within me. I sure am crazy about culture. You folks think because we’re coloured we don’t care about nothing but jazz. Why, I’d give all the jazz in the world for just one little stone from one of your cathedrals’”
Furthermore, he notes, “I appreciate art. There’s plenty coloured people come over here and don’t see nothing but a few night clubs. I read Shakespeare, [...] Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear” (80). He says, “my race, [...] is essentially an artistic race. We have the child’s love of song and colour and the child’s natural good taste” (80). Once again, Waugh’s irony here is multivalent. On the surface, the last line seems to undermine Chokey’s pretension to culture by reminding us of the “childlike,” “natural,” “primitive” race. Chokey’s native culture, Waugh would suggest, is childlike in its lack of sophistication. Yet, the line can also be read without irony; more so than anyone in the novel, Chokey does possess “natural good taste.” Margot dismisses the Tudor architecture of King’s Thursday by saying, “it was rather Chokey’s taste before” (125). Chokey is the one who, rather than be polite, lets Margot know that her renovation is worse than the original. He has the good taste to prefer the genuine. Yet this is where Waugh’s irony folds back on itself, for the fact that the “primitive” possesses taste ought to make us question the validity of that taste. Chokey may be “crazy about culture,” but it is a culture rendered picturesque; his is a good taste distilled into cultural touchstones. The fact that Chokey—who, in Waugh’s mind, has no culture to speak of—is the only supporter of Englishness is cause for concern. His precociousness is not Waugh’s attempt to change how we think about primitives, nor is it to valorize the negro. Chokey’s reputed cultural prowess is, as difficult as it may be to accept, Waugh’s way of demonstrating how devalued English taste and culture have become. Salisbury and Shakespeare are, much like King’s Thursday, picturesque—quaint signifiers of a lost romanticism. Chokey’s taste, while technically “good,” becomes, like King’s Thursday itself,

44 Waugh makes a similarly difficult point in his criticism of the aesthetic emotion in Rossetti. He writes, “the fact that primitive negro sculpture satisfies the aesthetic emotion ought to make the healthy Western critic doubt the formula rather than acclaim the barbarian” (223).
meaningless, for it is emptied of content—the culture he purports to value is merely a consumable version of authentic culture.

The other character to value King’s Thursday in the novel is equally suspect. Jack Spire\(^45\) initiates the *Save King’s Thursday Fund*, though the effort is ultimately futile. Though Spire “urged that it should be preserved for the nation, […] only a very small amount was collected […] and the theory that it was to be transplanted and re-erected in Cincinnati found wide acceptance” (118). This misguided attempt at preservation by means of relocation is obviously alarming. The entire restoration for restoration’s sake movement was disconcerting for Waugh, as it was for Betjeman, for it was predicated on a confused understanding of value. To “save” King’s Thursday by moving it to Cincinnati is to dwell in the picturesque, to deny the aesthetic context of the original home through substitution. Waugh continually makes fun of Spire’s attempts at “rescuing” buildings, as evidenced in the parenthetical remarks in the following passage: “Mr Jack Spire was busily saving St. Sepulchre’s, Egg Street (where Dr Johnson is said once to have attended matins), when Margot Beste-Chetwynde’s decision to rebuild King’s Thursday became public. He said, very seriously: ‘Well, we did what we could,’ and thought no more about it” (118). Waugh here criticizes the picturesque motives that he felt spurred most restoration efforts.\(^46\) Spire values St. Sepulchre’s not for its structural or aesthetic value, but for its apocryphal “human interest.” As with King’s Thursday, he is eager to save the *idea* of a place, no matter how grossly contextless that idea becomes. Waugh scoffs at the appreciation of aesthetic objects

\(^45\) A cutting reference to J.C. Squire, a writer, critic, editor, and avid cricket player who ran a campaign to save historic buildings in the *London Mercury*, where he was editor. Squire was a good friend of Waugh’s brother, Alec.

\(^46\) Waugh would no doubt be bemused to learn that Liberty’s itself is now protected under preservation order (Adburgham 113).
for unaesthetic reasons; like Betjeman, he argued that buildings should be saved not simply because they are old or because they are attached to a legend, but because they are “good.”

But the impulse to displace aesthetic appreciation in favour of sentiment—to value domestic Tudor because it conjures romantic notions of the seafaring traders, for instance—is not only picturesque, but also destructive. Waugh discusses this problem in *Labels* where, in visiting Tutankhamen’s tomb, he reflects on the “Tutmania” that swept Britain in the 1920s:

> The fact that a rich and beautiful woman, even though living very long ago, should still require the toilet requisites of a normal modern dressing-table was greeted with reverberations of surprise and delight and keenly debated controversies in the press about the variable standards of female beauty. The fact that idle men, very long ago, passed their time in gambling and games of skill was a revelation. Everything of ‘human’ interest was extensively advertised, while the central fact, that the sum of the world’s beautiful things had suddenly been enormously enriched, passed unemphasised and practically unnoticed. (108)

People like Spire generate human interest where should be generated aesthetic interest. Preservation for the wrong reasons leads to cultural stultification—esthetic value becomes compromised, like the wife of the third Earl of Pastmaster who was “imprisoned […] for wishing to rebuild a smoking chimney” (116), just as the misplaced aesthetic motives of Llanabba Castle’s renovation create a futile, half-caste structure.

As we begin to understand King’s Thursday in its proper context it becomes increasingly clear that the argument of the house is social and aesthetic, not moral and theological. Waugh’s treatment of the house reveals, I suggest, the first stage of his ever-
evolving theory of taste. The character of this stage is, I argue, apocalyptic. Margot’s
renovation of King’s Thursday serves an important role in effecting an apocalypse of taste
that attempts to eradicate the plague of the picturesque.

The iconoclastic underpinnings of *Decline and Fall* have not gone unnoticed by
Waugh scholars. In untangling Waugh’s difficult relationship with modernism, Alder
suggests that “Waugh approved of cultural innovation as a will to discredit a redundant,
artless predecessor” (121). Indeed, in an early letter to Dudley Carew, the young Waugh
asserts, “the great and only mistake in design is that it becomes conventional” (*Letters 8*).
Certainly King’s Thursday—while not originally artless—has become “conventional” in
spite of itself and, thus, redundant. It means no more than its artless double, Liberty’s
department store. Thus the renovation of the manor house, hideous as it may be, does much
to discredit its predecessor. And even though Waugh the classicist may have preferred King’s
Thursday, he not only sees its destruction as necessary, but, as Stephen Greenblatt argues, he
“refuses to create a merely sentimental picture of the achievements of the past at the moment
of extinction; he insists, rather, upon recording in scrupulous detail the actual process of
demolition” (4). To sentimentalize King’s Thursday would be to become another Jack Spire,
inffectually capitalizing on misplaced emotions. Instead, as McCartney argues, “Waugh
took a perverse delight in discomfiting the complacent. This was modernism’s special value
to him” (*Confused 5*).\(^47\) Thus Margot’s renovation of King’s Thursday is the perfect model
of Waugh as a modernist—she “discomfits” the picturesque complacency of King’s
Thursday’s supporters with her modernist assault on domestic Tudor. McCartney continues,

\(^{47}\) Consider, for instance, Waugh’s infamous description of the sunset at Mount Etna in *Labels*: “I do not think I
shall ever forget the sight of Etna at sunset; the mountain almost invisible in a blur of pastel grey, glowing on
the top and then repeating its shape, as though reflected, in a wisp of grey smoke with the whole horizon behind
Although he seems to have become increasingly reluctant to admit it as he grew older, the young Waugh found in modern art the kind of derisive but liberating iconoclasm Ortega y Gasset had applauded for its power to clear away conventional aesthetic pieties that only served to obscure one’s view of the world as it was after 1914. Waugh might not have liked what was revealed—the metaphysical emptiness, the abdication of reason, the aimless pursuit of sensation—but he preferred to look at the disease rather than hide behind a façade of nineteenth-century reasonableness pretending nothing had changed. (*Confused* 5)

Yet the problem with these models of Waugh’s iconoclasm is that they are fundamentally negative; they fail to acknowledge that Waugh’s iconoclasm does positive work. Waugh was not simply passively “looking at the disease” of twentieth-century taste. If this were the case, then the charge that his early novels are contentless would be more valid. Waugh’s “taste apocalypse” was an attempt not to reveal a metaphysical abyss of the bogus, but rather to usher in a return to the genuine.

In understanding the apocalyptic angle of Waugh’s thought, we might consider his precursor, William Morris. Another consummate craftsman, Morris shares much with Waugh. Harold Acton, Waugh’s Oxford friend, noticed this connection early on in his *Memoirs of an Aesthete* (1948). Acton notes that Waugh’s art “is an applied art, and he cannot rely entirely on imagination” (127). Certainly this craftsmansly note resounds in Morris’ own reputation, known not for his paintings but for his “applied” art. Moreover, recounting Waugh’s thrifty efforts at decorating his flat with his first wife, Acton recalls how radiant with pink light, fading gently into a grey pastel sky. Nothing I have seen in Art or Nature was quite so revolting” (169).
Waugh “devoted infinite care to such domestic arts and crafts. Perhaps he would soon take to designing tiles, fabrics and stained-glass windows. [. . .] It was even possible that he might develop into another William Morris and solve some of our more pressing social ills with a similar faith” (204). Waugh abandoned his potential careers as a draughtsman or cabinet-maker, but nonetheless he retained a Morris-like corrective vision in his fiction in which he attempted, by way of prose, to accomplish what Morris did in textile and ceramic.

While Waugh was certainly critical of aspects of the Morris project, such as the inherently picturesque nature of Morris’ medievalism or the radicalism of his socialism, Waugh nonetheless adopted the same metaphysical-aesthetic approach to reforming taste. In *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936), Niklaus Pevsner suggests that Morris, while superficially as unmodern as one could imagine, was nonetheless “the true prophet of the twentieth century, the father of the Modern Movement” (24).48 Yet Pevsner’s major complaint was Morris’ insistence on hand-production in his attempt to recreate the spirit of medieval guilds. Pevsner describes Morris as “looking forward to barbarism” (26), and this attitude, in a way, reflects Waugh’s own feelings. Waugh did not share Morris’ socialism, yet the connection between art and the fate of civilization is there, for even Pevsner recognizes “there is more [in Morris’ socialism] of Thomas More than of Karl Marx” (25). Yet the crucial idea is that Morris dreams of “barbarism once more flooding the world” (*Letters* 2B 436); he writes,

> the blindess to beauty will draw down a kind of revenge one day: who knows, years ago mens [sic] minds were full of art & the dignified shows of life & they had but little time for justice & peace; and the vengeance on them was

---

48 Although, as Mowl points out, Betjeman was the first to make this claim (25-6).
not <the> increase of the violence that they did not heed, but destruction of
the art they heeded: so perhaps the Gods are preparing troubles and terrors for
the world (or our small corner of it) again that it may once again become
beautiful and dramatic withal [. . .] (Letters 1 230)
The modernism that encroaches in Waugh’s early novels is the flood of barbarism—it is that
which “uncovers” the picturesque and prepares the way for a new aesthetic order. In other
words, it is not that modernism is in itself positive, but rather that the disinterested
catastrophe of taste it instigates amounts, so to speak, to that “flood of barbarism”—the
levelling of defunct styles. Waugh writes in 1932, “But just as the ‘nineties’, odious as they
now seem to us with their ‘greenery-yallery’ artiness, did do a valuable social service in
finally breaking up British insular, bourgeois materialism, so the ‘twenties’—futile,
obstreperous, anarchic, vulgar, call them what you will—broke up post-war Rupert Brooke
magnificently-unprepared-for-the-long-bitterness-of-life sentimentality, and made Youth
openly and ludicrously inglorious” (“Why Glorify Youth?” 126). In destroying the
sentimental associations of King’s Thursday, Margot destroys the picturesque and uncovers
what makes even good design unbearable: sentiment. In a review of Basil Ionides’s redesign
of the Savoy Theatre, Raymond McGrath—of Finella fame—argues there are “two kinds of
architecture—architecture which is lasting, simple and monumental in form and permanent in
material, and architecture which is of the moment, accurate, impermanent. It is stupid to
build decorated architecture to last and it is stupid to think that decorative art is not as
important as that which is more monumental. Without fresh, vital, contemporary decoration
everywhere, the public becomes artistically anaemic and unintelligent” (qtd. Battersby 57).
Margot’s destruction of King’s Thursday—its inherent provisionality\(^{49}\)—allows us to be critical once again; without the sentimental burden of the monument, we can begin to think about what we value most.

Yet, like Morris, Waugh’s position is that of a dissident modernist. Morris may have been the prophet of the Modern Movement, as Pevsner argues, but his unwillingness to embrace the future in preference for the past fundamentally separates him from modernism. Likewise Waugh, while stylistically “modern,” remained suspicious of modernism’s wider methodology. As Baron Alder argues, Waugh felt “the modernists’ search for material and inspiration in the individual’s psychological state produced art that was obscure, esoteric, and uncommunicative” (118). In other words, Waugh agreed that change was necessary to strip away pre-war pieties, but he felt that the turn inwards was dangerous and solipsistic. More than any other novel, *Decline and Fall* is a record of Waugh’s complex negotiations with modernism.

The figure of Silenus is a testament to this fact, for while Waugh makes the architect laughable, he does not discount him. “It was more than fashionable cleverness,” McCartney writes, “that led him to make a functional architect of the Bauhaus school the cranky moral centre of his first novel. Otto Silenus announces a specifically modernist critique of the nineteenth century humanism Waugh detested for its deluding sentimentality” (*Confused* 6).

It is interesting, however, to note how Otto Silenus came to be. In 1925 Waugh wrote to Acton that he “want[ed] to write a story about Silenus—very English and sentimental—a Falstaff forever babbling o’ green fields” (23). That story never appeared, but it is curious that he would use the same Dionysian name for a character charged with the task of

\(^{49}\) We discover that shortly after Silenus’s renovation of the house is complete, Margot decides to re-do the house once again. No such thing as permanence, indeed!
eradicating the very sentiment for which the original Silenus was supposed to stand. Silenus’s ambivalent and contradictory position in the novel symbolizes the fundamental problem with modernism—namely, that it is very difficult. In an article from 1930 Waugh addresses this problem in the context of the fashion craze for antiquated style: “it is a very arduous business to keep up with one’s own period. People talk about ‘being modern’ as though it were simply a matter of buying a new dress, drinking some cocktails, putting on the most recent gramophone record, and letting a mysterious ‘spirit of the age’ do the rest. That way lie all the terrors of the pseudo. It takes as much serious effort to be sincerely and completely modern as to swim the Channel—and it is just about as profitable” (“Let us Return” 123). Silenus’s despairing inability to raise King’s Thursday above anything other than a modernistic sham is proof of this difficulty. Silenus relates the challenge of modernity in his notorious description of the wheel at Luna Park. He tells Paul Pennyfeather:

‘You pay five francs and go into a room with tiers of seats all round, and in the centre the floor is made of a great disc of polished wood that revolves quickly. At first you sit down and watch the others. They are all trying to sit in the wheel, and they keep getting flung off, [. . . ] Of course at the very centre there’s a point completely at rest, if one could only find it: I’m not sure I am not very near that point myself. [. . . ] There are others, like Margot, who sit as far out as they can and hold on for dear life and enjoy that. But the whole point about the wheel is that you needn’t get on it at all, if you don’t want to. People get hold of ideas about life, and that makes them think they’ve got to join in the game, even if they don’t enjoy it.’ (208)
Silenus is the only character to understand what it means to be sincerely and completely modern, and yet his modernism amounts to nothing—it is a still, vacant point at the centre of a riotous game. Yet the question the end of the novel poses is whether it is better to uncover the emptiness at the centre, or better to remain, like Paul, paralyzed in the past.

If either option is doomed by either sentiment or vacuousness, where does one seek refuge? In *Labels*, Waugh suggests a dissatisfying answer:

The French, through the defects rather than the qualities of their taste, are saved from the peculiarly English horrors of folk dancing, arts and crafts, and the collection of cottage antiquities, only to fall victim, one false thing driving out another, to the worst sort of sham modernity. If the choice is inevitable between pewter-*cum*-warming-pan-*cum*-timbered-gables and the glass of M. Lalique, it is surely better to be imposed upon by a past which one has not seen than by a present of which oneself is a part? (19)

In other words, apocalypse is necessary, but is it worth it?

2.2 “The Lie that Tells the Truth”: *A Handful of Dust* and Philistine Taste

*A Handful of Dust* is Waugh’s great meditation on this central question: is it better to live in a false past or a bogus present? *Decline and Fall* was an experiment in making the best of the latter through an apocalyptic cleansing of taste, but the experiment was not wholly successful. In *A Handful of Dust*, neither the past nor the present would seem to offer a solution to taste. Yet, as in *Decline and Fall*, Waugh uses the context of design as a critical tool to work out his larger argument about the problem of taste. Rather than a Bauhaus
architect, however, Waugh chooses an interior decorator as the aesthetic figurehead in *A Handful of Dust*. The choice is significant. Mrs Beaver’s grim atelier is the perfect site for Waugh to enlarge his increasingly darkened vision of the world of taste.

The competitive nature of the decorating business bred a class of female decorators who were ruthlessly professional and whose “toughness,” Battersby remarks, “would have embarrassed Attila” (61). This “toughness,” however, often masked other deficiencies; as Osbert Sitwell observed in 1935, “any ruined woman of fashion can at once sell her own house and begin ‘doing up’ other people’s, and nearly all the unemployables of the richer classes tend to become, according to their temperament, either interior decorators or car-touts, just as in the ‘eighties they used to work for wine-merchants” (362). Waugh’s Mrs Beaver, the morally deficient decorator engaged in carving up Georgian homes into blocks of flats, fits this description uncannily. The novel begins with a question: “‘was anyone hurt?’” (7). Mrs Beaver’s response to this seemingly contextless query bears quoting at length:

‘No one, I am thankful to say,’ said Mrs Beaver, ‘except two housemaids who lost their heads and jumped through a glass roof into the paved court. They were in no danger. The fire never reached the bedrooms, I am afraid. Still, they are bound to need doing up, everything black with smoke and drenched in water and luckily they had that old-fashioned sort of extinguisher that ruins everything. One really cannot complain. The chief rooms were completely gutted and everything was insured.’ (7)

Mrs Beaver’s gleefully mercenary assessment of her profit potential in redecorating, coupled with her wildly depraved response to the fate of the two housemaids, does much to establish the perverse ethos of *A Handful of Dust.*
Though arguably a minor character, Mrs Beaver in her role as decorator is central to Waugh’s larger argument about taste, representing, however ghoulishly, the modern spirit of design. Mrs Beaver’s description to Brenda Last of her speculative real estate empire could have been ripped from a home magazine from the period:

What people wanted, she said, was somewhere to dress and telephone. She was subdividing a small house in Belgravia into six flats at three pounds a week, of one room each and a bath; the bathrooms were going to be slap-up, with limitless hot water and every transatlantic refinement. The other room would have a large built-in wardrobe with electric light inside, and space for a bed. It would fill a long-felt need, Mrs Beaver said. (42)

Just what constitutes this “long-felt need,” however, is never articulated. In Waugh’s portrait of Mayfair’s desultorily faddish elite, needs are “felt” only as soon as they are invented. Social alliances, lovers, and wall-coverings are constantly being “upgraded” for newer models. Mrs Beaver’s campaign to modernize the homes of London is simply this enhancement impulse writ large, punctuating the actions of characters. It is significant that at the moment Brenda tries to seduce Mrs Beaver’s son, John, in the taxi, he had just commented on “an old house that was being demolished to make way for a block of flats” (48). Brenda “demolishes” her old house—Tony’s Hetton—to make way for her own little flat—the architectural equivalent to her emotional and spiritual degradation. Waugh’s characters exist as mere fragments of social beings.

Already we can see how the tone of A Handful of Dust is different from that of Decline and Fall. Whereas Otto’s destruction of King’s Thursday is amusingly valiant, Mrs Beaver’s “renovations” elicit an elegiac response. But what had changed since Waugh’s
aesthetically nihilistic romp of 1928? The fate of Hetton Abbey is surely the clue to understanding Waugh’s developing attitude towards design, for it is here that the intersection of ethical and aesthetic values is most apparent and most ambiguous. Originally a medieval abbey, Hetton has devolved into an unwitting parody of its former self. Waugh introduces us to the house in the language of a regional guidebook entry: “This, formerly one of the notable houses in the county, was entirely rebuilt in 1864 and is now devoid of interest” (15). Hetton is a testament to the vagaries of Victorian design—mould-wracked bedrooms named for Arthurian heroes, groined ceilings, imposing battlements, and stained-glass windows. Tony’s embittered Aunt Frances “remarked that the plans of the house must have been adapted by Mr Pecksniff from one of his pupils’ designs for an orphanage” (15). Nonetheless, Waugh insists, “there was not a glazed brick or an encaustic tile that was not dear to Tony’s heart” (15). In the cruel logic of the novel, just as Tony himself is destroyed by his inability to adapt to the steely modern age, so too is his picturesque home compromised for its inability to meets the needs of modernity.

Mrs Beaver is the harbinger of this plague of modernization in her role as decorator. Brenda, who had previously moved in to one of Mrs Beaver’s modern flats to accommodate her infidelity with John, asks the decorator down to Hetton to redecorate the morning room so that she might have “one habitable room downstairs” (78). Mrs Beaver and her tasteful coterie of friends descend upon Hetton and ridicule its pink granite and gloomy proportions in terms of moral opprobrium; it is “appalling,” “dark,” and “horrible” (78-9). Dismissing one socialite’s suggestion to simply “blow the whole thing sky-high” (79), Mrs Beaver
concludes, “‘the only thing to do would be to disregard [the structure] altogether and find some treatment so definite that it carried the room, if you see what I mean’” (79).50

Waugh’s joke, of course, is that chromium plating is the decorator’s solution to all design dilemmas—not for aesthetic effect, but because it is monstrously expensive. Here Waugh draws on the chief difficulty faced by the modern interior decorator: true modernist style was inimical to profit. If minimalism and restraint were the goals of the International Style, then the enterprising decorator had to come up with some creative solutions in order to earn a healthy commission from a client with modern tastes (Battersby 45). Hence we find something called modernistic style—a commercial, adulterated version of modernism, often associated with Art Deco, or “jazz modernism.” All manner of objects, from radios to lamps to cigarette cases, were produced in vaguely modern style and could be used to “fill out” a room that was otherwise sparse (Sparke 110-12). For some, this style was the hallmark of a hack designer; Anthony Bertram describes the superficiality of this style:

what the modernistic builder does is to build an old-fashioned villa with the old-fashioned plan in the old-fashioned way, and then he ‘streamlines’ it, tacking on his modern features just as the Tudoristic builder tacks on his bogus beams. And then, because genuine modern architecture is too severe for his degenerate taste, he jazzes things up a bit. Vague and ignorant ideas about cubism suggest to him all sorts of loathsome jagged zig-zagging meaningless ornaments and the result is just the old thing in a new fancy-dress. (64)

Mrs Beaver’s endless store of bakelite and glass bibelots are indicative of this misguided spirit and operate as her marketable short hand for “good taste.”51 In contrast to Otto Silenus,
whose chief dilemma in *Decline and Fall* is the impure pollution of his otherwise modern interior, Mrs Beaver’s flaw is her unflinching devotion to modernism’s commercial appeal. Mrs Beaver lacks Silenus’s heroic sense of failure, the purity of which Waugh could, at least, admire. Waugh could summon little sympathy for the meretricious Mrs Beaver.

In pitting the expert’s opinion against Tony’s *démodé* taste, Waugh captures the pervasive anxiety about taste in the period. Part of the success of “mediated” design sources like home magazines or interior decorators was their position between the design authorities and the average consumer, Grace Lees-Maffei argues (189). Indeed, “advice literature” was wildly successful because it spoke to “a readership desirous of upward mobility, seeking advice and implicitly lacking in self-confidence” (Lees-Maffei 190). Yet while many Britons may have convinced themselves of the undeniable caché of “good taste,” their eagerness to adapt to the style of the majority often involved a betrayal of personal taste. Waugh takes on this problem in two important articles, “Take Your Home into Your Own Hands” (1929), and “The Philistine Age of English Decoration” (1938). In the former Waugh wonders where this idea of “good taste” originated, and concludes, “I strongly suspect that DORA [Defense of the Realm Act] had a younger brother who went to art classes at an evening polytechnic, and that it all began with him” (44). This “plague of ‘good taste’” (44) seems to have descended from on high, inciting paranoia and fear in the hearts of Britons: “one has only to look around today at the bleak little parlours of the suburbs and the still bleaker great drawing-rooms of Belgrave Square to see the havoc it has caused” (44). Waugh’s point in the article is that this bureaucratic homogenization of domestic style is, in fact, unnatural, for “it seems odd that Colonel Brown’s wife who disagrees with you about politics and religion and how to bring

---

51 Although, as Waugh tells us, Mrs Beaver also stocks objects suitable to a variety of easily recognizable styles for her clients who are less inclined towards the virtues of chromium plate.
up her daughters should see eye to eye with you” about décor (45). Furthermore, “the vicar’s
drawing-room is exactly like yours, although you could never bear the vicar; and so is the
doctor’s wife’s, who, they say, drinks far more than is good for her, and wears such
extraordinary hats” (45). Why, Waugh wonders, would we be expected to share aesthetic
tastes when we cannot be expected to share political, religious, or moral tastes? And yet, this
expectation pervaded British culture at the time. As Deborah Cohen argues, there were
several factors that contributed to this rigorously consensual culture of taste that developed at
the turn of the century. Firstly, she points to “a new, seemingly secular way of thinking about
the self, expressed in the concept of personality” (125). This new kind of subjecthood, in
contrast to its predecessor, “character,” was predicated on individuality—on not just the
possession, but rather the assertion of personality. The easiest means of asserting one’s
personality was, paradoxically, through one’s choice of fashion and design, and the
commercial opportunities of exploiting this feeling were not lost on advertisers. Cohen notes,
“possessions were the very stuff out of which the self was made. Perfect congruence was, or
so the advertisers suggested, a possibility” (137). This assumption was then championed by
decorators and advice writers, such as the “celebrity” decorator, Elsie de Wolfe, whose The
House in Good Taste (1913) was a seminal publication in the genre. In it she insists, rather
ominously, “you will express yourself in your house, whether you want to or not, so you
must make up your mind to a long preparatory discipline” (5). Those who were unwilling—
or unable—to commit to this long apprenticeship of the self sought the advice of design
experts instead, a trend that contributed to the popularity of home magazines and advice
columnists. Of course, as Cohen makes clear, “in seeking to demonstrate personality, [advice
columnists] had achieved a surprising degree of uniformity” (142). The very notion of
individuality became homogenized and commodified; as Osbert Sitwell observed in his essay, “On Interior Decorators and Decoration,” “nothing is so disagreeable in decoration as a house with a false, a concocted individuality” (365).

The public’s reliance on the expert’s very public conception of private personality thus accounts for much of the homogenization of taste, but it is not the only cause. Changing socio-economic conditions also affected the decorative climate in the 1920s and 1930s. Home ownership rose rapidly in the period with the growth of speculative real estate developments in the suburbs. Cohen argues this home-owning middle-class developed a “new social strategy” which was “calculated to ease tensions between not-always-comfortable next door neighbours. Caution was the watchword and caution bred uniformity” (xii). This cautious attitude, coupled with a suspicion of eccentricity, spurred advertisers to make of homogeneity an aesthetic virtue, with furniture makers shilling “Majority” lines of furniture, guaranteed not to offend one’s suburban neighbours (Cohen 187).

This blandness bred of paranoia is exactly the issue Waugh confronts in “Take Your Home into Your Own Hands.” He defends those who “have been bullied into an inferiority complex about their own homes” (44). He implores readers,

Look around your own drawing-room. Where is the fire-screen with the family coat-of-arms worked in coloured wool by your Aunt Agatha? And why is that horrible earthenware pot, which somebody else’s Aunt Agatha made in a suburb of Brighton, sitting so coldly on the mantelpiece? And do you really

---

52 Cohen relates that 60% of middle-class British families owned, rather than rented, their homes in 1939, compared to a 10% rate of home-ownership across all classes at the turn of the century (192).
53 Elizabeth Bowen captures the decorative and psychological stultification of these new suburbs in her short story, “Attractive Modern Homes.”
54 Cohen writes, “by the mid-1930s, the notion of eccentric furnishing was hopelessly outmoded, as redolent of the pre-war years as an abundance of servants and low rates of taxation” (186).
find it comfortable to read by that triangular lamp shade which throws all the light on the ceiling? (44)

Why do we repress all that makes us individuals within our own homes? But Waugh does not here advocate mere sentimentality in design, but rather he promotes personal decision-making as the chief guide to home décor: “by all means hide the tiger’s head which your Uncle George shot in India if it keeps you awake at night, but if you like it, don’t be bullied into putting it away by Mrs Brown who lives next door” (45). Waugh attributes the ease with which we capitulate to consensual “good taste” to our unwillingness to utter the now shocking phrase, “I don’t know much about art, but I do know what I like!” (44). This phrase is shocking for its rejection of the supremacy of the expert opinion. The assumption that personal preference cannot coincide with aesthetic amateurism is the crux of the anxiety about good taste in the 1930s.

Take, for instance, the surge of interest in surveys of taste in the period. Margaret Bulley, a noted taste reformer,\(^{55}\) published in 1933 the provocatively titled *Have You Good Taste?*\(^{56}\) The book consists of sets of photographs of a variety of household items. Each set would include a piece—say a coffee pot—in “good taste” and one in “bad taste.” The goal was to choose the coffee-pot that critics had deemed to be “in good taste.” Bulley insists that “the purpose of this book is, therefore, not so much directed to the making of ‘right’ choices, although ‘spotting the winner’ has proved to be an excellent parlour game. It is planned, rather, to provoke discrimination and to awaken interest in a subject of national importance” (21). Although she may downplay the “right/wrong” rubric of the exercise, Bulley betrays

\(^{55}\) She was active in the British Institute of Industrial Art’s efforts to curate admirable contemporary objects of industrial design in the Victoria and Albert Museum. In 1930 the museum exhibited the “Margaret Bulley Collection of Modern Decorative Art” (Suga 178).
her normalizing impulses throughout. In attempting to placate those who resist the book’s implicit standard of taste, she writes,

If, without referring to [the answers], he guesses at once which objects he is supposed to like, yet dislikes them, he must continue in his dislike. If he thinks the critics wrong, let him hold to his own opinion and back up his beliefs with reasoned arguments. No one can prove him mistaken, and many will agree with him. The important thing is sincerity. And should anyone honestly admire an ugly or an indifferent object to begin with, he may end by honest enjoyment of a beautiful one. (22)

Though she does not go so far as Adolf Loos in criminalizing such taste dissidents, Bulley makes clear that the goal of cultivating subjective tastes is to arrive at an objective understanding of beauty. The appendix to Have You Good Taste? is even more indicative of this objectivizing impulse. It consists of the printed results of the nationwide survey of taste, carried out by Cyril Burt in conjunction with the BBC and The Listener. Britons were asked to write in with their responses to Bulley’s “taste test.” The survey employs the phrase “correct choice” (45) to indicate that a person’s choice agreed with the critics’ choice. Over 6000 individuals responded, of which 70% of men and 74% of women made “correct choices” (45). This one moment in the history of design demonstrates just how obsessive the pursuit of an objective and consensual perception of “good taste” became for Britons after WWI.

---

56 Surveys of taste proved quite popular at the time, though the most notable is likely Nikolaus Pevsner’s “Questionnaire on Industrial Art,” the results of which were published in Design for Today in 1935.
57 The survey proved to be quite the phenomenon. Several notable figures sent in their responses, including Clive Bell, Julian Huxley, Eric Gill, Walter de la Mare, and Frank Dobson. Bulley notes, “it is exceedingly interesting to note that persons of this eminence, no matter what their sphere of work, send in replies that are invariably superior to the replies of others following the same calling” (47).
By contrast, in “The Philistine Age of English Decoration,” Waugh points to “the period between the Great Exhibition and the fall of the Second Empire” as the one “monument of what the plain Briton can do to his home when he is not badgered by his daughters into buying what he does not like” (219). While to modern eyes the mid-Victorian period symbolizes an acute absence of taste, Waugh argues that the ingrained eclecticism and idiosyncrasy of this florid, “Philistine” style bore witness to more honest decorative impulses. He notes, “it must not [...] be thought that the plain man had—or to this day has—any natural taste for plainness. Poor fellow, it has been drummed into him by a hundred experts, writing on what are ironically termed ‘home pages,’ that ornament is vulgar, and today he endures blank slabs of concrete and bakelite, prisonlike bars of steel and aluminium” (220). Here again Waugh emphasizes the unnaturalness of consensual taste in contrast to the natural freedom of Victorian decorative strategies. “Good taste” is, for Waugh, an oppressive system that convinces the public that it is virtuous to endure plainness and uniformity in the interests of a reputedly “enlightened” theory of style. Yet what good is style, Waugh contends, if it serves to render individuals indistinguishable? It seems odd that someone like Waugh would actively promote Philistinism, yet, contra Matthew Arnold, he found the individualism and self-interest of Philistines to be, at least in terms of interior decorating, a refreshing change from the monolithic monotony of “good taste.” Philistine design, at the very least, encouraged free choice—a quality central to Waugh’s ethics. McCartney points to a passage from “Charles Ryder’s Schooldays” to demonstrate Waugh’s unusual reading of Jekyll and Hyde, in which Hyde was, for Waugh, the more sympathetic character. Jekyll and Tony, McCartney argues, “suffer from moral immaturity” because “each would rather forfeit his freedom than face the anguish of ambiguous moral decisions”
(“Being and Becoming” 145-6). He continues, “Waugh’s Jekyll is modern secular society whose moral relativism and progressive materialism require that it ignore a difficult truth: the energy that sometimes erupts as feral viciousness is somehow the same that can at other times spring forth as a moral virtue” (145-6). In aesthetic terms, the Philistine is a decorating Hyde, a dissident willing to assert his free will in terms of design, even though the consequences—encaustic tile and stuffed parrots—may not be quite so virtuous. The “good taste” movement is equivalent to the secular society that serves to obliterate the “moral adventure” necessary in expressing one’s taste.

One might be tempted, given his resistance to “good taste” and his own penchant for Victoriana, to assume that Waugh laments modernity’s decorative encroachment upon Hetton Abbey. Quite the contrary. Waugh does not, in fact, pit Mrs Beaver against Hetton, but rather, he figures her as the mere recurrence of errant good taste. Just as Mrs Beaver’s predatory good taste razes Tony’s morning room, so too did his Victorian ancestors’ revivalist “good taste” raze the whole of Hetton in 1864. Waugh goes out of his way to deride the Victorian renovation of true Gothic into sham Gothic; he directed the illustrator for the novel to depict Hetton in “the worst possible 1860” (Letters 88). As Edward Lobb suggests, “the inauthentic style of Tony’s house reflects his unreal way of life” (131). Waugh makes Tony’s Gothic dream-world ridiculous by reminding us of the wholly impracticable expectations of that world during Tony’s darkest hour when he feels “a whole Gothic world had come to grief . . . there was now no armour glittering through the forest glades, no embroidered feet on the green sward; the cream and dappled unicorns had fled” (151). Tony remains incapable of believing that this Gothic world had never existed.
From a purely aesthetic point of view, we should have no sympathies for Hetton. We should not be surprised that Waugh referred to *A Handful of Dust* as his “good taste book” (*Letters* 85), for in it we find two instances of good taste gone awry: the jerry-built modernism of Mrs Beaver, and the picturesque, ersatz Gothic of Hetton. Both these decorative variations are in their own ways symptoms of modernity. Waugh aligns Hetton with the Dickensian sentimentalism and secular humanism that destroy Tony, just as Mrs Beaver’s flats—nothing more than “somewhere to dress and telephone”—align her with the twentieth-century’s anonymous nomadism. This reading has been articulated extensively by critics. Wasson first drew attention to the thematic use of Hetton, suggesting that the Victorian age was the endpoint of the naturalization of English Protestantism, for “Anglican England [. . .] has no real tradition but has merely built anew over the destroyed edifice of the authentic Catholic tradition,” and so “the Gothic Hetton is only an attempt to disguise the break in the tradition” (“Critique of Victorianism” 327). Frederick Beaty suggests that Hetton embodies the “secularized religion of benevolence” (86), upon which Tony depends, thus making his fate in the jungle with Mr Tod especially ironic, for it involves Tony suffering “the ultimate psychological torture of having to revive the Dickensian ethos in an environment especially inimical to it” (86). Similarly, Robert Garnett considers Hetton to be “an architectural version of Tony himself” (107), in that the structure, like Tony, exhibits an ahistorical, liberal humanism. Tony’s devotion to Hetton is thus inextricably linked to his devotion to what McCartney refers to as “reasonableness and decency” (“Being and Becoming” 146). Tony and Hetton share their ethical obsolescence in the grim modern era.

58 Here Hetton embodies what the editor of *The Architectural Review* feared in his discussion of modern design: “if Design is to break with shibboleths many age-old prejudices and predilections must go; but if in disentangling Design from the past we substitute for traditionalism an equally conventional modernism, we are merely exchanging one prejudice for another” (“Europe Discusses” 221).
And yet, something does not quite add up. If Waugh suggests we should abandon standards of conventional taste and fill our homes with what we dearly love, then why does he ridicule Tony for cherishing his pewter? Furthermore, why does Waugh lambast Tony for his ineffectual Victorian tastes when Waugh views this decorative period as the last refuge of the “plain man’s” natural style? After all, Waugh himself cultivated a thoroughly Victorian style in his own home.\(^{59}\) There seems, then, to be an anxious inconsistency in Waugh’s responses to the ethics of Victorian “good taste.” In making sense of Waugh’s critique, we encounter the conflict that Terry Eagleton identifies throughout Waugh’s work, the conflict “between a sense of morality and a sense of style” (43). Jeffrey Heath argues that for Waugh taste is a question of theology, not aesthetics.\(^{60}\) Heath’s argument rests on Waugh’s insistence that “the whole of thought and taste consists in distinguishing between similars” (“More Barren Leaves” 214). Yet Waugh lamented that in an increasingly secular and thus “tolerant” world, people lose both their ability and their willingness to distinguish between real and sham. In “Matter-of-Fact Mothers of the New Age,” Waugh describes this phenomenon: “there is more or less of anything: a bottle of champagne or several bottles, but no idea that between one bottle and another differences of date and brand should suggest a preference” (7). According to Heath, the recognition of the divine is for Waugh the ultimate source of authenticity and, as such, the locus of taste (35). Valuing culture, whether selecting a bottle of champagne or comparing portraits, thus involves the same kind of activity as

\(^{59}\) After his marriage to Laura Herbert in 1937, Waugh expended much energy in setting up a home. His diaries from the period catalogue his relentless efforts at finding a suitable home and furnishing it accordingly. He gradually developed a “masculine” (Donaldson 9) Victorian style and in a letter to Daphne Fielding he remarked, “The paper that is being put up over my head is very remarkable, very dark 1860 Gothic. [John] Betjeman ordered it and it was too much even for him so I took it over” (266). One can only wonder, given his own flamboyant Victorianism, what could possibly have been too much for Betjeman!

\(^{60}\) Heath writes, “Good taste, [Waugh] was convinced, was the special insight which came from the exercise of ‘right reason’—man’s reason assisted by grace. Waugh believed that taste was a question of God, and dissented
valuing basic moral principles. Modernism and Victorianism are thus equally blameworthy in
the erosion of taste by valorizing the secular and devaluing both aesthetic and moral
standards. In other words, for Waugh, the “good taste” of the novel stands in for a secular
humanist aesthetic which is doomed to an endless repetition of sham styles in the absence of
any stable sense of value.

Yet this assessment does not begin to explain the curious paradox of Waugh’s taste. If
he derides the Victorians for the secular renovation of “pure” or pre-Reformation Gothic into
ersatz “1860” Gothic, then why does he spend his leisure time arranging Gothic revival
balustrades in his garden? Indeed, he even suggests to his wife upon the death of his
beloved Waugh aunts that he could take possession of the family home, Midsomer Norton,
and “then make the house into a museum of Victorian art. […] I have the photographs of
the rooms as they were in 1870 and I could gradually restore them to that splendid state”
(190). As was the case with Decline and Fall, the tendency amongst critics to conceive of
Waugh’s thought exclusively in terms of theology proves limiting and misleading. There are,
in fact, two secular strains of Waugh’s thought that help to resolve this problem of taste: the
first is a critique of romanticism, and the second a critique of the nature of taste itself.

Though Heath’s theological reading of Waugh’s taste seems rather monolithic, as I
have shown, Waugh was more than willing to admit of idiosyncrasy in aesthetics. Being able
to tell the difference between the real and the artificial does not prohibit one from purchasing
artificial pearls without fear of divine retribution. The quality of discernment is related to, but

from the more fashionable view that God was a question of taste. In his view, art was not valid unless it was
thematically concerned with God and formally incorporated decorum, clarity, and order” (35).
61 “I have purchased for 10£ 16s the thirty-foot run of Gothic balustrade from Box” (Diaries 437). Even in the
earliest weeks of the Second World War the correct arrangement of this balustrade in his garden seems foremost
in Waugh’s mind.
distinct from, personal choice. The problem, Waugh argues, occurs only when we mistake the sham for the real and thus ascribe a false significance to objects. This mistaken taste is the dominant criticism of Hetton in the novel. Moreover, when we valorize the sham at the expense of the real, we commit perjury of taste. It is not so much secular humanism itself, but rather the artificial investment of a particular style—such as Gothic—with liberal significance, that makes Hetton “tasteless.”

Scott’s notion of the “romantic fallacy” once again becomes important, for he traces the origins of this fallacy to eighteenth-century theorizations of architectural style, namely the Gothic and the Greek, or Classical (47). In this romanticized system of aesthetics, Scott argues, “the interest is shifted, more and more, from the art itself to the ideals of civilization” (47). He continues:

Romanticism conceives of styles as a stereotyped language. Nineteenth century criticism is full of this prepossession: its concern with styles ‘Christian’ and ‘un-Christian’; one ‘style’ is suitable to museums and banks and cemeteries; another to colleges and churches; and this is not from the architectural requirements of the case, but from a notion of the idea supposed to be suggested by a square battlement, a Doric pillar, or a pointed arch. (52)

Waugh clearly has such a symbolic process in mind when Tony’s brother-in-law, Reggie St Cloud, discusses the seemingly necessary sale of Hetton to finance Tony’s divorce settlement: “I daresay you’ll find it quite easy to sell to a school or something like that. I remember the agent said when I was trying to get rid of Brakeleigh that it was a pity it wasn’t Gothic, because schools and convents always go for Gothic” (149-50). This “literary”

---

62 This is, of course, wildly ironic in light of de Wolfe’s claim that “the furniture of the mid-Victorian era will never be coveted by collectors, unless someone should build a museum for the freakish objects of house
interpretation of architecture is false because it tries to express fixed meaning in an object which resists fixed meanings, for “in architecture,” Scott contends, “the universal term is the sensuous experience and substance of form” (57).

Thus, the romanticization of secular humanism through Gothic form is the real argument of the novel. Here, of course, we may admit that this symbolism is especially abhorrent to Waugh not only because it is symbolic, but because it is falsely so; here we might return to Wasson’s conception of Hetton as a romantic attempt at normalizing the Reformation: “the picturesque does not create authenticity but rather constitutes a clear and present danger to those seeking true faith, for it beguiles the imagination and leads it astray” (328). Waugh rebukes Tony’s Gothic taste on two grounds. It is symbolic (Hetton’s medievalism symbolizes Tony’s ineffectually chivalric ideals) and, more importantly, it is inauthentic (any medieval symbolism it may hold is a product of the Victorian imagination c. 1860). Tony consoles himself about the decorative fate of Hetton by remarking, “twenty years ago people had liked half timber and old pewter; now it was urns and colonnades; but the time would come, perhaps in John Andrew’s day, when opinion would reinstate Hetton in its proper place. Already it was referred to as ‘amusing,’ and a very civil young man had asked permission to photograph it for an architectural review” (16). That Tony should welcome the “amusement” derived from Hetton as a sign that the cycle of taste is beginning to turn in its favour reveals Tony’s falsely symbolic understanding of Hetton’s significance.

---

63 It is important to note how closely tied Hetton is to Tony’s taste. In the serialized version of the novel, “A Flat in London,” Robert Murray Davis points out, “Tony is not to lose Hetton and since Hetton is more a residence than an embodiment of values, ‘A Flat in London’ can dispense with passages which describe the absurd Victorian clutter of the house and its furnishings” (“Harper’s Bazaar” 512). Notable, also, is Waugh’s description of Tony’s precursor, Paul Henty in “The Man Who Liked Dickens”; he was “an even-tempered, good-looking young man of fastidious tastes and enviable possessions, unintellectual, but appreciative of fine architecture and the ballet, well travelled in the more accessible parts of the world, a collector though not a connoisseur, popular among hostesses, revered by his aunts” (116; emphasis mine).
Tony’s great crime, as far as Waugh is concerned, is that he believes in the romantic fallacy of Hetton and, moreover, mistakes this sham for the real. He assumes, in the passage above, that Hetton’s “proper place” is 1860; Waugh, like the amused photographer, recognizes the lie, for Hetton’s “true place”—both architecturally and spiritually—is closer to 1360.

It is little wonder that Waugh would think that “the funniest book in the world is Grossmith’s *Diary of a Nobody*” (“One Way to Immortality” 85). Perhaps no book captures the perils of misplaced symbolism better than this account of Charles Pooter’s hopelessly flawed attempts at keeping up appearances in the suburbs. It would seem that Waugh’s amusement at Pooterism is related to the “amusement” derived from Hetton. Moreover, it is odd that even though Waugh sees through the shams of Victorian design, he still holds this style dearest to his heart. It is worthwhile to consider the source of this complicated mirth. For, really, what it amounts to is a delight taken in “bad taste”—that is, in “good taste” miscarried. Although this impulse is related to the apocalyptic defeat of taste in *Decline and Fall*, the attitude Waugh espouses in *A Handful of Dust* and in his growing Victorianism suggests a more nuanced approach to the problem of taste. One might suggest that in *A Handful of Dust* we see signs of Waugh’s cultivation of a “camp” attitude, which is that which, in Matei Calinescu’s terms, “cultivates bad taste—usually the bad taste of yesterday—as a form of superior refinement. It is as if bad taste, consciously acknowledged and pursued, actually could outdo itself and become its own clear-cut opposite” (230). We can see, in a peculiar way, how this camp attitude functions in the conclusion to *A Handful of Dust*.

---

64 A clever reference to the young John Betjeman.
In my reading of the novel’s notoriously ambiguous ending, it is only by reinstating to Hetton the embodiment of “bad taste”—the impoverished Richard Lasts—that Hetton can begin to be renovated. After all, it is these country-bumpkin Lasts who finally vanquish Mrs Beaver—rather than taking up her offer to lavishly renovate Hetton’s chapel in memory of Tony, the Lasts choose instead to erect a “plain monolith” cut from the estate quarry by their own workmen (220). Of course, most critics read the novel’s conclusion as hopelessly bleak; of the Lasts’ modern lifestyle, McCartney argues, “the twentieth century expresses itself with backfiring motorcycles and caged foxes, explosive and exploitative commerce. These are the forces that destroy the ancestral houses in order to make room for blocks of characterless one and two-room flats” (Confused 156), as if to suggest that Waugh was always on the side of the tradition that Hetton had come to represent. While, admittedly, it is a little difficult to view the conversion of Hetton into a commercial fox farm positively, in so doing the Richard Lasts manage to break the spell of “good taste.” The novel may end on what Heath calls a “deceptive note of optimism” (121), but the optimism is deceptive not because Waugh tacitly disapproves of the genuinely upstanding if déclassé Lasts’ accession to Hetton, but rather because Waugh secretly revels in the dynastic end—the end of taste—this accession signifies.

While in itself the conclusion to A Handful of Dust may not seem terribly “campy,” put within a larger context we can begin to see the source of Waugh’s deceptive optimism. The victory of “bad taste” is achieved through a delight taken in conspicuously misplaced symbolism. In this way, Waugh’s camp approach circumvents the problem of past and present by cultivating an ironic pose—Hetton returns to its rural past, but it is subverted by a resolutely modern practice, commercial fox-farming; Hetton returns to its ancestral family,
but it is a new, nuclear family, equipped with motor-cycles. This simulation of taste concludes the novel, and this subversive move reflects, but improves upon, the apocalyptic note of *Decline and Fall*. But this peculiar campiness has traces outside of Waugh’s fiction; there is a sense that he was acutely aware of the ridiculousness of his own tastes. He writes in a letter, “it is by having preposterous possessions that one can keep them at arms length” (198), and in an early article entitled “A Young Novelist’s Heaven” (1930), he hopes not only for Heaven to include “a few genuine Gothic cathedrals,” but also “some very comic Gothic revival castles” (65). Indeed, his very existence was a campy amusement; Betjeman’s first wife, Penelope Chetwode, reminisces, “he achieved the effect he desired [at Piers Court], which was to give the impression of a country house lived in by the same family for several generations” (100)—a distinctly artificial impression. Though Waugh was aware of the dangers of the “pseudo” and the ethical consequences of espousing “bad taste” for amusement, he was, nonetheless, irresistibly drawn to the camp sensibility—to, in Susan Sontag’s definition, the “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (515).

Yet this convoluted, campy conclusion still does not resolve the problem of taste for Waugh. How does “bad taste” come to be a viable solution for the ever taste-conscious Waugh? It would seem that the delight in artifice and misplaced symbolism that would seem to characterize Waugh’s camp attitude runs counter to his anti-romantic stance. Here we need to consider more closely the theoretical underpinnings of Waugh’s critique of taste. It is most helpful, here, to consider a particular exchange of ideas in *The Times* in 1945. In that year Waugh wrote a letter to the editor about the exhibition of Picasso’s and Matisse’s work at the Victoria and Albert Museum. In it he suggests that “Señor Picasso’s paintings cannot be intelligently discussed in the terms used of the civilized masters,” and he contends that this is
because of “his admirers’ constant use of an irrelevant aesthetic vocabulary” (Letters 214). He claims the success is the result of a “mesmeric trick,” and that “the large number of otherwise cultured and intelligent people who fall victims to Senor Picasso are not posers. They are genuinely ‘sent.’ [ . . . ] They emerge from their ecstasy as cultured and intelligent as ever. [ . . . ] But do not let us confuse it with the sober and elevating happiness which we derive from the great masters” (214). Of course, this polemical letter drew attention, and caused Robin Campbell to write a response. In Waugh’s private reply to Campbell, we learn much about his approach to taste. He begins his letter with this crucial passage: “I believe that we all have a secondary and impure aesthetic sense. Tennyson delighted in smutty doggerel, Ruskin in Kate Greenaway, Betjeman in chapels and so on. I am keenly excited by 19th century book-illumination. I suggested that Picasso-addicts were similarly moved—that the excitement was harmless. Today I am not so sure” (214). Here Waugh distinguishes between two kinds of taste: the primary (implicitly the “pure” aesthetic sense) and the secondary (the “impure), but his criticism only applies to the former.

Here Waugh betrays a curiously Kantian grounding in taste. In his Critique of Judgement, Kant distinguishes between three kinds of judgement. The first, judgements about the agreeable, apply to what Waugh calls the “impure aesthetic sense.” These are judgements based on personal preference that have no broader applicability; Waugh no more expects one to share his taste in Victoriana than for him to share in a taste for the modern. This category of agreeableness pertains to his larger ideas about individualism and taste—of course we cannot all be pleased by the same wallpaper, so why should we be expected to hang the same wallpaper? It is, after all, a matter of taste.
But does this mean that we can never make universal statements about taste? This was the problem that Kant faced, and his solution finds its way into Waugh’s thought. In the eighteenth century, the theory of taste found its way into two opposing camps: the rationalist and the empiricist. The former viewed taste objectively, in that rationalists believed beauty could be conceptualized, otherwise how would we be able to discuss it at all? The latter group viewed taste subjectively, arguing that beauty cannot be “proved” like a mathematical formula could, and thus concluded that beauty is truly a question of taste. Neither solution was sufficient for Kant, so he set himself the task of reconciling rationalism and empiricism in a theory of taste. He did so in differentiating two further judgements beyond the agreeable: the determinant and the reflective judgements. In the former, “a concept is applied to what is given,” while in the latter, “a concept is sought out for what is given” (Wood 155). True judgements of taste can only be reflective judgments. Luc Ferry explains:

Unlike what classical rationalism maintains, the judgment of taste is not based on determinate concepts (or rules); it is thus impossible to ‘argue’ about it as if it were a judgment of scientific knowledge. Yet it is not thereby confined to the pure empirical subjectivity of feeling, since it rests on the presence of an object which, if it is beautiful [. . .] will awaken a necessary idea of reason, as such common to humanity. It is through referring to this indeterminate idea (it merely calls for the reconciliation of the sensible and the intelligible without stating what precisely this reconciliation could consist in) that it becomes possible to ‘argue’ about taste and to expand the sphere of subjectivity in order to envision a nondogmatic sharing of the aesthetic experience with another, in so far as this other is another human. (88)
Kant solved taste by demonstrating how it may be communicated through “intersubjectivity” (Ferry 50), because the “common sense” arrived at through the experience of beauty—the Idea of reason—can be shared and reached by all, yet this “concept” can only be sought through the reflection upon art—an act which is, by definition, not a priori—thus judgements of taste still require individual imagination and variation in the processing of the beautiful.

So we can see how this theory may apply to Waugh’s concerns about Picasso. He rejects the idea that Ruskin’s love of Kate Greenaway could represent a valid judgment of taste because it is subjectively empirical, and, thus, incommunicable intersubjectively. But he also suggests that Picasso’s supporters’ judgements are also invalid as taste judgements. Firstly, he says that Picasso fails in two aesthetic requirements: communication and content. These are, in altered form, Kant’s requirements for beauty (that it can be argued about, thus communicated, and that it can represent a common sense, thus conceptualized). The work cannot, in Waugh’s eyes, be communicated intersubjectively because there is no shared field of discussion, only the “irrelevant aesthetic vocabulary” of a few critics. The work has no content, or common sense, Waugh argues, because it does not lead to the Idea of Reason; in fact, Picasso’s work leads to the opposite; Waugh writes, “his addicts tell me his message is one of Chaos and despair. That is not the message of art” (Letters 215). The “sober and elevating happiness” derived from the artistic masters is the ideal common sense, not the pervasive unreason of secular modernity.65

Waugh’s views here may correspond with Kant, but they are, of course, tenuous. After all, Waugh never invokes Kant himself. Moreover, Kant never had to contend with Cubism. Yet Kant’s distinction between determinant and reflective judgements helps to
highlight the real crux of Waugh’s critique of taste. The true difficulty Waugh has with “Picasso-addicts” is not the nature of the work, necessarily, but rather the nature of their judgement, for this is where the “harm” of otherwise harmless agreeableness comes into play. The judgements of the Picasso-addicts are not valid because they are not the proper kind of judgment; they are determinant, not reflective. Paradoxically enough, Waugh places the apologists for modern art firmly within the rationalist camp. This criticism had been gestating in Waugh’s writing for some time. If he loathed the solipsism of modernism’s emphasis on subjectivity (Alder 114),66 even worse were the totalizing effects of modernism’s objective tendencies. In his biography of D.G. Rossetti, Waugh devotes considerable attention to the theories of modern art, particularly to the Bell-Fry notion of significant form. He writes:

At the present day there is a perceptible stability about the standards of ordinary periodical artistic criticism [. . .]. This originally took shape when the more articulate admirers of the post-impressionist schools of painting found themselves obliged to explain their preferences. To do this, they pointed to what was, I think, an entirely new thing which they called the ‘aesthetic emotion.’ [. . .] Some people’s aesthetic emotion might be more easily aroused than others, but, whenever the emotion was sincerely present, there was Art. [. . .] Thus the initial assumption became the foundation on which modern criticism is built. (221)

65 Waugh considers that modern artists who cannot communicate in terms either orderly or rational are “aesthetically in the same position as, theologically, a mortal-sinner who has put himself outside the world order of God’s mercy” (215).
66 In a favourable review of David Jones’s In Parenthesis, Waugh writes, “it is this painter’s realism which lifts his work above any of Mr Eliot’s followers and, in many places, above Mr Eliot himself. Moreover, he has a painter’s communicativeness. The literary mind is a rat on a treadmill; too many modern poetic writers
The problem, however, is that “modern criticism” “has taken an already existing word, ‘art,’ and has fastened it upon a newly discovered ‘necessary relation of forms in space’” (223). Waugh concedes, “no one would deny that there is this vivifying quality to be found as a common factor in most recognised works of art,” but he cautions, “surely it is unjustifyable to claim this as the one vital factor and to accept anything embodying it as a work of art?” (223). Rossetti, whatever his failings, is an example of the cost of this modern approach to valuing art. In speaking of Beata Beatrix, arguably one of Rossetti’s best works, Waugh notes, “there are manifestations of the human spirit [in his work] that transcend the materials in which they are discernible; this picture is one of them, and it cannot be dealt with by the workaday machinery of technical valuation, however high-sounding the phrase and however little understood” (130). Waugh continues, “You can if you are so disposed dismiss with a clear conscience half at least of Rossetti’s work as artistically negligible; you can go further and denounce his whole reputation as a fraud, but as long as Beata Beatrix hangs in the Tate Gallery there is a problem to be faced” (132). Modern theories of art are ruled by the concept of form—a concept that precedes the judgement of an art object, thus rendering the judgement of significant form necessarily determinant. This is why Rossetti’s Beata Beatrix is a problem for taste; on Kantian grounds it is beautiful—transcendent and communicable—but in Fry/Bell grounds, it lacks significant form. This latter determinant judgement is not a judgment of taste because, as Waugh argues, there is no room for argument.

Like Huxley, Waugh was not hostile to theory per se, but he resented the tendency in design circles to turn theory into fact. Waugh agreed with many of Roger Fry’s and Clive Bell’s ideas about art, but he had little patience for the devotees of Significant Form who employ a language which can be intelligible only to themselves; they relate experiences one to another inside themselves” (“A Mystic in the Trenches” 196; Waugh’s emphasis).
prohibited theoretical dissidence. The institutionalization of theory, rather than the theory itself, is what makes the Picasso-addicts dangerous in Waugh’s view, for they have found a concept that accounts for their taste. But this is not how taste works—the concept must be found through art, not outside of it. Waugh lambasts Raymond Mortimer for his assertion in the introduction to Channel Packet (1943) that ‘‘it is affectation to pretend you like Poussin if you don’t like Picasso. Their differences are superficial, their identity essential’’ (qtd. ‘‘The Last Highbrow’’ 275). Waugh characterizes this attitude as ‘‘the habit of assuming that the common quality discernible in good things is the whole of their goodness’’ (‘‘The Last Highbrow’’ 275). Not only is this bad theory, Waugh argues, it is bad for humanity, for the dissolution of the reflective judgement, which, as does moral behaviour, admit of ‘‘infinite variations’’ (Letters 215), erodes our ability to exercise true judgement of taste. The abstract objectification and standardization of a consensual notion of ‘‘good taste’’ denies the possibility of arguments about taste, and, as such, renders questions of taste moot.67 This determinant nature of taste in the modern period is yet another manifestation of the abstraction of the ‘‘common man’’68 that Waugh so abhorred.

This might be why, perversely, Waugh so loved the Victorian period as a source of style, for, as he says, it was ‘‘an age which rated liberty above equality’’ (‘‘Victorian Taste’’ 260). Waugh’s love for the Philistinism of Victorian style may not seem terribly Kantian, but Kant’s thoughts on decoration may have some relevance here:

67 Waugh was ever vigilant to instances of unnaturally restricted taste. In a diary entry Waugh recounts a visit to Dame Laura Knight in 1946 to view a painting on which she was working at the time. Waugh notes, ‘‘the papers on the table [in the picture] had by chance taken the form of a cross and she was in doubt whether to leave them so. ‘You don’t think it illustration do you,’’ she kept asking. I tried to explain that I liked ‘‘illustration,’’ but the poor old girl had plainly had her tastes warped by Roger Fry’’ (646).
68 In a notorious article for Life magazine following the success of Brideshead Revisited in the United States, Waugh asserts, ‘‘the Common Man does not exist. He is an abstraction invented by bores for bores. [. . . ] Do not ask yourself, when you read a story, ‘Is this the behaviour common to such and such an age group, income
But where all that is intended is the maintenance of a free play of the powers of representation (subject, however, to the condition that there is to be nothing for understanding to take exception to), in ornamental gardens, in the decoration of rooms, in all kinds of tasteful implements etc., regularity that betrays constraint is to be avoided as far as possible. Thus English taste in gardens, and baroque taste in furniture, push the freedom of imagination to the verge of what is grotesque—the idea being that in this divorce from all constraint of rules the precise instance is being afforded where taste can exhibit its perfection in projects of the imagination to the fullest extent. (73)

Waugh shares this taste for the Baroque, but curiously locates it in the Victorian era: “the huge euphoria of the Victorian home may be attributed directly to the abundance of ornament. How much of the neurotic boredom of today comes from the hygienic blankness of offices, aerodrome waiting-rooms, hospitals? The human mind requires constant minor occupations to put it at rest. The eye must be caught and held before the brain will work” (“Those Happy Homes” 466). The freedom of imagination bordering on grotesquerie, coupled with the discipline required to synthesize the “huge euphoria” into a state of contemplation, is the foundation of taste. The liberating push and the restrictive pull of the imagination powers the faculty of taste.

But how does one achieve this baroque euphoria in the age of the “common man” and ferro-concrete? One cannot revive the Victorian home, nor more so can one recapture the significance of the baroque. Camp is, perhaps, one way of recovering the spirit of the baroque in modernity. Waugh’s complex relationship with the Catalan architect, Antoni...
Gaudi, reflects this notion. Speaking of Gaudi’s superiority over “anonymous contractors and job-builders” who rendered *art nouveau* insufferable, Waugh writes, “Gaudi bears to [them] something of the same relation as do the masters of Italian baroque to the rococo decorators of the Pompadour’s boudoir, or Ronald Firbank to the author of *Frolic Wind*. What in them is frivolous, superficial and *chic* is in him structural and essential; in his work is apotheosized all the writhing, bubbling, convoluting, convulsing soul of the *Art Nouveau*” (“Gaudi” 309).69 Waugh admired this grotesque writhing of Gaudi’s work for it exhibited the structural exuberance “wholly untempered by considerations of tradition or good taste” (“Gaudi” 311).70 Waugh’s interest in the Victorian period was, like his interest in Gaudi, genuine; it was an attempt to recover a baroque sense of taste in a decidedly un-Baroque age. Waugh’s taste, then, came across as campy because it seemed to revel in, as Sontag puts it, “the failure of the attempt” (524), because in some ways, it was the failure of Victorian eclecticism and of Gaudi’s architecture to live up to an idea of “good taste” that renders it admirable.

But camp is, after all, not a very satisfying conclusion. Firstly, as Sontag asserts, camp “makes no distinction between the unique object and the mass-produced object. Camp taste transcends the nausea of the replica” (528). This elision is certainly not Waugh’s aim, as *Decline and Fall* makes clear. Moreover, camp relishes “style at the expense of content” (Sontag 517). Here again there is a problem, for while Waugh cherishes style and exalts Firbank’s dizzying obsession with it, Waugh also insists that style cannot exist without content. Though a satirist, Waugh cannot fully abide by the abyss of irony to which camp leads. Camp is substitutive, seeking to replace traditional notions of “good taste” with

69 Significantly, Sontag identifies both Gaudi and Firbank as examples of camp (520, 523).
consciously studied “bad taste,” but this substitution does not solve the problem of taste as far as Waugh is concerned. The victory of bad taste as explored in A Handful of Dust is only provisional—we take temporary delight in the overthrow of “good taste,” but the larger concerns still loom. Betjeman will face the same difficulty in his early flirtations with the Amusing style. Both Waugh’s and Betjeman’s conceptions of a dissident taste are supplemental, rather than substitutive. This third taste does not simply react against “good taste,” it attempts to provide taste with a means of evaluating not just purely aesthetic concerns, but human concerns as well. For Waugh, the question was how to capture, in the Kantian sense, the baroque without resorting either to irony or rigid conceptualization. This is the central difficulty Waugh will try to resolve in Brideshead Revisited.

2.3 “All Beauty is Difficult”: Brideshead Revisited and the Charity of Taste

This central problem, the problem of irony, is what haunts what is surely Waugh’s most “taste-minded” novel, Brideshead Revisited (1946). Apocalyptic destruction and campy “bad taste” fail, ultimately, to provide Waugh with a viable alternative to the “good taste” movement. If the chief character arc in Brideshead Revisited is from agnosticism to faith, then we might consider that the crucial thematic movement begins with the agnosticism of taste.

First, however, we need to step back and consider the moment of transition between A Handful of Dust and Brideshead Revisited: Waugh’s unfinished novel from the 1940s, Work Suspended. In this truncated piece, Waugh details the efforts of the detective novelist, John

---

70 Indeed, as Waugh argues in Rossetti, “all great artists” must “disregard the standards of contemporary taste”
Plant, to settle his late father’s estate. Though only a short work, already in the first two chapters Waugh rejects the campy bad taste of the 1930s. First Waugh complicates the idea of Philistinism as a solution to “good taste” in his portrait of the father, an aged narrative painter of the nineteenth-century school. The narrator, his son, explains the father’s career of creating “long, increasingly unsaleable series of historical and scriptural groups, and the scenes of domestic melodrama by which he is known—subjects which had already become slightly ludicrous when he was in the cradle, but which he continued to produce year after year” (222). Near the end of the painter’s life, however, he “suddenly, without realizing it, found himself in the fashion. The first sign of this was in 1929 when his ‘Agag before Samuel’ was bought at a provincial exhibition for 750 guineas” (222). This sudden fashionability, however, was not quite of the nature the painter expected. The purchaser of ‘Agag’ was Sir Lionel Sterne, whom the elder Plant could “see well—a fine, meaty fellow with a great gold watch-chain across his belly, who’s been decently employed boiling soap or smelting copper all his life, with no time to read Clive Bell. In every age it has been men like him who keep painting alive”” (223). But of course, this industrial magnate bears no relation to the actual Lionel Sterne who, as the younger Plant tries to explain, was “the youthful and elegant millionaire who for ten years had been the leader of aesthetic fashion” (223). The elder Plant’s reply was “‘Nonsense! [. . .] Fellows like that collect disjointed Negresses by Gaugin. Only Philistines like my work and, by God, I only like Philistines’” (223). Here even the safe harbour of Philistinism, which seemed, for Waugh, a suitable refuge from “good taste,” falls victim to fashion. Even the taste of Philistines, it seems, can become conventional. But Waugh was not inventing here, for the Victorian style did become something of a revival in the period, with numerous articles written on how to achieve the

(168).
look, including one possibly written by Waugh’s ex-wife, Evelyn Gardner.71 Plant’s tragedy at the hands of Cubists-in-Philistine’s-clothing, coupled with his ultimate defeat—the destruction of his exceptionally Victorian town home to make room for more flats, would seem to suggest that Philistinism alone is not sufficient to ward off the plague of “good taste.”

Even that campy delight in bad taste seems unworkable in Work Suspended. John, who seeks a home for himself, must ward off the suggestions of his fashionable friends. One night at the home of Roger and Lucy Simmonds (the latter will soon become his mistress), John was shown an engraving of a house for sale. It showed a pavilion, still rigidly orthodox in plan, but, in elevation decked with ornament conceived in a wild ignorance of oriental forms; there were balconies and balustrades of geometric patterns; the cornice swerved upwards at the corners of the lines of a pagoda; the roof was crowned with an onion cupola which might have been Russian, bells hung from the capitals of barley-sugar columns; the windows were freely derived from the Alhambra; there was a minaret. (274)

The fashionable guests proclaim this tour-de-force of incompetent orientalism72 to be “a gem” (274). Lucy, however, voices what John—and Waugh—think of this bad taste for bad taste’s sake attitude: “I can’t think why John would want to have a house like that” (274). And, really, she’s right: this campy yearning for bad taste may make for an amusing joke,

---

71 The Victorian Revival was a much discussed, if obscure, movement in the twentieth century. See Battersby, 109-110, and Cohen 182-5. Roger Fry’s essay in Vision and Design, “The Ottoman and the What-Not,” also discusses the curious taste for Victoriana.

72 Waugh bemoaned the superficial treatment of “styles” in architecture and advocated a return to classicism in the study of architecture. In “A Call to the Orders,” he writes, “by studying ‘the Orders’ you can produce Chippendale Chinese; by studying Chippendale Chinese you will produce nothing but magazine covers” (218).
but, Waugh would query, can it make a home? Should domesticity and irony be paired in such a way?

There are signs that Waugh himself, like John Plant, was beginning to question the value of campy bad taste as a design philosophy. In an undated note in his archive at the Harry Ransom Center, Waugh scribbles, “it is the kind of honor which takes a lot of living up to. Everybody who comes in says ‘What a lovely house you’ve got.’ But I haven’t got it: it has got me—How am I to impress my personality (if I have one) on a house whose atmosphere is not mine? And how long will it be before the place begins to impress its personality on me?” (Box 3.10). It’s not clear, given the lack of information, whether he here refers to Stinchcombe or Piers Court, but both of Waugh’s homes were such overwhelming instances of “personality” that it is not difficult to see Waugh’s point. If the design of one’s home is mere theatricality, mere rampant Philistinism, then the whole point of the decorative gesture—the assertion of individuality in a homogenized environment—is lost, for the house itself, like the oriental monstrosity of Work Suspended, subsumes all individuality in a wash of “effect.” It is no wonder that the writing of Brideshead Revisited coincides with a period of fervent decorating on Waugh’s front: in both fiction and life, Waugh was trying to come to terms with his own tastes.

In this way, the movement of Brideshead Revisited mirrors Waugh’s own life, for the novel is an exploration of Charles Ryder’s awakening to taste. It is no secret that much of Brideshead Revisited is autobiographical, especially in the initial chapters at Oxford. Ryder’s original aesthetic impulses are particularly telling in his progression of taste. Ryder describes his rooms at Oxford:
On my first afternoon I proudly hung a reproduction of Van Gogh’s
*Sunflowers* over the fire and set up a screen painted by Roger Fry with a
Provencal landscape which I had bought inexpensively when the Omega
workshops were sold up. I displayed also a poster by McKnight Kauffer and
Rhyme Sheets from the Poetry Bookshop, and, most painful to recall, a
porcelain figure of Polly Peachum which stood between black tapers on the
chimney-piece. My books were meagre and common-place—Roger Fry’s
*Vision and Design*, the Medici Press edition of *A Shropshire Lad*,73 *Eminent
Victorians*, some volumes of *Georgian Poetry, Sinister Street* and *South Wind.*

(29)

Ryder’s design instincts are decidedly circumscribed by his notion of “good taste” for an
intellectual. Van Gogh’s impressionism and Fry’s aesthetics overwhelm the room, and his
literary selection reads much like a “suggested reading list” for the budding intellectual of the
1920s. It is salient, though, that Ryder wishes he had “decorated those rooms with Morris
stuffs and Arundel prints and [. . .] filled [his shelves] with seventeenth century folios and
French novels of the Second Empire in Russia-leather and watered silk” (29). These are the
very things Waugh would come to love at Oxford, in part through the influence of Harold
Acton, with whom Waugh became involved as an undergraduate. In his memoir, *A Little
Learning*, Waugh recalls his aesthetic conversion under Acton’s influence: “while Mr
Betjeman was still a schoolboy rubbing church brasses, Harold was collecting Victorianna. [. . .]
. . .] Harold led me far away from Francis Crease to the baroque and the rococo and to the

73 In describing the “Cultured Cottage” style so beloved by intellectuals, Lancaster notes that “no longer was the
Family Bible visible on a richly covered centre table; instead “A Shropshire Lad” (hand-printed edition on rag
paper, signed by the author and limited to two hundred copies), occupied an “accidentally” conspicuous
position on an “artist designed” table of unstained oak” (130).
Waugh’s aesthetic awakening corresponds with Ryder’s friendship with Sebastian Flyte and his set of socialite dilettantes. Ryder explains, “Collins had exposed the fallacy of modern aesthetics to me [. . .] but it was not until Sebastian, idly turning the page of Clive Bell’s *Art*, read: “Does anyone feel the same kind of emotion for a butterfly or a flower that he feels for a cathedral or a picture?” ‘Yes, I do,’ that my eyes were opened” (30). Sebastian opens Ryder’s eyes to an alternative theory of taste, one which rejects the rigid principles of Bell and Fry and exhibits—even revels in—the eclectic and incongruous. Sebastian’s room “was filled with a strange jumble of objects—a harmonium in a gothic case, an elephant’s foot waste-paper basket, a dome of wax fruit, two disproportionately large Sèvres vases, framed drawings by Daumier—made all the more incongruous by the austere college furniture and the large luncheon table” (33). The curious assemblage of Sebastian’s belongings first alerts Ryder to the fact that “bad taste” might not be so bad: “when at length I returned to my rooms and found them exactly as I had left them that morning, I detected a jejune air that had not irked me before. What was wrong? Nothing except the golden daffodils seemed to be real. Was it the screen? I turned it to face the wall. That was better” (35). In turning his back—literally in this case—on the presumed “good taste” of Roger Fry and company, Ryder makes way for his truly momentous aesthetic experience: Brideshead Castle.

Ryder’s introduction to Brideshead is couched in revelatory terms: “suddenly a new and secret landscape opened before us. We were at the head of a valley and below us, half a mile distant, grey and gold and a screen of boskage, shone the dome and columns of an old house” (36). This “old house” has, we learn, a storied past. Originally a castle, the owners had, two or three hundred years earlier, pulled the structure down and reassembled it a mile
away in the valley. Just as the house was reborn in the baroque style, so too is Ryder reborn in his “conversion to the baroque” (79). He narrates of his experience at Brideshead, “here, under the high and insolent dome, under these coffered ceilings; here as I passed through I felt a whole new system of nerves alive in me” (79-80); “it was,” Ryder reflects, “an aesthetic education to live within those walls, to wander from room to room, from the Soanesque library to the Chinese drawing-room, adazzle with gilt pagodas and nodding mandarins, painted paper and Chippendale fretwork, from the Pompeian parlour to the great tapestry-hung hall which stood unchanged, as it had been designed two hundred and fifty years before” (78). Ryder here “converts” to the baroque without any trace of camp; the euphoria he feels at Brideshead is not ironic—it is a whole-hearted embrace of the principles of the baroque. This baroque interlude must educate readers as well—Waugh is teaching us the lesson of true, not second-hand, baroque. Here, we think, is Waugh’s return to taste; gone are the stuffed parrot and anti-macassar; here in this unqualified promotion of baroque we find a reconciliation of taste.

And yet, as is always the case, Waugh makes things considerably more difficult. The taste for the baroque is not, it seems, quite so uncompromisingly positive. One first realizes the problem when Lord Marchmain returns home to die. He is the “masculine” backbone of the baroque castle, and yet his return serves only to throw the baroque into a comically macabre light. Marchmain insists on dying in the Queen’s bed in the museum-like Chinese drawing-room. Ryder’s impression of the scene dismantles his beatified vision of the baroque:

the room had a Hogarthian aspect, with the dinner-table set for the four of us by the grotesque, chinoiserie chimney-piece, and the old man propped among
his pillows, sipping champagne, tasting, praising, and failing to eat, the
succession of dishes which had been prepared for his homecoming. Wilcox
had brought out for the occasion the gold plate, which I had not before seen in
use; that, the gilt mirrors, and the lacquer and the drapery of the great bed and
Julia’s mandarin coat gave the scene an air of pantomime, of Aladdin’s cave.

(303)

This grotesque scene of oriental excess marks the beginning of Ryder’s disillusionment with
the baroque dream. He realizes, in his last few days at the house, that Brideshead’s beauty
masked darker concerns. Marchmain’s improbable death-bed reconciliation with faith, Julia’s
sudden remorse at her affair with Ryder, and, ultimately, the onset of war pile in on Ryder,
who unwittingly returns to Brideshead as an army officer several years after his break-up
with Julia. Ryder tours the house-cum-army encampment with some dismay, lamenting the
encroachment of the suburbs around Brideshead and the rough misuse of the house at the
hands of its occupants.

Yet he finds, to his surprise, that one part of the house had remained intact, the
infamous *art nouveau* chapel.74 That this aesthetic miscarriage should outlast the baroque
fineries of Brideshead is surely an important signal—a suspicion confirmed by the fact that
we learn Ryder’s *true* conversion—conversion to belief—occurs in this deplorable *art
nouveau* chapel; Ryder narrates,

---

74 Ryder had described this room during his first visit to the house: “Angels in printed cotton smocks, rambler
roses, flower-spangled meadows, frisking lambs, texts in Celtic script, saints in armour, covered the walls in an
intricate pattern of clear, bright colours. There was a triptych of pale oak, carved so as to give it the peculiar
property of seeming to have been moulded in Plasticine. The sanctuary lamp and all the metal furniture were of
bronze, hand-beaten to the patina of a pock-marked skin; the altar steps had a carpet of grass-green, strewn with
white and gold daisies” (39-40).
something quite remote from anything the builders intended, has come out of their work, and out of the fierce little human tragedy in which I played; something none of us thought about at the time; a small red flame—a beaten-copper lamp of deplorable design relit before the beaten-copper doors of a tabernacle; the flame which the old knights saw from their tombs, which they saw put out; that flame burns again for other soldiers, far from home, farther, in heart, than Acre or Jerusalem. It could not have been lit but for the builders and the tragedians, and there I found it this morning, burning anew among the old stones. (330)

This final scene in the chapel undoes any lessons in taste we may have gleaned from the baroque Brideshead. It is not the beauty of Inigo Jones’s construction that kindles this “remote flame,” but rather the lamp of “deplorable design” bears the promise of hope through faith. While Ryder may have discovered a route to the sea of faith in this chapel, we find ourselves, once again, in the wilderness of taste.

The ultimate significance of this defeat of the baroque has been well charted by critics. The conventional wisdom is that Brideshead functions as a theological allegory. For instance, Dominic Manganiello reads Ryder’s “aesthetic rehabilitation” through the Augustinian distinction between “‘enjoyment’ and ‘use’” (160). The first impulse, that of cupidity, means “to cling to [a beautiful thing] for its own sake and to love it as ultimate value,” while the second impulse, charity, means “to employ it with reference to a proper object of love”—the Divine (160). In this way, Charles’s love of the baroque Brideshead is motivated by cupidity, while the chapel in the final scene draws him towards charity. As Manganiello argues, “Charles still considers the art work an eyesore, but the deplorable
aesthetic design no longer repels him” (165). Similarly, Laura White argues that Brideshead Revisited is a milestone in Waugh’s career because it required him to ultimately reject beauty, a move “Waugh sees as morally necessary” because “art and beauty cannot substitute for religion” (181). The chapel scene enacts this correction, then, in that Ryder seems to accept faith in the Divine in the place of faith in art. As Damon Marcel DeCoste points out, Waugh’s later, slighter work, Love Among the Ruins, takes this theme to an extreme, in which it is the replacement of God by aesthetics that turns ghastly and creates mere artifacts of humanity (33–4). The fetishization of aesthetics thus serves only to dehumanize us, rather than underscore our status, as Alder puts it, as “individual souls made in the image of God” (127).

Once again, however, Heath makes what would seem to be the most useful statement on the meaning of Brideshead. He suggests that, contrary to many critics’ readings, the rejection of the baroque does not occur at the end of the novel, but rather, he argues, Waugh instructs us throughout to be cautious of the charms of Brideshead. The house’s “joys are illusions” (167), and he points to two features that support this reading: the gold dome and the Italianate fountain. The former is, of course, a false dome which houses the nursery, and Heath connects the falseness of the dome with Waugh’s disillusionment with the cupolas of Chambord (168). Architecturally, then, Brideshead is duplicitous; an imposing baroque dome on the outside conceals a humble nursery within—a nursery which is, in itself, of “motley taste” (Heath 168). The fountain is imported from Italy and is equally suspicious, as Heath suggests: “‘natural,’ ‘counterfeit,’ and ‘fantastic,’ the miscellaneous taste of the Pagan fountain connotes fraud” (168). The significance of the chapel scene, Heath insists, is to demonstrate the theme of the novel, “the operation,” he writes, “of grace through the
inauthentic” (169). The authenticity of the baroque is no vessel for grace—a lesson, Heath suggests, Ryder learns in the final scene.

Certainly the theology of these readings is sound and the various interpretations are indeed relevant to *Brideshead Revisited*, but one cannot help but feel they are a bit too catechistic in their reading. Too many contextual questions remain unanswered: why, for instance, must “beauty” be rejected wholesale? Cannot beauty and charity coincide? And why does Waugh choose *art nouveau* as the decorative style of the chapel? Surely there is a significance to baroque/*art nouveau* binary beyond beauty versus ugliness? Why isn’t the chapel a Hetton-like neo-Gothic, and what distinguishes the bad taste of the chapel from that of the sterile modernism of the ocean liner?²⁷

Not only do they fail to provide answers to these questions, the answers these critics do provide is often misleading. Firstly, Ryder’s “rehabilitation” from cupidity to charity is not so sudden as Manganiello would suggest. Charles, even at the height of his agnosticism, can differentiate between use and enjoyment. In his diplomatic discussion of the chapel with Bridey, the latter remarks, “‘You take art as a means not as an end. That is strict theology, but it’s unusual to find an agnostic believing it’” (91). In fact, Ryder never, I would argue, treats art as an end in itself, even though his particular conception of what the end of art is might be rehabilitated in the novel. Secondly, Heath’s treatment of Nanny Hawkins seems slightly off-kilter. Heath associates this woman with the falseness of the dome, suggesting her “collection of small presents which had been brought home to her at various times by her

²⁷ Ryder describes the “modern” ship with much disdain: “I trod carpets the colour of blotting paper; the painted panels of the walls were like blotting paper, too—kindergarten work in flat, drab colours—and between the walls were yards and yards of biscuit-coloured wood which no carpenter’s tool had ever touched, wood that had been bent round corners, invisibly joined strip to strip, steamed and squeezed and polished” (225). For a discussion of the politics surrounding the disputed “modernism” of the Queen Mary’s design, see Fiona
children, carved shell and lava, stamped leather, painted wood, china, bog-oak, damascened silver, blue-john, alabaster, coral, the souvenirs of many holidays” (38) is aesthetically flawed, displaying that undisciplined “motley taste” (168). Yet Nanny Hawkins’s tastes are merely those of the bygone Victorians, the very same sort of Victorians as Waugh’s maiden aunts at Midsomer Norton. He recalls their “motley taste” with great affection in *A Little Learning*: “the bric-a-brac in the cabinets, the Sheffield plate, the portraits by nameless artists quickened my childish aesthetic appetite as keenly as would have done any world-famous collection and the narrow corridors stretched before me like ancient galleries. I am sure that I loved my aunts’ house because I was instinctively drawn to the ethos I now recognise as mid-Victorian” (48). It seems odd that Waugh would condemn Nanny Hawkins’s bric-à-brac when he wanted to curate his own aunts’ *bibelots* in a private museum. Moreover, Heath’s conception of the novel’s theme is problematic: there is nothing “inauthentic” about *art nouveau*; by all accounts the chapel is, as Sebastian proclaims, a “monument” of the style (39). It might be ugly, but authenticity is not an issue. The question with which one is left after reading the criticism of the novel is how can one read the final scene of *Brideshead Revisited* in the proper context of design?

It is curious that no one has pointed out that the scene in the chapel had, in slightly altered form, already been written some seven years before *Brideshead Revisited*. Incongruously enough, the interpretive key to *Brideshead Revisited* may be found in Waugh’s most obscure and, arguably, least admired book, *Robbery Under Law* (1939). This “object-lesson” in post-Revolutionary Mexican politics certainly pales in comparison to Graham Greene’s tour-de-force of Mexican travel writing, *The Lawless Roads*. Unlike

---

Greene, who soldiered his way through remotest Mexican territories, Waugh did not stray far from his luxury hotel while in Mexico. Unlike Greene, who sought a private exploration of the impact of the Mexican Revolution, Waugh’s book was commissioned by a British oil magnate. Needless to say, Robbery Under Law’s status as an apologia for British oil interests in Mexico has coloured the book’s legacy; so too has its unrepentantly conservative point of view. And yet, there are moments of insight and lucidity in Robbery Under Law that deserve a second look, especially as they foreshadow Waugh’s career to come.

Unsurprisingly, one of Waugh’s most trenchant criticisms of the new Mexican state is its treatment of the clergy, who had been marginalized under strict anti-clerical legislation during Calles’ regime. The defence of the priests was not, certainly, a favourite issue amongst Britain’s liberal classes, for the prejudice against corrupt and exploitative priests was strong.\(^{76}\) Still, Waugh was fascinated by the consequences wrought on a devout yet impoverished population bereft of spiritual guidance, and he found their continuation of the faith in the absence of their pastors to be a supreme, if sometimes pathetic, nobility. He recounts a visit to a defunct Mexican chapel in the following passage:

[the parishioners] had got hold of a tin of gold paint and were ‘doing the place over’. It was the nastiest kind of gold paint that dries with a dull, powdery surface and rapidly turns green, but they were all poor men and it must have cost them considerable saving. They were dabbing it about everywhere, even on the bells, and were about to start on a pair of fine estofado figures. All of them lacked the things which we consider necessaries and they had clubbed together to buy imitation gold paint; aesthetically the result was deplorable;

\(^{76}\) Greene’s fictional The Power and the Glory is a complex exploration of the tarnished legacy of Mexico’s clergy.
they had ruined the *patina* and rendered their statues quite unsuitable for the 
drawing-rooms of Cuernavaca. [. . .] To what purpose was this waste? The 
answer, quite simply, was carved on the lintel A.D.M.G., to the greater glory 
of God. The splendid age of trained and directed craftsmanship, of gold leaf, 
ivory and majolica, was over; it was left for the peasants to preserve the 
memory of it. For the impulse to adorn is a part of love, and those who see in 
the glories of Mexican decoration only the self advertisement of a clerical 
caste and the oppression of a people, do not know love. (212-13)

Waugh, in spite of his *snobbisme*, recognizes in this dreary display the true motivation for 
humans’ decorative tendencies. While Waugh’s conception of adornment is strictly 
thetical here—that love expressed in decoration is directed towards God—the basic 
framework of this impulse has grounds in even secular ethics. For instance, Janet McCracken 
 theorizes what she calls the “domestic aesthetic,” the goal of which is to direct the objects of 
domesticity towards the good (52). In this practice, a primary function of which is 
decoration, we attempt to “engage our values with objects in the world” (31). But just as 
Waugh argues that the awfulness of the effect does not matter because the motivation is 
correct, so too McCracken explains that “the standards by which one would judge a 
particular person’s decision with regard to her domestic aesthetic skill are not how good the 
decision is according to one’s own conception of goodness, but how well it achieves the 
particular good at which the person making it aims” (15). Waugh cannot fully enjoy imitation 
gold paint, but he recognizes the purity and efficacy of the intent behind the paint. Thus this 
passage answers, in a way, Bridey’s rhetorical question to Ryder when he asks his guest what 
he thinks of the *art nouveau* chapel; Bridey asks, “is there a difference between liking a
thing and thinking it good?’” (89). Recognition of spiritual or ethical “goodness” need not coincide with aesthetic appreciation.

The Mexican chapel scene anticipates Ryder’s experience in the chapel of Brideshead Castle. But in order to understand the link between these two chapels, we need a historical context for *art nouveau* itself. For even though Waugh uses the same key word to describe the effect of both chapels—“deplorable”—it is understood in the novel that the *art nouveau* chapel is not poorly executed, it is simply in poor taste. *Art nouveau* is one of the most curious cases of modern design. On the one hand, it is firmly entrenched in the history of the modern movement; it was one of the first styles to eschew historical influence—the undulating lines and organic patterns are “without any visible architectural premisses” (Pevsner 99). *Art nouveau* also made use of modern materials; Victor Horta’s use of iron at No. 12 rue de Turin—the premiere *art nouveau* design—was unprecedented. And yet, *art nouveau*’s period of prestige was brief; it was eclipsed rapidly by the less fanciful Arts and Crafts Movement and by functionalism and its concomitant campaign against ornament.

“After 1905,” Pevsner observes, *art nouveau* “was played out” (111). Yet, as Pevsner argues, *art nouveau* “is the ‘Transitional Style’ between ‘Historicism’ and the Modern Movement.[. . .] But Art Nouveau deserves the greatest credit for the revival of handicraft and applied art on the Continent” (114). Despite this legacy, though, *art nouveau* did not merely fall out of fashion, it fell ineffably into active derision. Walter Crane spoke of the “decorative illness known as art nouveau” (qtd. Pevsner 114), and even Waugh spoke of its “chief horrors” (“In Quest of the Pre-War Georgian” 166). The Modern Movement’s disgust with ornament simply did not leave room for the hot-house of *art nouveau* lilies, and the style’s insistence

---

77 As Kara Olsen Theiding details, metaphors of disease and degeneration characterize British criticisms of *art nouveau* at the turn of the century (215-16).
on natural forms seemed anachronistic in the age of the machine. *Art nouveau* is, decoratively speaking, the butterfly to Clive Bell’s cathedral. By 1946, *art nouveau* was a massive joke—a joke often overlooked by Waugh’s critics.

This revulsion against the style is crucial in understanding *Brideshead Revisited*. Waugh needed to recreate the Mexican chapel in England, but he needed to do so in a believable manner. He obviously could not have the Marchmains slathering artificial gold paint on their porcelain, yet he still needed to convey the effect of that hideous paint within an otherwise tasteful, affluent home. *Art nouveau*, with its legacy of aesthetic nausea, fit the bill perfectly; the *art nouveau* chapel is merely the English aristocrat’s version of the poor Mexicans’ gold paint. Waugh could not make the chapel mean in material, so he made it mean in design.

This is why Ryder’s words when he first sees the chapel are so telling; he says to Bridey, “‘it may be *good* now. All I mean is that I don’t happen to like it much’” (89-90). It is only when Ryder returns to the chapel when the baroque glimmer of Brideshead has worn off that he can begin to see that it is good, in the spiritual sense, because he sees in the hideousness of the chapel that underlying motivation for adornment. And the love that went into the decoration of the chapel has preserved it, unlike the rest of the house. What Ryder finally sees, at the end, is the love generated by this improbable family; their one saving grace was that they understood the impulse to adorn. But the baroque of the house proper does not reflect this impulse—it is academic, aesthetic. It is significant that none of the family—save the apostate, Lord Marchmain—actually *likes* the house. Cordelia prefers the

---

78 It is important to note that Waugh has Ryder visit Mexico in an attempt to find inspiration, but he ultimately transposes this inspirational moment from Mexico to the chapel at Brideshead. Ryder tells us, “despite this isolation and this long sojourn in a strange world, I remained unchanged, still a small part of myself pretending to be whole” (218).
chapel and thinks it is “‘beautiful’” (89), Sebastian does not bother showing Ryder most of the house, saying, dismissively, “‘You see, there’s nothing to see.[. . .] But there’s the chapel. You must see that” (39). Sebastian makes a point of bringing Ryder into the house through the side door—through the least representative part of the house—to see his beloved Nanny Hawkins. The nursery that Heath had so dismissed is the favourite part of the house, adorned with objects of love, just as Lady Marchmain’s “feminine,” anti-baroque rooms are full of “small personal treasures” (122). What is truly valued amongst this family is not the extravagant correctness of the baroque, but the quotidian tastelessness of treasures that express love. The Marchmains are like Waugh’s beloved maiden aunts, who “had a way of investing all their possessions with an individual character and importance” even though “there was nothing worth very much” (A Little Learning 48). Ryder realizes in the final scene all that he had missed—that the best-adorned space at Brideshead was also the ugliest.

In this way the novel’s theme is not the operation of grace in spite of ugliness, but rather it is the grace granted by ugliness that is essential. It is only by learning to appreciate what is ugly that one learns the values that lie behind and beyond our human designs.79 It is important to note, however, that the baroque Brideshead is devoid of love only by context, not design. No style is intrinsically good or bad, for it is the intention behind the decoration that one ought to judge. This is why, as DeCoste points out, Waugh’s insistence on style was not contentless, for “style [. . .] pays homage to realities beyond itself” (40). This is how style becomes, in the Augustinian sense, charitable—by expressing that which is beyond mere aesthetic competence. Ryder must learn not to passively experience beauty, as he does for

79 Even Elsie de Wolfe makes a similar claim, saying, “I think it will give you as great a satisfaction to re-arrange your house with what you have as to re-build, re-decorate. The results may not be so charming, but you can learn by them. [. . .] Your sense of the pleasure and meaning of human intercourse will be clear in your disposition of your best things, in your elimination of your worst ones” (15).
most of the novel, but rather to participate in its values—to, as Waugh defines the word in a cranky diary entry, “study [a work of art] in reverence and understanding” (793). To “participate” in the chapel does not mean one has to like beaten copper, but it does mean one must engage in the values that the style seeks to express. This is the charity of style.

Although *Brideshead Revisited* would seem to undo every previous statement of Waugh’s about taste, in effect *Brideshead Revisited* does finally “solve” taste without contradicting Waugh’s previous provisional statements on taste. Each lesson thus far culminates in this novel. This final definition of taste is certainly iconoclastic, but it is a productive, rather than destructive, re-visioning of what constitutes “good taste.” The charitable impulse of taste preserves individuality because, by definition, love is an individual act: it cannot be mass-produced like consensual taste can. Moreover, charitable style allows one to embrace “bad taste” without irony—Waugh’s love of Victorian decorating is directly tied to the ethos that developed it. And this theory also relies upon the act of discernment so crucial for judgements of taste, for if the motivation for decoration is the movement towards the good, then one must make distinctions between good and bad motivations for design, not simply between good and bad designs. And, finally, this act of discernment must be a reflective act—it must be a judgement produced by the reflection of the good in the aesthetic effect of the work.

It is little wonder that Waugh scorned the “good taste” movement, for it denied the very basic impulse behind decoration: love. Correctness, functionality, rationality, and neutrality were the values of “good taste,” but none of these values, Waugh argues, are the values of art. Like Huxley and Betjeman, Waugh felt that “good taste” ought to express something beyond the self and reflect values beyond the merely aesthetic. While it may seem
preposterous that such a misanthrope as Waugh would turn to love as the underpinning of his “third taste,” this charitable dissidence is directly in line with Huxley’s and Betjeman’s theories of taste. *Brideshead Revisited* remains, if nothing else, Waugh’s final aesthetic statement: one cannot be tasteful without also being charitable.
Chapter Three: Locating Taste with John Betjeman

New Houses, new furniture, new streets, new clothes, new sheets
everything new and machine-made sucks life out of us
and makes us cold, makes us lifeless
the more we have.

— D.H. Lawrence, “New Houses, New Clothes”

Betjeman remarks in the 1970 preface to *Ghastly Good Taste* (originally published 1933) that his interest in architecture and design “started in seeking out what was old” (xiv). But after an adolescence of chasing, “uncritically” (xv), remnants of Medieval and Tudor England, Betjeman found himself at Marlborough under the supervision of two art masters, Christopher Hughes, the traditionalist, and the “anti-art master,” Anthony Blunt, who introduced Betjeman and his friends to the French Impressionists and dismissed, almost wholesale, the English art scene (xvii-iii). This juxtaposition of extremes—between pastoral English watercolours and “smart” Continental experiments—would colour Betjeman’s early ideas about taste. But what makes Betjeman an interesting critic of taste is that, contrary to Waugh and Huxley, whose critical interest in the “taste market” was observational at best, Betjeman was raised in a household in which the pressure of changing tastes was ever-present. Betjeman’s father, Ernest Betjemann, ran G. Betjemann & Sons, a decidedly middle-class cabinet-making firm begun in 1820 by Betjeman’s great-grandfather. Ernest had hoped his only son would take over the company, but was sorely disappointed when Betjeman showed little enthusiasm for the family business (Hillier, *Young* 56). Despite their difficult relationship, Ernest and his son shared a keen eye for trends. After the First World War, Ernest was quick to realize that the luxury goods market had changed, and he

---

80 Ernest refused to drop the extra “n” on Betjemann during WWI, despite the protestations of his wife, who feared to be associated with the Germans (Hillier I 3).
began making high-quality Art Deco pieces for his changing clientele. The difference between the men, of course, was that where Ernest saw market potential in “Jazz Modernism,” Betjeman saw vulgarity. In 1933, Betjeman would compare this turn in the 1920s to Art Deco with the “high water mark of good old Victorian commercial vulgarity,” noting it “was not until 1925 that a ‘refained accent,’ no less unpleasant, crept in with the pseudo-Swedhish International-Beaux-Arts-Jazz-Modern with which commercial architects and manufacturers tried to appease the awakening public consciousness” (“There and Back” 4). Betjeman showed little, if any, interest in his family’s business, but it is difficult to believe that his father’s experiments in commercial furniture design were any less influential than his country walks with Christopher Hughes. Much of Betjeman’s early career reflects his struggle against his father’s commercial tastes, but it is telling that by 1950 Betjeman’s dissident taste would come to accept the middle-class vulgarity of the inter-war years.

John Betjeman’s career as first a proponent, then an opponent of “good taste” began at the *Architectural Review*, where he was taken on as an assistant editor in 1930. Over the four years he worked there, Betjeman was actively involved in make-up, writing, and editorial duties. Under the watchful, if reticent, gaze of editor Hubert de Cronin Hastings, Betjeman gained a deep understanding of the importance of striking layout and design in book and magazine production, and he took to heart Hastings’s mantra at the *Architectural Review* that “every page must be a surprise” (Hiscock 200). Betjeman, although degreeless from Oxford and entirely untrained in architecture, was a surprisingly good fit for the magazine. He had an eye for unconventional visual presentation and a whimsically iconoclastic nature that endeared him to Hastings, and his literariness was in step with the *Architectural Review*’s penchant for literariness.

---

81 See Hillier I, 51-57 for a discussion of G. Betjemann & Sons furniture.
The *Architectural Review* was, at heart, ruled by the spirit of modernism, though this forward-thinking attitude was often at odds with the interests of more conservative advertisers. Even more so than any editorial content, the back pages of the *Architectural Review* enact their own taste debates. In the January 1927 issue, for instance, one finds an ad for ‘Country House Lighting and Heating’ next to a modernist-inspired ad for “Delta Metal”—a decidedly Hetton-esque juxtaposition. This sort of polarity, however, reflects Betjeman’s own position at the *Architectural Review*. Although in the 1970 preface to *Ghastly Good Taste* Betjeman claims that “with the natural contrariness of [his] nature,” and in spite of the protestations of his schoolmaster, Christopher Hughes, he “became fascinated by Victorian art and architecture” (xx), it is clear from his early work that this fascination with the previous century was deeply fraught. In the minutes of Betjeman’s college literary society one finds the description of a paper Betjeman read as an undergraduate in which he attempted to demonstrate “‘to what artistic depths the Victorians had debased themselves’” (qtd. Morse 8). It is clear, however, that Betjeman’s early criticisms of the Victorians were not purely aesthetic in nature; for instance, his professed aversion to Arts and Crafts as an undergraduate might, as Bevis Hillier speculates, have had more to do with his class anxiety over his father’s furniture factory (*Young* 155). Even when Betjeman was not trying to distance himself from his own past, however, his tastes were inherently defensive, despite being cloaked in satire; in “Our Lovely Lodging-houses!,” a short story from 1926, Betjeman warns against the persuasive effects of the typical lodging houses, noting, “to an undergraduate who is in the least susceptible to hideousness, this compulsory residence will prove so restless that he cannot work in it, or else it will eat into his very soul, so that an overmantel is a thing to be tolerated—even liked” (9). This fear of being persuaded by the tastes of previous generations was at once parodic in its adoption of the

---

82 As Hillier notes, Betjeman was apt to make fun of his father’s “boast” that “everything was ‘done by hand’ at the
language of the more militant taste reformers of the period, while at the same time it was reflective of a greater hesitation on the part of the adult Betjeman to allow himself to be swayed by the styles of the past that had enchanted him in his youth—an anxiety that will infiltrate his writing for the early part of the next decade.

3.1 An Apprenticeship in ‘Good Taste’

For the most part Betjeman’s early attitude towards taste tended towards the fancifully satirical, a characteristic that helped Betjeman carve a niche for himself at the often irreverent Architectural Review. Indeed, this lighthearted attitude reflects Betjeman’s attitude to his position as a whole; as Hillier remarks, Betjeman was “more interested in contributing history, comedy and poetry to the Review than in trying to affect the course of the Modern Movement” (Young 270). Morse records how Betjeman “and his colleagues at the journal often submitted correspondence purporting to be from angry readers—a device used mainly to send up what was generally regarded as good taste” (19). Despite the staunchly pro-modernist position of the magazine’s editors, the tone of the Architectural Review strayed from the aesthetic evangelism that characterized the writing of the Modern Movement’s supporters, adopting instead a cheekily ironic style. There was, perhaps, no greater “send up” of conventional taste than the publication of Betjeman’s “The Church’s Restoration” in the February 1930 issue. Betjeman’s satiric poem “in honour of that mighty movement” (107)—Victorian church restoration—drew some rather violent protest. Mowbray’s, the ironic “provider” of the “thick red baize” and “th’ encaustic tile” (107), did not take so well to being lampooned and the reference was taken out in later versions of the poem for fear of a legal suit.

Betjemann factory” (1155).
And yet, despite his apparent compatibility with the spirit of the magazine, Betjeman was clearly conflicted. Many of his longer articles for Architectural Review reveal a curious tension between Betjeman’s admiration for modernism and his lingering attachment to the past. Betjeman’s first major piece for the journal—“1830-1930—Still Going Strong” (1930)—is one such example. The article begins, innocently enough, with a history of interior design in Britain, noting the marked contrast between the variety of styles that characterize dining-rooms of 1930 and the “subtle and scholarly” (231) differences one might find amongst dining-rooms of the Regency period. The abandonment of the scholarly in favour of the commercial in decoration is, Betjeman argues, the “ulcer” (231) that will plague English decoration in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Betjeman continues his decorative journey through the nineteenth century, citing both shifting class structures and influential books on design—notably Ruskin’s Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849)—as contributing factors to the development of Victorian design.

So far, so good. Betjeman’s history reads like a typical twentieth-century evaluation of the previous century in design in which the merits of the mid-eighteenth- to early-nineteenth-century Georgian style are extolled, the transgressions of the industrialized and moralistic Victorians are rebuked, and the usual suspects—Gropius, Loos, Corbusier—are hailed as the prophets of modern design. The piece is predictable, except that Betjeman takes a curious detour through Arts and Crafts via William Morris en route to modernism. Few architectural critics would have quibbled with the loose association of Arts and Crafts design with modernism—the simple lines of turn-of-the-century architects C.F.A.Voysey and Sir Edwin Lutyens were at least comprehensible to a modern mind—yet the conscious evocation of “Merrie England,” the often unfortunate attempts at Do-It-Yourself-ism that the movement inspired, and the anti-machine bias of Arts and Crafts were too far removed from the aims of modernism to be considered

83 Later published as “Hymn.”
widely influential. While Betjeman acknowledges the many short-comings of Arts and Crafts, he nonetheless insists that the movement’s precursor—William Morris—is a necessary figure in the history of modern design: “Warp and woof! warp and woof! We have not done with Arts and Crafts yet. We have taken up the thread and will not drop it until we reach the present day, for the movement has always stood aloof from others, cold and refined, and today, perhaps, a little elderly” (233; emphasis mine). Whereas most modern designers would have been quite happy to drop this thread and proclaim the staid lines of Georgian architecture to be modernism’s closest ancestor, Betjeman refuses to discount the turn-of-the-century style. Rather than distancing modernism from Morris’s guild, Betjeman argues that the Arts and Crafts movement had few sympathies with the nineteenth century and was, in fact, proto-modernist: He writes:

The Arts and Crafts movement cleared many chairs of pads and frills, showed up the ridiculousness of overmantels and gazed with pained surprise at red mahogany; it mistrusted Aubrey Beardsley and recoiled from good King Edward’s frolics. The simplicity of an ‘olde-worlde’ cottage in Surrey, earth-closets and whitewash, was of course one result of the teaching, but the movement may give hearing in England to Le Corbusier. William Morris has far more in common with Soane than with Ruskin. He was far too sensible to be taken in by sham Tudor. Through most of his life he was looking to the future and in his textiles and papers and furnishing he was trying to create new forms in the old tradition. (235)

Though seemingly an improbable conclusion for many of Betjeman’s modernist colleagues, William Morris is for Betjeman the missing link between the twilight days of the sensible

---

84 For instance, in his review of F.R. Yerbury’s Georgian Details of a Domestic Architecture (1926), S.C. Ramsey wonders “what there is in the Georgian days that should so particularly attract so advanced a modernist,” and concludes, “in the severity of its outline, and the economy of its detail, [later Georgian work] seems to foreshadow that modernistic art” (166).
Regency period—typified by Soane—and the dawn of modernism—figured, as was so often the case in design histories, as Le Corbusier. The Arts and Crafts movement which Morris inspired had the good sense to reject the sinuous lilies of Art Nouveau while also resisting the decadent charms of Edwardianism. And while for many modernist critics suspicious of his anti-machine stance Morris’s futurism expressed itself in apocalyptic terms, for Betjeman Morris’s futurism expressed itself in terms of that commonplace of modernism, the search for new forms. Yes, Morris’s medievalism was both socially and historically flawed; yes, his style spawned many an “art tea shoppe and a flat home-made cake” (“William Morris” 151), but then again, Betjeman wants to remind us, so too did the modern movement spawn cheap Bakelite clocks and chromium-plated cigarette cases. Whatever the shortcomings of the style itself, Arts and Crafts design took at least the first advances towards cleansing British design of decadent superfluities—a necessary step to prepare the public for modernism. Indeed, Betjeman refuses to submit to convention and proclaim modernism as a radical break; it is, rather, merely the consummation and perfection of the goals of its design predecessors. In a caption of a photograph of one of Le Corbusier’s houses, Betjeman makes the debts of modernism explicit; he proclaims that this “third great figure in modern architectural history ‘rationalizes’ the efforts of Morris and [C.R.] Mackintosh” (239). Le Corbusier, so often regarded as a prophet of design, was for Betjeman not the first, but merely the third great figure in modern architecture.

What Betjeman praises in Morris is his willingness to design new forms within a tradition. It might seem odd to unite Morris and Le Corbusier against the plague of sham revivalism, yet Betjeman’s argument proved influential. As Timothy Mowl points out, it was likely this article that convinced Betjeman’s arch-rival—the German émigré and unflagging supporter of modernism in design, Nikolaus Pevsner—to include Morris in his 1936 study of the origins of modern architecture, *The Pioneers of the Modern Movement*. Many of Betjeman’s
early pieces for the *Architectural Review* make a complex argument for the traditionalism inherent in modernism. For instance, in “The Death of Modernism” (1931), Betjeman tries to make the case that the “battle of the styles” between the modern and the classical is merely a ruse—“there is no battle for the intelligent artist. The older men gradually discard superfluities. The younger men do not ignore the necessary devices of the past. Both sides find their way slowly to the middle of the maze, whose magic centre is tradition” (22). Betjeman here suggests that tradition is not mere reproduction of past styles, and that what ties the classic to the modern is the shared interest in the integrity of construction; basic principles like mass and proportion form part of this “magic centre.” The “death” to which Betjeman alludes in the title is in some way the death of the *idea* of modernism as something entirely separate from tradition. This notion of the “modern,” Betjeman writes, “is becoming old-fashioned. It is used by one writer to describe the latest effort of the oldest old stager, by another, some building of Corbusier” (23). Betjeman’s argument is a clever move for a moderate modernist; he does not ignore the vast possibilities afforded by—and exigencies demanded of—modern building materials and new shapes “never devised before” (23), yet he “magically” unites these new materials and ideas of modernism with the wisdom of tradition.

Yet the name Betjeman gives this idea of tradition as construction is perhaps a little jarring; he borrows from the influential Arts-and-Crafts architect, C.F.A. Voysey, the term “Gothic” to describe “the architecture of necessity” (22). Betjeman’s insistence on the construction elements inherent in tradition is one way for him, following Voysey, to rehabilitate the Gothic by focusing on its structural claims.\(^{85}\) Thus, both traditional and modern architecture can, in this way, be Gothic; not in the stylistic sense, but, as Mowl explains, in the sense that “it

---

\(^{85}\) Of course, the connections between Gothic and modernism could always be found; for instance, Pugin develops an early definition of functionalism in his extended apology for Gothic architecture, *Contrasts* (1836/41): “it will be readily admitted that the great test of Architectural beauty is the fitness of the design to the purpose for which it is
was a system of designing from within outwards, in contrast to the classical, which was designed from without inwards” (40). In other words, classical construction emphasized façade and planned an accommodating interior; Gothic builders planned the interior and developed an appropriate façade. This latter tendency finds echoes in the modernist drive to consider “the plan” as all-important in construction. Though Betjeman was not alone in his admiration for Voysey, his focus on the architect’s Gothic thesis was hardly a conventional way to harmonize modernism and tradition. Still, in associating Gothic architecture with the modern interest in the principles of construction, Betjeman subtly dismisses Geoffrey Scott’s humanistic defence of Baroque architecture, suggesting that “traditional architecture, while conscious of the claims of humanism, draws its vitality from the needs inherent in construction” (23). It was Voysey, then, who provided Betjeman with a method for holding the much maligned, yet fascinating, Gothic in suspension with modernism. Not only were actual Gothic structures at least relatable to modernism, but also the best of Victorian engineering could, in this scheme, be reconciled with the structural aesthetic of modern architecture.

Of course, Betjeman’s argument is theoretically suspect, to say the least. As Mowl notes in his analysis of Betjeman’s Gothic thesis, “he had been trapped in a corollary of Voysey’s definition: that simplicity was akin to goodness in architectural design, and complexity was less moral. That was a conclusion which agreed neither with the real world nor with [Betjeman’s] own instinctive preferences” (41). Betjeman’s relationship with both Gothic and modernism was

---

86 Though known best for his country houses, Voysey also designed textiles, wallpapers, and furniture. Voysey’s interest in industrial design, as well as his penchant for simplicity of line in his architecture, endeared him to modern architects—including Pevsner—and he was even awarded the RIBA Gold Medal in 1940, even though Voysey himself was averse to modernism and resented being yoked into the Modern Movement.

87 For Scott, humanist values inhered in the architecture of the Baroque period, and “to pass from Roman architecture or that of the Renaissance to the fantastic and bewildered energy of Gothic, is to leave humanism for magic” (180). Betjeman was not coy about his lack of sympathy for Scott; in the preface to *Ghastly Good Taste* he writes, “the more serious-minded told me the only important book on architecture was Geoffrey Scott’s *The Architecture of Humanism*. I did not find it easy reading” (xxv).
nearly as fraught as Waugh’s, but whereas Waugh oscillated between iconoclastic campiness and 
thological historicizing in treating the Gothic, Betjeman’s attitude towards the Gothic was 
decidedly didactic, borrowing Voysey’s structural, as well as moral, theories about design. In his 
essay following Voysey’s own 1931 *Architectural Review* essay, “1874 and After,” Betjeman 
praises Voysey’s method: “to him aesthetic and moral values are inseparable, and since he is an 
individualist, he considers the training of character to be of far greater importance than any 
knowledge of styles and books” (“C.F.A. Voysey” 95). Thus, it was not enough for the “magic 
centre of tradition” to revolve around mere construction; implicit in Betjeman’s Voysey-inspired 
thesis is that the moral underpinnings of such construction play as crucial a role in architecture as 
the structural foundation. In some ways, this line of thinking helped Betjeman to redeem 
buildings or architects who might not, at first glance, seem to reflect the “architecture of 
necessity.” But the antiquated emphasis on an architect’s “character” as a component of good 
architecture could not help but embroil Betjeman in a nostalgic debate over the “morality” of 
simplicity in design. 88 Not only had this battle been fought—and, for all intents and purposes, 
lost—in the nineteenth-century, but the intertwining of aesthetic and moral values that Betjeman 
lauds in Voysey tended to fall flat in his attempts at promoting rationalist modern design. 

What held Betjeman back in this regard was his choice of language in developing his 
ideas of design, for though few modernist sympathizers would have admitted it, “the training of 
character” was very much a tenet of the good taste movement. But while they may not have 
interested themselves in conventional morality, for many taste reformers of the 1930s, 
“education” was the modern equivalent to “character.” For instance, after discussing the 

88 Compare, for instance, Geoffrey Scott’s explanation of the “character” of architecture, in which he makes clear 
that the morality of architecture is an effect of space, not content—a distinction Betjeman often struggles to 
articulate: “There is, in fact, a true, not a false, analogy between ethical and aesthetic values: the correspondence 
between them may even amount to an identity. The ‘dignity’ of architecture is the same ‘dignity’ that we recognise 
in character. Thus, when once we have discerned it aesthetically in architecture, there may arise in the mind its
widespread problem of misplaced taste standards in his 1938 book, *Design*, Anthony Bertram concludes, “education, then, and only education, can heal this social crippledom” (17). Reviewing Bertram’s book, John Gloag agrees with the need to institutionalize design education, suggesting Britain can only “escape from the chaos and degradation of contemporary life” when design is “a recognized department of human knowledge [. . .] Let us have Chairs of Design in the universities, design taught in the schools, preached from the pulpits, shouted from the house tops” (97). Moreover, in “Modern English Furnishing” (1930), designer and artist Paul Nash joins the chorus of voices lamenting the state of English design, arguing, “what is wanted in England is greater mental independence, an intelligent, unprejudiced study of modern movements and methods combined with an ideal to form standards for ourselves and to evolve a national style” (45). The improvement in taste first requires, Nash argues, an intellectual improvement—both for designers and, implicitly, for their consumers. In order to encourage this work, however, “some system of centralization is,” Nash suggests, “obviously necessary” (48). Such systems did exist in England, such as the Design Industries Association and British Institute of Industrial Art, though neither made much progress in “forming standards” outside the small circle of artists, designers, and critics who campaigned for taste education, though who did not always agree on what constituted taste. Indeed, Bertram addresses this very problem when, in making the case for public instruction by “a special body of men trained in aesthetics,” he argues, “if we refuse to accept instruction from experts until all experts agree. . . well, we can postpone all education until the building of Utopia” (17). Most assumed the aggregate taste level of these bodies is, after all, likely to be better than that of the man in the street, yet what both Nash and Bertram fail to address is the overwhelming reality that a centralized bureau of taste has little power in a market system. Few consumers cared whether the products they purchased
were officially approved by government bodies. The fact is, as John Gloag makes clear in his 1930 article in the *Architectural Review*, these central bodies need to be—to borrow the parlance of twenty-first-century fashion magazines—a little more “aspirational” in their appeal to the public. It is “painfully clear,” Gloag writes, “that in the absence of an educated, fashion-setting aristocracy, the poor, dear public never knows what it wants in matters touched by art” (215). Taste education is not, for the pragmatic Gloag, a matter of instruction, as it is for Nash and Bertram, but rather of socially driven emulation. The eye is best trained, Gloag would suggest, by what it covets. Yet this aristocracy Gloag describes needs to satisfy several needs at once—it must be at once ahead of its time and of its time, at once avant-garde and commercial. In short, this aristocracy must be able to captivate the general public, not simply the cultured public. After all, he writes, “it is useless to think of the taste that is expressed in the furnishing and interior decoration of the artistic flats and neat little houses of Bloomsbury and Hampstead and Chelsea—that represents the ideas of a handful of educated individualists who have the sense to get what they want when they go shopping. But in thousands of homes in this country there is no will to get anything in particular” (215). In other words, the average Briton is not terribly concerned with aesthetic standards and will not, thus, demand other than what is available in the shops. This is a sentiment frequently expressed by those concerned with the state of British furnishing; even the editor of *Architectural Review* assumes aesthetic passivity amongst the masses: “as every caterer knows, the public is inarticulate, doesn’t demand anything. What the public in fact does, is to make a selection from supply” (“Give the Public What It Wants” 224). The only thing that might cause the average person to seek out what is not widely available is the desire to emulate the fashionable; it is, after all, this social reflex that triggers Rosie Shearwater’s anxiety over her own taste in Huxley’s *Antic Hay*. Thus, Gloag argues, changing standards of

architecture, whose language is Mass, Space, Line and Coherence” (125).
taste will have little effect on the public, but changing notions of fashion might, for it is fashion, not taste, that impacts the commercial sphere.

Negotiating specialist taste in the commercial sphere was the central didactic problem for the good taste movement, yet Betjeman, while still acknowledging the educational aims of the movement, managed to come up with a rather idiosyncratic solution. In “The Graver Side of School Life” (1929), a review of Cyril Norwood’s *English Tradition of Education*, Betjeman makes clear his pedagogical intentions. Of course, it is rather curious that such a book would be reviewed in the *Architectural Review*, especially since, as Betjeman ruefully points out, “throughout all this book ‘aesthetics’ hardly come in for a mention more than three times, and then but vaguely” (297). Certainly this review is simply a vehicle for outlining Betjeman’s observations about “how closely religion and even, at times, Protestantism and the arts are related” (297). For many of his modernist colleagues, such an assertion may not have been quite so obvious, but for Betjeman, it was a direct result of Voysey’s belief in the training of character. He writes, “Dr. Norwood does not point out how closely character and taste are bound. They should be taught together. Indeed, there is some truth in the saying that for every man who commits a breach of good manners some ill-conditioned turret or half-timbered hideosity punctures the English sky” (298). While for other taste reformers breaches in good taste are largely the result of an intellectual defect, for Betjeman they result from a moral one. It follows, then, that the opinion of aesthetic “experts” is less crucial to Betjeman’s system (indeed, it is his suspicion of the “expert” that will ultimately set Betjeman apart from his colleagues). Rather than instructing children in good taste, then, he devises a typically Betjemanian solution. He explains:

> chiefly can taste be taught by an appeal to the sense of the ludicrous which is nearly always highly developed in a boy. A small book consisting of
representations, with little letterpress, of good and bad architecture, a display of pomposity beside dignity, and fussiness beside the straightforward, will be a popular source of amusement to a boy who has been taught the rudiments of taste and good manners in art. (298)

In essence, Betjeman describes a book like Margaret Bulley’s Have You Good Taste?, but he substitutes the ludicrous quality of contrasts for the sober technicality of Bulley’s work. The values “good” and “bad” become, in Betjeman’s scheme, unlaughable and laughable. Implicitly, too, does he suggest an element of embarrassment that aligns itself with Gloag’s suggestion that the only thing that might make public taste less ludicrously laughable is the aspiration to fashionability. Betjeman’s solution is at once instructive, in that it teaches children the difference between good and bad design in their own terms, rather than in specialist’s terms, and it is also commercially viable in that it taps into the belief that being unfashionable is a source of shame.

But how to instill the same set of aesthetic values in a population denied the benefit of such a visual education? How does one control the fashions of the commercial sphere without the guidance of the expert? Betjeman looked to historical precedent to help him shape his rhetorical strategy, for he was not the first to explore the didactic power of visual contrast; the architect and critic A.W.N. Pugin was Betjeman’s model in this regard.  Contrasts, first published in 1836, then issued in second edition in 1841, is a seminal treatise on Gothic architecture, the aim of which, the book’s subtitle announces, is to reveal a “parallel between the architecture of the 15th and 19th centuries.” Pugin uses this formal framework of paralleled contrast to develop an argument for the revival of Christian architecture—an argument that is as much social and religious as it is aesthetic. Pugin attributes the degradation of English

---

89 See pp. 109–10.
90 Specifically, the nine-foot pull-out illustration Betjeman commissioned from Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh—the real point of the book—is, as he freely admits in the 1970 preface, “an old-fashioned thing to do, and the style of architectural caricature was deliberately based on Pugin’s characters in his book Contrasts” (xiii-xiv).
architecture in the last four centuries to the ascendancy of Protestantism, though, in the 1841 edition, he does modify his point to suggest “he was wrong in treating Protestantism as a primary cause,” for “the real origin of both the revived Pagan and Protestant principles is to be traced to the decayed state of faith throughout Europe in the fifteenth century, which led men to dislike, and ultimately forsake, the principles and architecture which originated in the self-denying Catholic principle, and admire and adopt the luxurious styles of ancient Pagans” (Preface iii; Pugin’s emphasis). In both prose and picture, Pugin develops the marked contrasts between the social, religious, and aesthetic ethos of medieval and contemporary society, punctuating such comparisons with an analysis of the historical processes at work in the intervening centuries.

While Pugin’s textual argument may occasionally deal in labored moralizing, his visual argument revels in what Betjeman would call the ludicrous. Take, for instance, the plates in which Pugin contrasts episcopal monuments—hardly a natural source of mirth. The Gothic (and Pugin-approved) monument is a sober, symmetrical and, though florid, well-composed statue. The neo-classical monument to which it is contrasted features a somewhat bloated bust flanked by statues of the churchman’s two wives, all watched over by a rather skeptical cherub. The monument juts out awkwardly from the wall and covers an originally Gothic window that has been partially plastered-over. A sign instructs visitors not to “deface the walls,” yet Pugin flippantly covers the monument and surrounding wall in graffiti. The obviously ludicrous scene makes clear the lesson in contrast; the secularized eighteenth-century memorial cannot compare with the sanctity of Gothic design.

This technique, however, puzzled many critics who questioned the educational value of Pugin’s treatise. As Atterbury and Wainwright point out, however, Pugin’s “aim is to persuade, not to inform; and for this purpose the tactics are aptly chosen. Subjects of equal beauty in each half of a contrasted plate will not make the beholder instantly take sides; splendour juxtaposed
with shoddiness at least may” (106). Betjeman realized the rhetorical power of such a scheme and employed a similar tactic in his answer to *Contrasts, Ghastly Good Taste: Or a Depressing Story of the Rise and Fall of English Architecture* (1933/1970). This book—Betjeman’s first—follows a similar pattern to Pugin’s in tracing the development of contemporary taste back through English history. While Betjeman did not, as Pugin did, provide a set of contrasted etchings, he did commission Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh to design a pull-out illustration entitled “The Street of Taste” that maps out the architectural transformations Betjeman details in the text. Indeed, the slogans and ads that litter the “jazz-modern” block of the Street of Taste would not be out of place had Pugin lived to publish *Contrasts* in 1933. Betjeman writes that *Ghastly Good Taste* was written “primarily to dissuade the average man from the belief that he knows nothing about architecture, and secondly to dissuade the average architect from continuing in his profession” (12). Betjeman’s choice of words makes clear that the book is not, primarily, instructional, but rather rhetorical, for he shares Pugin’s polemical need for persuasion. Of course, Betjeman plays with this model; the first chapter, “An Apostrophe to One of the Landed Gentry,” is a portrait of a country house in 1933, almost entirely bereft of any connections to its social, religious, or aesthetic past. It is a picture of decayed aristocracy that has ceased to be relevant: “the democrats and freethinkers are in. They no longer shout and preach, they are coming up the drive in their motor cars. You are already half a democrat yourself” (10). And yet, Betjeman toys with the convention of polemic; he begins the next chapter by saying that everything that follows is merely a development of this theme—the decline of the landed gentry—so “there is little reason for my continuing the rest of the book beyond pleasing my publisher” (11). Noting that “a page of illustrations of good and bad buildings will do more than a chapter of text,” Betjeman nonetheless admits, “here is another textbook, an opportunity for the thousands of ‘art critics’, of whom I am unwillingly one, to air their pedantry and express their
annoyance, an opportunity for aesthetic snobs to contest yet another theory” (11). Except, of
course, that Ghastly Good Taste is not a textbook—no more so than Pugin’s Contrasts is. It is,
rather, a rhetorical exercise in good taste.

The aim of Betjeman’s polemic is, ostensibly, to persuade the reader that good taste can
only be restored to Britain if the country “will emerge from its present state of intense
individualism and become another Christendom. Not until it is united in belief will its
architecture regain coherence” (20). In this, Betjeman shares Pugin’s desire for unity; as
Atterbury and Wright suggest, Pugin’s “ideal world acknowledges one God, joins in one faith,
builds in one style, and lives at one in society. [. . .] Exploiting the device of contrast again for
this fundamental purpose, Pugin uses this ideal as a criterion by which to identify the failings of
his own time and as a standard to which it can aspire in their redress” (109). Where Pugin and
Betjeman differ is in the formulation of this ideal unity; for Pugin, it is very clearly a return to
Catholic Christendom that will set nineteenth-century tastes right. The plate that concludes
Contrasts sums up this sentiment nicely by depicting the eclectic collection of architecture found
in the nineteenth century weighed in a balance against a medieval cathedral—the motto makes
Pugin’s point clear: “they are weighed in the balance and found wanting” (n.p.) Betjeman,
however, gestures towards Pugin’s desire in his yearning for “another Christendom,” but he
modifies this statement by saying, “whether that Christendom will be a Union of Soviet
Republics, a League of Socialistic Nations or an Ecclesiastical Union, it is not for me to say”
(20). Betjeman’s refusal to name this ideal unity to which he implicitly contrasts the examples of
“ghastly good taste” leads him to an impasse as the terms of his polemic remain confused. He
tries to make the “man in the street” use his eyes instead of relying on the advice of expert
opinion, yet he frames his argument around the decline of aristocratic tradition at the hands of
these “men in the street”; in his unfolding series of contrasts, from medievalism, to Renaissance
and Regency, and, ultimately, Victorian design, he singles out both positive and negative examples of each period—a tendency which dismantles the neat distinctions between an ideal unity and an incoherent modernity. In short, the source of the “ludicrous” and the “dignified” is always changing in this book—it is at once democratic and aristocratic, at once amateurish and studied, at once historicist and modernist. *Ghastly Good Taste* is, ultimately, at odds with itself; even Betjeman seems aware of the fundamental inconsistencies in his book; while he sets out the two “tasks” he wishes to accomplish in the book, he concedes, “but both tasks will have failed, for the work is not a novel which will please the average man, and not enough wrapped up in technical terms for the average architect” (12). Lacking the authority of Pugin’s ideals, Betjeman fails to sustain the rhetorical impact of contrast. He admits as much himself in the preface to the 1970 edition of the book, in which he notes, “it was in this muddled state—wanting to be up to date but really preferring all centuries to my own—that I wrote this book” (xxviii). One cannot make the case for unity if one is internally divided, and *Ghastly Good Taste* is a case study in Betjeman’s aesthetic ambivalence.

In part, the goal of the book did run counter to Betjeman’s nature—contrast has persuasive power only if the writer or artist is convinced of aesthetic absolutes. Not only was Betjeman not yet convinced of his own tastes, he was not convinced of the efficacy of promulgating such tastes with a didactic aim. His comments deriding art critics and experts throughout *Ghastly Good Taste* are a testament to this insecurity. Betjeman was unwilling to place himself in the role of “expert” and offer the public a unified vision of tastefulness. One problem was, as Betjeman admits above, that the genre of architectural treatise is by definition an expert’s game. Failing to either enchant the public or persuade the expert with his prose, Betjeman turns to poetry as a mode of exploring contrast. In his early poetry we can see Betjeman struggling to find a form that will either enable or create his ideal unity; like Huxley in
his *House & Garden* editorials, Betjeman will attempt to produce meaning from the juxtaposition of extreme contrast.

3.2 “Half dead and half alive”: Negotiating Contrasts in *Mount Zion* and *Continual Dew*

Betjeman’s simultaneous yearning for and ambivalence about aesthetic unity is, in many ways, the central problem facing all the figures studied here. On the one hand, Waugh, Betjeman, and Huxley desire a greater uniformity of taste—Waugh promotes the discipline afforded by the Orders, Huxley praises the architectural constancy of Wren, and Betjeman commends the confidence of Regency tastes. On the other hand, each writer laments the increasing regularity and uniformity of modern design and mass production. We must ask, then, what exactly Betjeman is suggesting when he contends that improvements in taste will only occur through unification and uniformity. After all, this was also the prediction of the good taste movement and its desire to standardize the objects of taste in order to improve the overall quality of taste. But whereas the unification longed for by those invested in good taste was a matter of aesthetics, the union Betjeman prescribes is a matter of belief. Instead of uniformity, Betjeman sought unity; instead of singularity, Betjeman privileged architectural sympathy. In other words, improving public taste is not a question of unifying what people like, but rather, it is a question of unifying the values that determine how or why people like what they do. No doubt Betjeman was in agreement with Voysey who, in describing the effects of an eighteenth-century neighbourhood, writes, “all the houses are different, though sympathetically respecting each other, like gentlemen. Now an angry rivalry, or a deadly dull uniformity, is the dominant feature of our street architecture” (92). Individualism in the absence of sympathy leads to architectural
incoherence—it is the assertion of aesthetic personality at the expense of, rather than in support of, other personalities. A “union of belief” in architecture is, for Betjeman, a renewal of the union of aesthetics and ethics that characterized design in the eras before commerce and mass production. With this sympathetic foundation in place, individuality can express itself creatively, rather than destructively. Thus, “unity” and “sympathy” are the tools Betjeman proposes to combat, on the one hand, the uniformity of design espoused by certain design experts, and on the other hand the dissonant individualism that plagued the High Streets of Britain.

This emphasis on “gentlemanliness” in design is here, as it is for Huxley, certainly problematic. While it might be outwardly difficult to discount the value of architectural sympathy, one cannot ignore the fact that the “angry rivalry” of which Voysey speaks is largely a product of democracy. Eighteenth-century houses were gentlemanly because they were built by gentlemen; it is little surprise that the houses they built were ethically and architecturally sympathetic since their builders tended to share the same values as their class and education would dictate. In contrast, individuality is a democratic value, and the outcroppings of wildly incoherent streets—much like those Huxley disparagingly describes in the opening pages of After Many a Summer—are as much testaments to the power of democracy as they are markers of the decline of the aristocracy. Thus one must be careful to disentangle genuine architectural comments of this sort from larger class-based criticisms. In comparison to Waugh and Huxley, however, snobbery does not seem as powerful a motivation for Betjeman. For him, this “union of belief” is as much a matter of native common sense as it is genteel collusion. As much as he may lament the “Egypto-Commercial-Renaissance-cum-Georgian” streetscapes in his “Street of Taste,” a greater consequence of architectural incoherence—and surely a by-product of “good taste” campaigns—is the reluctance of the public to believe in their own powers of discernment. On the one hand commercialism and democracy make available the array of fundamentally
unsympathetic consumer goods and building estates that plague Britain. On the other hand, this incoherence lends greater credence to the opinion of the “expert,” whether in the guise of historian, shopkeeper, or interior decorator. These figures would seem to be the keepers of taste in an otherwise tasteless landscape. But by divesting all aesthetic responsibility to “experts,” Betjeman argues, the public has lost its capacity for common sense. As a result, “deadly dull uniformity” can be as destructive as an “angry rivalry.” In fear of making the “wrong” choice, people defer to a perceived “superior” in questions of aesthetics. Not only does this practice obscure individualism, it leads to skewed notions of what constitutes “acceptable” design—a few designers’ preference for Tudor half-timber translates into an entire swath of Tudorbethan suburban space. The emphasis on academic taste, coupled with the discontinuity of most modern landscapes, renders the instructive power of contrast ineffectual. Either people are so used to contrast that they see nothing laughable in building an art deco movie theatre next to a Georgian firehall, or people are no longer convinced of the “commonness” of their common sense so they are unwilling to criticize for fear of rebuke.

The task that faced Betjeman, reluctant modernist and amateur taste reformer, was to persuade the public of the value of unity in design without calling upon his “expertise” to convince them. *Mount Zion* (1931) and *Continual Dew* (1937) are two of Betjeman’s attempts at unspecialized aesthetic persuasion. Of course, this rhetorical process is complicated by the fact that Betjeman had yet to fully develop his aesthetic allegiances, to say nothing of the fact that his poetic capabilities were still far from prodigious. Rather than solving this problem by choosing sides, Betjeman attempts to harmonize the contrasts that plague taste in his poetry, a move that led to much confusion about his status as a poet. Despite the suspension of contrast that characterizes these two books, Betjeman is nevertheless more successful in employing contrast poetically, mostly because Betjeman sees literature and visual art as natural pairs—a fact he
makes clear in his infamous (unsent) letter to his former tutor and lifelong nemesis, C.S. Lewis:
“I don’t see how anyone with visual sensibility can live in Magdalen and be unmoved by
architecture, if their job is partly that of teaching an appreciation of English Literature. A
mathematician would certainly be moved, how much more someone who reads English poetry?”
(252). If an appreciation of literature and a sensibility for design go hand in hand, then it is only
natural that Bejeman would turn to poetry to construct the unity of aesthetic belief he seeks.

Of course, Mount Zion at first glance seems to be a symptom of rather than a cure for the
incoherent eclecticism of taste. The book itself makes the array of typefaces Bejeman employed
in the cover design of Ghastly Good Taste seem positively staid. But the seeming tastelessness of
the artifact was, in fact, the point. The book was financed by Bejeman’s friend, the poet and
patron of surrealism, Edward James. The two had conceived of the collection of Bejeman’s
poetry to date and spent quite a bit of time attending to the details of its production. A letter
James sent to Bejeman detailing his discussions with the printer, Mr. Lowe of the Westminster
Press, reveals the extent to which the design of Mount Zion was as central to its message as its
content was:

the type most suitable would be a type in awfully bad taste—possibly an abortive
Gothic. But after mature reflection I realized this would only be suitable to about
60 or 70 percent of the poems. The remaining 30% would be altogether wrongly
represented by such a type. For instance, ‘the bluish eyeballs of my love’ would
look far better in a graceful 18th or 17th Century type.

Therefore the conclusion I have come to is that—

---

91 At Oxford, Lewis and Bejeman made no secret of their disdain for one another. After leaving Oxford, Bejeman
needed a testimonial from his tutor in order to apply for teaching positions, though Lewis made clear he found little
to recommend in Bejeman (Hillier I). Bejeman’s writings are littered with scathing references—veiled or
otherwise—to Lewis. In 1939 it seems Bejeman composed an impassioned letter to Lewis outlining the many
injustices he felt his tutor had committed against him, though he never sent the letter (it is held in the Archives at the
University of Victoria).
(1) Either the types must be varied page to page, which would be extremely amusing if successfully carried out, or

(2) One dull, sober, non-committal type would have to be used throughout. (qtd. Peterson 4)

As it happens, Betjeman did choose “one dull, sober” type for the book, though this decision hardly tempered the spirit of the design. The original book featured pink cloth boards, light blue paper (firecracker paper, to be exact) with brown ink for the text and borders, and brown, pink, and blue ink for the illustrations. James adds, “I suggest that the paper be fairly good and the cover nicely executed, so that while the book may present an epitome of everything that is the worst taste in type and decoration, yet there must be an underlying feeling that the whole is well produced. We must not allow the outside world one moment to doubt the deep intensity of our sophistication” (qtd. Peterson 3).

James’s emphasis on both “intentionally bad taste” and genuine sophistication in his vision for Mount Zion suited Betjeman’s formal and thematic schemes. The full title, Mount Zion: or, In Touch with the Infinite, is accompanied by an illustration of a late-Victorian woman speaking into a primitive telephone. The joke would seem to be clear: the purported religiosity of the Victorians—suggested by the consciously Biblical title—is undermined by the image which redefines the sense of being “in touch with the infinite” through the device of the telephone. The contrast between the serious and the ludicrous appears clear but, unlike, say, a Pugin contrast, the source of the ludicrousness is not entirely apparent. The contrast is even more fraught once we consider the wider implications of the frontispiece within the book as a whole. For if, as the juxtaposition of text and image would suggest within the context of modern irony, the Victorians

---

92 In a letter to Lowe James advised “goodish paper to give the book an underlying feeling of being a well produced book, in spite of the rather absurd (and intentionally bad taste) choice of some of the type and decorations” (qtd. Peterson 4; James’s emphasis).
shifted from faith to technology, then such a reading would, rather than create distance between the Victorians and the “hyper-modern” audience of the book, actually draw them closer in their shared sense of “exile” from religion. Mount Zion, with its associations with exile, effectively acts as a conceptual bridge, just as the telephone in the illustration functions as a visual bridge between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The frontispiece, in its suggestion of both compromised faith and scientific development, would seem to prophesy modernity, leaving open the possibility that the satirical target might in fact be the twentieth century, not the nineteenth. And so, while one cannot ignore the obvious joke of the cover, one also cannot afford to ignore the troubling synthesis this juxtaposition attempts, for it is the same kind of synthesis that directs the poetry itself. Though the contrast here seems, initially, as inscrutable as the contrast in Huxley’s editorials, Betjeman proves incapable—or unwilling—to allow such dissonance to resolve itself into meaning.

The first and perhaps best known poem in *Mount Zion,* “Death in Leamington,” demonstrates effectively how Betjeman manipulates the idea of contrast. The poem is, like the other poems in the collection, surrounded by a jaunty, pseudo-modern border. On the facing page one finds a generic line drawing of an elevation of a typical nineteenth-century villa. The drawing seems at first to be purely decorative, until one notices a single, small star situated above the villa. Glancing at the first stanza of the poem, one realizes that the illustration is not, in fact, just any Victorian villa; it is, rather, the villa the poet describes: “She died in the upstairs bedroom / By the light of the ev’ning star / That shone through the plate glass window / From over Leamington Spa” (13). Thus, our approach to the poem follows the same path as our approach to the image; we see the upstairs bedroom, the evening star, and the window from the

---

93 The subtitle refers to the turn-of-the-century devotional book by Ralph Waldo Trine, *In Tune with the Infinite.*
same angle that we read about these features. The poem begins, then, on equal footing with the image.

And yet, the limitations to this shared perspective between text and image present themselves almost immediately. For we cannot “see” into the window the scene the poem describes in stanza two: “Beside her the lonely crochet / Lay patiently and unstirred, / But the fingers that would have work’d it / Were dead as the spoken word” (13). The interiority of stanza two is hidden from view in the poem’s accompanying image, and yet, the poem continues to deal in interior scenes. Betjeman describes the Nurse’s entrance into the bedroom and details the quotidian tasks she performs in the room—“She bolted the big round window, / She lets the blinds unroll” (13)—all the while oblivious to the state of her charge. The intense interiority of the poem begs the question: why focus the reader’s eye so obviously on the exterior of the villa? Why establish a perfect correspondence between text and image in the first stanza only to alienate image and text for the rest of the poem?

The poem takes a turn shortly after the Nurse, in her “tiny voice” (14), announces tea and attempts to wake her patient. Suddenly, the narrator, distant and objective until this point, interjects and cries with seeming exasperation: “Oh! Chintzy, Chintzy cheeriness, / Half dead and half alive!” (14). This outburst does not seem to refer to the old lady who, being fully dead, is neither Chintzy, cheery, nor half alive. Is the outburst directed at the Nurse? Is she the subject of “Chintzy cheeriness”? Is she “half dead and half alive”? We have no time to find out, for the poem immediately transitions into a new voice and a new tense with this interrogatory stanza: “Do you know that the stucco is peeling? / Do you know that the heart will stop? / From those yellow Italianate arches / Do you hear the plaster drop?” (14). The rapid transition to the present tense, coupled with the second-person address, break the calm of the deathbed scene with a frantic complaint. The “you” of the passage—at once directed to Nurse and reader—is
admonished and the house itself, rather than the woman who inhabits it, becomes the centre of the tragedy. The house itself bears the emotional burden of the scene, and the fixation on the exterior signals this architectural life-in-death—the stucco, the Italianate arches—renews the import of the poem’s accompanying illustration; the bedroom scene merely sets the stage for the thematic comparison of two kinds of death. The urgency of the voice indicates that the Nurse’s ignorance of the lady’s death is somehow incomparable to the greater crime of ignoring the slow death of the house itself, hence the visual emphasis on the house as a whole, rather than the bedroom in which the poem takes place. The “Chintzy cheeriness” that is “half dead and half alive” becomes, upon reevaluation, a marker of the house’s state, rather than the Nurse’s.

The contrast between the calm attitude of the Nurse, who “looked at the silent bedstead, / At the gray, decaying face” (14), and the mania of the speaker describing the peeling stucco is certainly ludicrous, but what conceivable “lesson” could this poem offer? To modern eyes trained to dismiss the merits of an outdated Georgian home,94 peeling stucco is hardly cause for such alarm. And yet, the speaker draws attention not to the lady in bed, but to said stucco. “You” may think you “see” this poem, the speaker seems to jeer, but you don’t see its true concern—the death in Leamington is not personal but architectural. For Betjeman, eager to redirect attention to the merits of Georgian design, must have looked upon developers and planners as an army of Nurses, oblivious to the importance of the passing of good nineteenth-century design. These Chintzy houses trapped in an architectural palliative ward were, just like the old woman, dying of indifference. Just as the Nurse’s listless response to her charge’s actual death seems cruel, so too, Betjeman seems to say, does the moderns’ refusal to preserve what might be good in traditional design reek of callous aesthetics.

94 In a broadcast in 1949, Betjeman admitted that when he wrote this poem as an undergraduate, he “had recently got great excitement about stucco houses and slightly overblown Georgian that you get in Leamington” (qtd. Peterson 404).
Betjeman’s “Hymn,” discussed above in its initial publication as “The Church’s Restoration,” gains a new context in Mount Zion. The contrast featured in this poem is largely generic; while the image of a neo-Gothic church interior matches the content of the poem, the militant nineteenth-century hymn form deviates from the material concerns of the poem. The ironic thrust of the piece is that the Victorian trope of God as “planner” becomes desacralized and literalized in the first stanza: “How well the ancient woodwork / Looks round the Rect’ry hall, / Memorial of the good work / Of him who plann’d it all” (17). The “him” is not God but the designer; the “it” is not Creation but merely the restoration of the church. The replacement of the original pews—“sold,” like so many artifacts the Victorians deemed unnecessary, merely “anywhere” (17)—takes on the character of a divine mission: “O worthy persecution / Of dust! O hue divine! / O cheerful substitution, / Thou varnish’d pitch-pine!” (17). The self-satisfied Victorian modernization of these churches which “[leaves] for contemplation / Not what there used to be” (17) entirely negates any spiritual component of restoration; the hygienic and aesthetic cleansing that characterized Victorian church restoration was its own sort of religion. The restoration, rather than the practice of faith such restoration may facilitate, is the true subject for hymn-signing, as the clearly self-referential invocation at the end of the poem makes clear: “Sing on, with hymns uproarious, / Ye humble and aloof, / Look up! And oh how glorious / He has restored the roof!” (18). The hymns “uproarious” become ridiculous when contrasted with their true subject: baize and encaustic tile. The mirth here seems easy: laugh at the Victorians’ pious materialism and their simplistic hymns, laugh at their impoverished adherence to belief. Unlike “Death in Leamington,” which asks readers to mourn the previous century, “Hymn” calls upon us to mock its later pretensions.

And yet, the consciously dated poetic style of the hymn, combined with the irredeemably dated style of Victorian restoration, are intended to suggest another, subtler contrast. The humour
of the poem stems from Betjeman’s perfect mimicry of both nineteenth-century meter and nineteenth-century concerns, and yet, this recreation of Victoriana in the poem is not merely satiric (Betjeman did, after all, genuinely love hymns). The Victorian enthusiasm for hymn-singing and church restoration is, while of doubtful theological value, at least an indication of their continued interest in a community of faith—a feature which, for the devout Betjeman, contrasts sharply with modern indifference to religion. The fervor with which the Victorians attacked their church furnishing could not have existed if they did not think these spaces important. Churches were not, as they were for so many twentieth-century building developers, wastes of space. So while the poem invites laughter at the expense of the Victorians, it also attempts to invite reflection: which is more ludicrous—restoring a church badly, or pulling down a seventeenth-century chapel to make way for a block of flats? For Betjeman, the instructive contrast behind the poem is the contrast of values, between the values of the twilight age of faith and those of the dawning age of secular commerce. Both eras were plagued by materialism—remember Mowbray’s was still around to threaten Betjeman—but the values that guide the application of materialism are not the same. Yet this contrast is so obscure within the poem—and the easy satirical reading so much more accessible to the reader—that it is little wonder the complexity of Betjeman’s relationship with the Victorians was lost on most of his readers.

This tension between mockery and elegy informs many of the poems in Mount Zion that address nineteenth-century issues. “Competition,” a poem in which Betjeman sends up the competitive nature of non-conformist church restoration, continues the farcical theme of “Hymn” in its attention to the frivolities of ecclesiastical aesthetics. The inclusion of a timeline in the margin of the poem helps to establish the distance between the modern audience and the antiquated subject; the last date—1875—refers to the installation of central heating at the church of the Mount Carmel Baptists (Strict). But the lightheartedness of “Competition” is tempered by
a poem like “For Nineteenth-Century Burials,” a sobering elegy for “so many old people” who are carried away by “this cold weather” (29). As much as the poem is a song envisioned as an accompaniment to nineteenth-century burials, it is also an elegy for the nineteenth century itself. Like “Death in Leamington,” it regrets the passing of the last vestiges of a generation; the last few lines, especially, convey a sense of generational passing:

These cold breezes
Carry the bells away on the air,
Stuttering tales of Gothic, and pass,
Catching new grave flowers into their hair,
Beating the chapel and red-coloured glass. (29)

The cold breezes that sweep away the old generation and their “tales of Gothic,” coupled with the sense of isolation and defeat of the remaining artifact of the past—the chapel itself—evoke the wistful longing for an inaccessible past that Betjeman’s more satirical poems attempt to elide. The contrast between elegiac poems like “Death in Leamington” or “For Nineteenth-Century Burials” and “Hymn” or “Competition” is striking on the surface, but they are unified by an enthusiasm for the past—an enthusiasm often overlooked if only considered in light of the “ludicrous” side of the equation. The poems are, however, meant to be taken together; we are not meant to choose one over the other, as in the scheme of aesthetic contrast. What Betjeman provides in Mount Zion is not contrast but a suspension of opposites—he is incapable of effectively synthesizing difference at this point, but in the collage of references that comprise these poems, Betjeman does manage to present for inspection the pieties of the nineteenth century alongside the cynicism of the twentieth.

Another way to consider this suspension is to turn to the poems that deal with modern life, not modern interpretations of the past. The poems which, more than any others, exemplify
the “modern” moment are the four suburban poems in *Mount Zion*: “Camberley,” “The Outer Suburbs,” “Croydon,” and “The Garden City.” These poems, with their accompanying illustrations by H. de Cronin Hastings, stand out starkly from the backward-looking poems that make up the bulk of *Mount Zion*. And, indeed, one ought to be alert to the framing of such poems, for just as one cannot accept the wholesale dismissal of nineteenth-century-inflected “bad taste” in the book’s design, so too can one not take Betjeman’s comment in the preface that Hastings’s illustrations “express the beauty of suburbia far more than the verse” (7) at face value. Take, for instance, “Camberley”; Hastings’s illustration depicts a lush “Tudorbatch” housing development set amongst the Surrey pines. The title suggests a documentary angle, as if the poem intended to describe Camberley as the picture illustrates it, but instead the poem describes not Camberley but the Kittiwake family, who reside there. The speaker asks, “I wonder whether you would make / A friend of Mrs. Kittiwake?” (41). Rather than telling us about Mrs. Kittiwake, however, the speaker goes on to say, “I’ll tell you how to get to know / Their cosy little bungalow” (41). The poem, is, then, an introduction to this suburban bungalow; it provides the means by which one can “get to know” the place by providing directions in verse:

When sunset gilds the Surrey pines

The family usually dines.

So later, in the Surrey dark,

Make for Poonah Punkah Park,

And by the monument to Clive

You’ll come to Enniscorthy Drive,

Coolgreena is the last of all,

And mind the terrier when you call. (41)
This description is at once specific to the world of the poem and a generalized vision of suburbia; there is a deliberate attempt to offer detail without losing the sense of generalization, as in the speaker’s assertion, “The drawing-room is done in pink, / The other rooms are mauve, I think” (41). In a sense, the poem is an invitation to call upon a suburban family, to use one’s own eyes rather than to take the speaker at his word—a common Betjemanian ploy.

Of course, the poem is much more than this, for in introducing readers to the Kittiwakes of Camberley, Betjeman is trying to introduce us to what the Kittiwakes represent. The tendency in the poem, of course, is to laugh at the gentle mockery of suburban pretensions—the very name “Poonah Punkah Park” was a false address Betjeman and his Architectural Review colleagues would use when composing their satirical letters to the editor.95 The complacency and domesticity of the suburban bungalow seems, at first, to support the idea that Betjeman’s comment about Hastings expressing the “beauty” of the suburbs was meant to be taken ironically. To the urban architectural critics, the Surrey suburbs were merely a source of derision.

And yet, this simple reading proves superficial, for it was, in fact, the ultra-modern Hastings who first tried to convince Betjeman of the advantages of suburbia (Mowl 59). The fact is, by 1931, the suburbs were an unavoidable part of the landscape and Betjeman, rather than simply satirizing them, also uses the setting to discuss the social change that this topographical change brought about. Perhaps here Betjeman was swayed by the arguments of another of his colleagues at the Architectural Review, J.M. Richards, who in his unexpected apologia for suburbia noted, “on the one hand, we have the alleged deficiencies of suburban taste; on the other we have the appeal it holds for ninety out of a hundred Englishmen, an appeal which cannot be explained away as some strange instance of mass aberration” (13).

---

95 The colonial tone of such an address need leave no doubt as to the nature of the Colonel’s military career.
This more critical angle comes to light in the last four lines of the poem which offer the reader instructions upon arriving at the Kittiwakes: “Knock gently, don’t disturb the maid, / She’s got to clear, and I’m afraid / That she is less inclined to take / The blame than Mrs. Kittiwake” (42). While outwardly amusing, these last lines impart to the poem a sinister angle that disturbs the sleepy complacency of the suburban setting. Mrs. Kittiwake is not the middle-class doyenne one might suppose; she lives in fear of her own maid lest a visitor’s knock—presumably a rare occurrence—startle her into breaking a dish. The suburbs are the landscape of democracy; their growth was fostered in part by the expansion of the middle-class and the marketing of affordable property ownership to this population. And yet, the same forces that made property-ownership accessible to many also rendered the social aspirations of the middle-classes comically futile, a fact emphasized in the apparent reversal of power between Mrs. Kittiwake and her maid (it is, after all, the maid who is not to be disturbed, not her employer). The end of the poem, then, shifts the focus from gentle mockery of suburban dwelling to commentary on a real social issue, for Mrs Kittiwake is not so much the prototypical suburban housewife as she is the portrait of twentieth-century Pooter—she is affluent enough to afford a maid, yet not powerful enough to keep one. We find Betjeman hinting throughout the poem at the sinister backdrop, as when he admits that “Colonel Kittiwake, it’s true / Is not the sort of man for you,” or when he suggests you “mind the terrier when you call” (41). These seemingly innocuous statements take on a degree of menace in light of Mrs. Kittiwake’s predicament, and the speaker’s desire for the reader to “make a friend of Mrs. Kittiwake” hints at the sense of desperation and loneliness we begin to attribute to the housewife. The poem draws attention to

---

96 Fred Wellings explains: “the 1923 Housing Act […] principally benefitted the speculative housebuilders. The 1923 Act provided cash subsidies to promote the construction of small working-class houses, although the reality was that it subsidised the sale of houses to the middle classes: between 1924 and 1929 some 363,000 private houses were built under the provisions of the Act, but reductions in the subsidies meant that the private output of subsidised housing all but ceased by 1930. In its place came the boom in unsubsidised speculative housing that reached its peak in the mid-1930s when annual private housing completions as high as 250,000 were consistently achieved” (36).
the issues underlying the suburban setting, such as Mrs. Kittiwake’s attempt to keep up appearances in a social structure that is rapidly changing, or Colonel Kittiwake’s colonially-informed authoritarianism. The poem, then, is less interested in making qualitative judgments about suburban tastes than it is invested in mapping the social implications of the growing taste for suburban domesticity.

“The Outer Suburbs” would seem to be a natural contrast for “Camberley.” Unlike the “Poonah Punkah Park” of the latter, the “Oakleigh Park” of the former is not an affluent suburb, and its lower-middle-class gloominess is signaled in Hastings’s illustration which depicts endless rows of identical houses on a black background. Here, the monotony of suburban life is at the forefront of the poem: “In blackened blocks against the view / Stands gabled Rosslyn Avenue, / And bright within each kitchenette / The things for morning tea are set” (44). There are no names in this poem, no single house described; the “wifie” who “knits through hubbie’s gloom / Safe in the Drage-way drawing-room” (44) is at once any and every “wifie” of Oakleigh Park. In “Camberley,” the speaker notes that “when you see electric light / Behind pink curtains it’s all right” (42) to visit, but in “The Outer Suburbs,” “a stained-glass window, red and green, / Shines, hiding what should not be seen” (44). The only thing this suburb shares with Poonah Punkah Park is the “Jacobethan” (44) design of the houses. In contrasting these two poems, one can be led to believe that “Camberley” is the preferred suburban choice—the depressed, downtrodden speculative building estate in “The Outer Suburbs” is merely the “bad taste” version of the former. As a closer reading of “Camberley” makes clear, the upper-middle-class suburb is hardly preferable; the setting may be nicer, there might be enough money for a maid, but Mrs. Kittiwake is just another “wifie” cowed by circumstance. The monotony of the endless rows of “blackened blocks” in “The Outer Suburbs” finds a correspondence in the internalized monotony of Mrs. Kittiwake’s life, in which a mere knock at the door could serve to arouse the household
from routine. In contrasting these poems, one finds that Oakleigh Park and Poonah Punkah Park may have more in common with each other; the similarities, rather than the differences, are the point of both poems in that Betjeman is here concerned with not the fact, but rather the effect, of suburban life in Britain. While ostensibly distinct, Betjeman would suggest, these two “suburbias” operate in similar ways.

Both poems benefit from a further comparison with “The Garden City,” a poem in which Betjeman depicts yet a third type of suburb. In this case, he uses a pseudo-arcane language to describe the Arts-and-Crafts inspired medievalism of an “artistic” garden suburb. The speaker of this poem, an inhabitant of Orchard Way, boasts, “Hand-woven be my wefts, hand-made / My pottery for pottage, / And hoe and mattock, aye, and spade, / Hang up about my cottage” (54). The point, of course, is to send up the pretensions of the affluent yet artistic classes that attempted to recreate a medieval world in the leafy outer reaches of England’s cities. In contrast to the uniformity that marks both the suburbs in “The Outer Suburbs” and “Camberley,” “The Garden City” is distinguished by its idiosyncrasy; the hand-made goods, compared to the mass-market “Drage Way”97 furnishings of “The Outer Suburbs,” and in Hastings’s illustration each home varies significantly, though all boast characteristics of the Lutyens style—sloping roofs, stucco, variegated windows. “The Garden City” would seem to have little to do with the other two suburban poems, except that the individuality which seems to characterize the former is, as Betjeman hints, misleading. In the foreground of the illustration Hastings illustrates the back gardens of the homes that back onto the street, and in each one is a figure, posterior in the air, tending the garden—presumably the “parsley” of the poem. The four figures in identical poses in identical gardens suggest a homogeneity cloaked by purported artistic expression. Indeed, Betjeman suggests as much in the poem, in which the speaker notes, “Belike unlike my hearths
to yours, / Yet seemly if unlike them’” (54). In other words, despite the enthusiasm for one-of-a-kind, Arts and Crafts pieces in such a garden suburb, the overall effect of each house and design is, at heart, monotonous. And so, while “The Garden Suburb” does not share the menacing quality of the first two poems, it complements the others in offering another glimpse of unproductive, suburban homogeneity.

Thus, in three poems Betjeman manages to capture three entirely distinct types of suburb—the middle-class enclave, the working-class building estate, and the artistic colony. Betjeman is precise in his description of each suburb; “Camberley” has its Surrey pines and winding streets, “The Outer Suburbs” its glaring electric light and hire-purchase furniture, and “The Garden City” its bottle glass windows and parsley gardens. And yet, while highlighting the differences between these suburban spaces, Betjeman manages to paint them as similars—all three, in their pseudo-vernacular designs, are homogenous and, ultimately, unfulfilling. And yet, rather than rejecting the suburban landscape wholesale, Betjeman attempts to understand it on its own terms. In other words, he uses contrast to arrive at a comprehensive vision of suburbia; he suspends in an equal balance a variety of “suburbias,” thus avoiding the rigid binary distinctions to which his initial program of contrasts relegated him.

Continual Dew, published in 1937, is in many ways the continuation of Mount Zion, especially since half of the poems in the collection also appeared in the earlier book. Although Betjeman refused the services of Edward James in the publication of this second collection, Continual Dew, published by John Murray, shares the material quirks and surrealist bent of its poetic predecessor. The jacket cover, illustrated by E. McKnight Kauffer, features a human hand emerging downward from a leafy cabbage, surrounded by drops of rain—presumably a play on the “continual dew” of the title. The book cover, by contrast, features the title—another Biblical

97 Drages was a leading mass-market furniture company of the time whose advertisements, featuring “Mr.
reference—in an overworked, “woodsly” type entwined with leaves, complete with faux hinges and lock. Already, the book announces itself as yet another exercise in jarring contrast, between the absurdist jacket and the prayer-book inspired book cover. The frontispiece takes the fun even further with Betjeman’s inclusion of a technical diagram of a dripping tap—a throwback to the titular pun afforded by the telephone featured in his first collection. Furthermore, Betjeman continues the tongue-in-cheek “amusing” character of the book by referring to it not as a “hyper-sophisticated” book, but as, rather, “a little book of bourgeois verse.” Like Mount Zion, Continual Dew is designed as a meeting-ground for surrealism, religion, and, improbably, the conveniences of modern domestic life.

Like “Death in Leamington,” the poem which opens Mount Zion, Continual Dew begins with a poem that makes clear Betjeman’s fascination with transitions. “The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel,” however, is a much more public poem than its Mount Zion counterpart, for here the connection between the victim and his historical significance is writ large. The title of the poem itself emphasizes this concern with transitions, for, as Betjeman remarked in 1961, “Oscar Wilde was arrested at the Cadogan Hotel in Pont Street in London. It always seemed to me a most unlikely place to be arrested” (qtd. Peterson 391). The Cadogan Hotel, newly built in 1887, was, like its Pont Street surroundings, a symbol of the newly fashionable. In the second stanza Betjeman points to this fact in noting “Pont Street / Did tower in her new built red, / As hard as the morning gaslight / That shone on his unmade bed” (1). In 1874, Pont Street, a part of Knightsbridge that was situated on the Cadogan Estate, had begun to be redeveloped in what was referred to as the “Queen Anne” style, characterized by red brick, terra cotta, gables, irregular lines, and bow windows. The style, a consciously historicist interpretation of the style favoured during the reign of Queen Anne, was popularized in England

by Richard Norman Shaw. The fashion for Queen Anne architecture was certainly widespread, though the neighbourhood surrounding the Cadogan Hotel was notorious for its adoption of the style, which led to the (occasionally dismissive) descriptor, “Pont Street Dutch.” As the neighbourhood grew in popularity it attracted major building projects, such as the new Harrod’s store (begun in 1894) and the Cadogan Hotel itself (1887). By the 1880s, Pont Street was the most fashionable and modern neighbourhood in London, catering to a public that had both the means and the desire to cultivate an aesthetic lifestyle.

It is this sense of the Cadogan Hotel as being on the cusp of a new wave of style that makes Wilde’s arrest seem, to Betjeman, so unlikely. Indeed, the poem, with its emphasis on the location of Wilde’s arrest, highlights, in effect, the aesthete’s social redundancy by 1895. Wilde himself had been a champion of the Queen Anne style, inhabiting with his wife a red-brick house in Chelsea from 1894 to 1895 (Gere 98). Wilde had been from the start of his career a “taste-maker,” instrumental in the popularization of Aestheticism in Britain and America. Wilde and his followers had managed to convince many Britons to replace their heavy Victorian mahogany and chintz with Japanese-inspired furniture and delicate Liberty fabrics. With his high-profile career as an authority on style, Wilde had done much to modernize attitudes towards domestic aesthetics, and by the late 1880s, the Victorian home began to exhibit markedly more sophisticated tastes. Indeed, in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (1891), Wilde remarks on the headway made in home in the decades since the Great Exhibition: “now it is almost impossible to enter any modern house without seeing some recognition of good taste, some recognition of the value of lovely surroundings, some sign of appreciation of beauty. In fact, people’s houses are, as a rule, quite charming nowadays. People have to a very large extent been civilized” (261). While Wilde was certainly not the sole, or even primary, cause of this taste reformation, this general improvement in taste had the unintended effect of rendering taste-
makers like Wilde somewhat obsolete. The tastes Wilde espoused were no longer outlandish or at the cutting-edge of fashion; they became, simply, the norm. The British no longer needed a foppish dandy to provoke their interest in stylish living; the accessibility of and market for “aesthetic” goods had already been well established, and Wilde’s provocations were no longer so provocative. The Aesthetic movement had become, ultimately, mainstream—an irony echoed in Betjeman’s (anachronistic) line in the poem, “‘So you’ve brought me the latest Yellow Book: / And Buchan has got in it now: / Approval of what is approved of / Is as false as a well-kept vow’” (1). Betjeman ties the fictional Wilde’s inability to make sense of his own significance in the poem—“‘Is this the end or beginning? / How can I understand?’” (1)—to Wilde’s misreading of his surroundings. In his indignation at the service he receives, Wilde remarks of the staff, “‘They are all little better than cretins, / Though this is the Cadogan Hotel’” (1). Wilde fails to see that he no longer has a place in this environment, though his own campaign for improving taste may have led to its creation—a point made painfully clear in Betjeman’s recycling of Wilde’s own phrase in the speech of the policeman who asks “Mr Woilde” to leave “quioetly,” “for this is the Cadogan Hotel” (2). Once Wildean aesthetics were adopted by the middle-class—the very class against which Aestheticism had initially opposed itself—these aesthetics were made to “play by the rules” of the centre, not the fringe. It is as if the transition between two eras—between Wilde’s florid Victorian roots and the nascent, modern world—unfolds within the poem itself, exchanging not simply tastes, but values too.

A natural, if not entirely obvious, companion for “The Death of Oscar Wilde” is the last poem in Continual Dew, “Daily Express.” This poem on the death of King George V frames its historical and cultural transition in terms of place. George V is, like Wilde in the first poem, the redundant subject; Betjeman describes the scene at Sandringham, the place of the philatelic King’s death: “Spirits of well-shot woodcock, partridge, snipe / Flutter and bear him up the
Norfolk sky: / In that red house in a red mahogany book-case / The stamp collection waits with mounts long dry” (45). The “red brick” of Sandringham directly recalls the “new built red” of Pont Street in the first poem, and with good reason. Both Sandringham House and the architecture of Knightsbridge are of the same origin; the royal house, rebuilt in 1870 in A.J. Humbert’s vaguely Jacobethan style, shares many aesthetic notes with the Pont Street Dutch of Shaw. Although distinct styles, both architectural symbols in their vibrant red brick are linked in the Victorian imagination with historicist novelty. While both styles recall the past, they simultaneously announce their “newness” and modernity. The difference, of course, is that in the first poem the new era ushered in is symbolized by the “new built red,” whereas in “Daily Express” it is the “red house” that is left behind in the past. Sandringham stands in for the last vestiges of the old era which the notoriously old-fashioned George V represents—the very era ushered in in “The Death of Oscar Wilde.” Betjeman makes the historical shift clear:

Old men in country houses hear clocks ticking

Over thick carpets with a deadened force;

Old men who never cheated, never doubted,

Communicated monthly, sit and stare

At a red suburb ruled by Lady Liner

Where a young man lands hatless from the air. (45)

King Edward VIII, the man whom Emerald Cunard deemed “the most modernistic man in England” (Gordon 213), is the prototypical example of the new era; upon the death of his father, he flew from Sandringham to London for his own Accession. The “hatless” modern man arrives, as does the reader, in the modern era, but, crucially, Betjeman carries over the controlling
metaphor of red brick in pointing out the “red suburb” in which he lands.\footnote{98 This continuity is lost in the later version of the poem, retitled “Death of King George V,” when Betjeman} The sense of belatedness shared between the poems, and the repetition of the red brick as a trope for transition, reflects Betjeman’s interest in the circularity of period, noting both the differences between the Victorian and modern periods, as well as the similarities.

Betjeman’s interest in transition is most often descriptive, but in one instance it becomes proscriptive, in the highly unrepresentative, but decidedly infamous, “Slough.” It is in this poem that Betjeman comes closest to articulating a position on not simply modernity, but also the place of taste in modernity. The poem seems initially to break the circularity of Betjeman’s historical logic in seeking a permanent transformation. The poem begins with the startling invocation, “Come, friendly bombs, and fall on Slough! / It isn’t fit for humans now” (4). Already “Slough” and its violent overtones is a departure for Betjeman; indeed, many critics accuse him of being merely cruel in this poem, especially in his treatment of the people of Slough, such as the clerks who “do not know / The birdsong from the radio” (5) or the wives who “frizz out peroxide hair / And dry it in synthetic air” (5). Simon Dentith cites this “bumptiously obnoxious” poem as an instance of Betjeman’s “simple snobbishness” (112). But those who cry foul at Betjeman’s treatment of the Slough people tend to overlook or misinterpret the repeated phrase, “It’s not their fault. . .” What many critics overlook is that the true focus of Betjeman’s rage in the poem is not so much Slough itself, but rather the process by which Slough came to be. The town of the poem is, in essence, the prototypical Modern Town; in 1920, the British government sold the land to a group of investors who created the Slough Trading Co. Ltd. (later Slough Estates). This industrial park was a thriving manufacturing centre, and as the business park grew, so too did the need for additional housing. Thus, vast speculative building estates were put up to accommodate the influx of workers who received, as the poem suggests, “a house for ninety-seven down / And
once a week a half a crown / For twenty years” (4). The “tinned fruit, tinned meat, tinned milk, tinned beans, / Tinned minds, tinned breath” (4) that characterize the place are indicative of Slough’s most recent history and of industrialism’s worst output, for while the Slough Trading Estate may have employed thousands of people during Britain’s worst economic years, the trade-off was, for Betjeman, unbearable. Slough could only be a successful operation if the entire place were, in effect, folded into the industrial system. Houses were built in assembly-line fashion, “labour-saving” devices shilled to keep up consumer demand, and, ultimately, the synthetic was lauded as the endpoint of human perfection; after all, one does not need birdsong when one has the radio. Betjeman’s anger at the Industrialist—“that man with double chin / Who’ll always cheat and always win” (4)—is the controlling feature of the poem, for industry has not simply transformed tastes, but also place; Slough is no longer “fit for humans,” it is fit for machines. In this way, Slough is the logical endpoint of even the highest aspirations of modernity; it is the dark underbelly of standardization and mass-production.99 In a letter explaining the poem, Betjeman notes that he “saw, in the Trading Estate, which was such a sharp contrast with real country, the menace of things to come” (qtd. Peterson 455). The defect of this poem is not so much snobbery as it is the limitation of Betjeman’s imagination—his inability to weigh the advantages of hygiene and housing over the less savoury aspects of industrialization. Though he may express the sentiment poorly, what Betjeman laments in “Slough” is the transformation of the community from a place to, effectively, “no place.”

The transformation for which the poet yearns in “Slough” is a regressive one; Betjeman calls for a return to Slough’s formerly rich agricultural past: “Come, friendly bombs and fall on Slough / To get it ready for the plough. / The cabbages are coming now; / The earth exhales” (5).

---

99 One cannot forget that in Brave New World Huxley placed the “majestic” Crematorium in Slough (66). The industrialization of humans reaches its perfection at the Crematorium, as the phosphorus from the deceased is captured as fertilizer.
This last stanza certainly throws the sense of “continual dew” in relief and clarifies Betjeman’s sense of past and present in “The Death of Oscar Wilde” and “Daily Express.” Finally, Betjeman here tips the scale in favour of the past; no longer is he hedging his bets between the new and the old. Of course, the industrialization of Slough is, in polemical terms, fairly low-hanging fruit. Moreover, it is a singular instance of Betjemanian ire; later in life (1952) he would write to Jock Murray that he hated the poem almost as much as “In Westminster Abbey” (qtd. Peterson 455). The poem was, as Betjeman admits, an early piece written just after he was sent down from Oxford and had taken up schoolmastering in 1928—a move that might set anyone on edge. By 1937, the exploitation of Slough’s agricultural land in the interests of manufacturing was hardly newsworthy. In the context of Continual Dew, however, the poem stands for its decisive railing against modernity, but in its desire to return to an agricultural past, the poem once again embroils Betjeman in a confused oscillation between past and present. After all, cabbages are hardly likely to counter the taste for peroxide or “jazz-modern” furnishings (to say nothing of the fact of they would prove nutritionally unsatisfactory). The apocalyptic tone—a departure for Betjeman—does little to advance Betjeman’s dream of a unified England.

What Betjeman exhibits in these early poems is a glimpse of what will become, according to Schröder, his trademark “fully socialised dialogism” (17). This dialogic tendency operates at once within and across poems in Mount Zion and Continual Dew, as Betjeman seeks to represent his subjects from all angles. Repeated themes (church restoration, suburban dwelling, non-conformist religious sects) and repeated forms (hymns, songs, ballads) help to play up the contrasted facets in the collection. The unusual yoking of ideas, images, and forms in the first two books of poetry is, Dennis Brown notes, typically Betjemanian, in that “prospectively postmodern themes come ‘encas’d’ in traditional forms—especially [. . .] the

---

100 A poem that first appeared in Old Lights for New Chancels, misinterpretations of which drew angry missives
basic quatrain” (3). The clash of formal and thematic extremes in the two collections can be understood as the sophisticated attempt at educating the eye and—in the case of poetry, the ear—through contrast. But of course, according to Betjeman’s own scheme in “The Graver Side of School Life,” his approach in these poems is fundamentally flawed; there is no stable marker of taste in this collection—the “ludicrous” component of any contrast is always shifting in Betjeman’s attempt to capture all sides of the issue. The “hyper-sophistication” of Betjeman’s eclecticism destroys any meaningful interpretation of contrast; instead, the willed dialogism of Betjeman’s yoking of contrasts leads not to meaningful unity but rather to an unmeaning cacophony of opposites. In straining to reconcile modernism with the past in his poetry, Betjeman makes the same mistake as he did in his architectural criticism: he makes unification improbable and incomprehensible while at the same time denying the importance of difference.

This central failure becomes clear in the critical reception of Betjeman’s early poetry. While the reviews of his work (mostly written, as it happens, by friends) were generally favourable, it seems few reviewers—least of all his friends—could take him entirely seriously. Peter Quennell deemed Betjeman “a passionate observer of the second-rate” (802). J.B. Morton, writing in The Listener, thought Betjeman “never serious for long; at least not for long enough to enable the reader to see into his mind” (n.p.). Though he was popular, his audience could only assume that his curious admixture of ironic modernism and nostalgic Victorianism was one vast joke. A major problem for the poet was his association—either perceived or real—with the “Amusing” movement in style. As Christopher Reed explains, this term was used to describe “an aesthetic known in its own era simply as ‘modern,’ but so different from what was later sanctioned as modernism” (Bloomsbury 236). This term had a broad application, but was closely linked to historical eclecticism, the (largely ironic) taste for Victoriana, and, in Reed’s reading, from churchmen.
the post-war designs of Bloomsbury artists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant (237). Although cultivated by decidedly “modern” figures, such as Osbert Sitwell or Harold Acton, the taste for “Amusing” art with its emphasis on irony and eccentricity was clearly counter-cultural to the mainstream of modernist culture.\(^\text{101}\) It was not simply marginal in its relationship to modernism, but marginalized as well; Reed explains that it was “relegated to the feminized margins of modernist practice—to textiles and experiments with color—where it occupied a no man’s land between modern and popular taste, a reminder to more heroically minded modernists of the risks attending deviation from the standards of science and technology” (262-3). Although an important counter to mainstream modernist style, the cult of the “Amusing” proved difficult for those interested in theorizing taste, for the actual value of “Amusing” objects was, as Huxley suggests, misperceived:

The people who collect these objects appear to derive as much satisfaction from them—for a time at any rate—as they would from the most austerely graceful Heppelwhite or the choicest fourteenth-century ivories. And there is no reason, of course, why they should not, provided that they continue to recognize the fact that Heppelwhite is better than Victorian papier-mâché and that medieval ivories are more beautiful than wax flowers. But the trouble is that this recognition is not always so complete or so prompt as it should be. That is the great danger attendant on the cult of the amusing; it makes its votaries forget that there are such things as the beautiful and the sublime. (“The Pierian Spring” 219)\(^\text{102}\)

\(^{101}\) While not of the neo-Victorian breed, Mrs Norman Knight, a decorator in Katherine Mansfield’s “Bliss,” signals her “Amusing” allegiances when, in describing her plans for the Jacob Nathans, she admits she is “so tempted to do a fried-fish scheme, with the backs of the chairs shaped like frying pans and lovely chip potatoes embroidered all over the curtains” (132).

\(^{102}\) Waugh, of course, plays with this notion of value and irony in his treatment of Hetton Abbey in *A Handful of Dust*, in which both Tony the sentimentalist and the “amused” photographer misperceive the significance of the house.
This is the crux of the “Amusing” movement—it was central in dismantling the pieties of both modern and traditional taste, but its substitution of irony for, in Huxley’s terms, beauty was insufficient as a model for taste. This campy attitude adopted by the pioneers of the “Amusing” is culturally significant in the context of aesthetic movements after the Second World War, but it was hardly a viable platform for public taste reform. The design of Mount Zion and Continual Dew, with their Victorian influences and eclectic mixture of typefaces and illustrations, to say nothing of Betjeman’s consciously eccentric adoption of outdated verse forms, was rooted firmly in this “no man’s land” of taste, even if Betjeman himself had more serious messages to convey.

While his poetry may have floundered in formal and historical ambivalence, Betjeman’s playful prose screeds about taste became, over the course of the 1930s, increasingly serious and exasperated in tone. Betjeman’s suspension of aesthetic disbelief could not continue for much longer, and his resignation from The Architectural Review in 1934 signifies a break with his few remaining ties to modernism. Betjeman’s goal of educating public taste by way of Pugin-esque contrast was unsuited to the modern context, since Betjeman’s sense of the ludicrous did not reflect the interests of those who held power over domestic taste, namely, town planning councils, speculative builders, and industrial manufacturers. Betjeman became increasingly aware that “taste” was too often sacrificed for capital in the transformation of England’s built environment; he writes, “the twentieth century, for which the local council stands, sees England not as landscape, but as material for drainage schemes, slum clearance, rating, road improvements, and site valuations: the eighteenth century […] sees England in terms of parks, landscape, trees, prospects, and noble building. It is the difference between a sense of money and a sense of spaciousness” (“Gentlemen’s Follies” 82). Betjeman clearly links a sense of taste with a sense of place, and nowhere is his critique of the unthinking, materialist approach to planning the built environment as scathing as in his Oxford University Chest (1938). In this volume,
Betjeman foregoes his usual affable satire and indicts the university’s role in allowing the degeneration of “the muddled pretentiousness which passes to-day for a town” (10). He writes, “you would suppose that Oxford University, the home of culture, the cluster of towers and spires whose fame has spread over five continents, whose portals are entered by reverent students from the older civilizations of the East—you would suppose this little Athens of European civilization, this cradle of toleration and enlightenment, would know something of the principles upon which a town is built” (11). In particular, Betjeman criticizes the central town’s handling of Morris Motor Works in Cowley. He explains,

they could have planned an industrial town, with all their learning, which would have been worthy of the University City beside it. The factories could have been planned away from the dwellings, the dwellings could have been set in green spaces and could have been handsome to look at. Morris Cowley could have been a model for the rest of England, so that visitors to the University, instead of trying to pretend no industrialism was near and bathing themselves in a false twilight of grey Gothic things, would have naturally hurried to see the living beauty of industrial Oxford after the dead glory of University architecture. (11-12)

What Betjeman identifies here and in other writings is the singular lack of vision that characterizes the “sense of money” underlying town planning. In Oxford’s case, this inability to conceive of an industrial town as anything other than a factory immediately surrounded by tract-housing leads, Betjeman argues, to a “more sinister community” (7). What distinguishes Betjeman from other preservationists is that, unlike his persona in “Slough,” he is no longer blind to the inevitabilities of an industrialized future. As he writes in an article from 1932, “it is useless to deplore this change. As useless as it is to deplore unalterable economic facts. [. . .] Only an escapist who has not the courage to face the creations of the machine age in which he
lives will fly to the country to find rural peace” (“The Passing of the Village” 92). He is not angry that Morris Cowley is an industrial town, but that it is a badly conceived industrial town. Moreover, there was, in Betjeman’s eyes, no need for the place to be so depressed; the “centre of culture”—the central town of Oxford—bears a greater burden, for more than any place, Betjeman argues, Oxford should understand the value of spatial beauty, but instead they turned a blind eye, preferring to ignore the inevitability of industrialism. The experts in Gothic failed to apply its principles to modernity.

This diatribe at the beginning of Oxford University Chest serves to highlight Betjeman’s greatest bugbear, the “antiquarian prejudice.” Betjeman had dealt comically with this tendency in Ghastly Good Taste, but by the late 1930s the consequences of valuing purely historical tastes for their own sake were more pronounced. In “Antiquarian Prejudice” (1937) Betjeman makes a more mature statement of his case against the expert—not the aesthetic expert, whom he criticized early in his career, but the historical expert, who is not only blind to the present circumstances to which ancient styles are unsuitable, but also blind to the aesthetic defects of such traditional styles. He writes, “the love of the ancient has bitten into most of us. I suppose everyone who feels afraid, and most of us do, of the delightful benefits which science has bestowed on us, and everyone who feels a certain disgust, as most of us do, at the financial machinations of people behind building trade, prefers looking back to looking at the present” (49). The preference for “Tudorbethan” architecture, for instance, is not merely aesthetic escapism, but social, political, and economic as well. Betjeman distinguishes this antiquarianism, which values historical remoteness above all other considerations, from previous experiments in building in period styles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, arguing that “the Gothic, Norman or Greek revivals of those days were not dead reproduction. They were a harmless veneer, covering interiors adapted to contemporary life” (50). In other words, the designers of
these earlier reproduction styles were inspired by the past yet geared towards the present. Conversely, the “sham” styles of twentieth-century reproductions are trying to adapt contemporary life to a false, romantic vision of the past under the assumption that the past was a better place.

Attendant to this model of taste which values the recreation of the past in the present is the reverence for the “expert” who is capable of providing the historical context for the antiquarian prejudice. But Betjeman views this valorization of the expert as fundamentally corrupt, for mere antiquarianism denies the reality of living communities, since it “is not interested in people” (56); instead, it is interested in a picture of history. After all, the expert’s “word for ‘beautiful’ has become ‘important’” (62) but, Betjeman cautions, this “importance” does not take into account social relevance. Antiquarianism is aesthetically and socially bankrupt, for, as Betjeman argues, past styles can only have value if they are integrated into the present so that they can become living styles which harmonize tradition and innovation—dead traditions can only produce dead environments.

Yet the ultra-modern answer to antiquarianism is, for Betjeman, equally unviable; the outright denial of tradition does as much damage to taste as the wholesale and unthinking prejudice for tradition. “Jazz-modern,” Betjeman writes, “is the product of insensitive minds. It is the decoration of art-school students” (60). Both antiquarian and contemporary taste values disregard the living values of the present in Betjeman’s view; one reaches to a dead past, the other to an unforeseen future. During the 1930s, much was made of the “battle” between these two styles; Betjeman notes “a man must be a great man, or a movement must be a disinterested one, to be able to ignore the noise of antiquarian prejudice shouting at its bastard, jazz-modernism” (65). But even the distinction between these two design tendencies is, for Betjeman, false, for the real fault-line in his view of modern taste is not between past and future, but
between, quite simply, good design and poor design. Yet, between the sentimentalism of antiquarianism and the insensitivity of ultra-modernism, there seems little room for the amelioration of British taste values in a climate of building. Betjeman suggests at the close of the essay that the answer to the problem of taste lies not so much in design discourse, but rather in a social shift; he asks, “what will give us time to think? What will give us an opportunity to act? A Ministry of Fine Arts? a change of government? or a change of heart?” (65). The essay suggests a turning point in Betjeman’s vocation: no longer is instructing the public eye sufficient for his taste reforms: he will now assign himself the task of changing hearts.

It was clear to Betjeman that the bearers of culture were no longer able to educate the public eye and preserve England’s spaces. Museums were especially incapable of changing hearts in matters of taste, and in “Museums Should Be More Attractive” (1934) Betjeman speculates as to why: they are cold, academic spaces whose exhibits are unrelated to the living community. In contrast, Betjeman writes, “day after day we learn of beautiful old London houses that are being destroyed. They would, most of them, make excellent museums just as they are and with the addition of appropriate furniture” (29). In other words, an exhibit of Regency work devoid of context in a museum is significantly less interesting than experiencing Regency styles living side-by-side with contemporary life. If, as so many writers and designers claimed, it was domestic taste that needed “fixing” in Britain, then it seems to Betjeman natural that a proper, domestic context is essential for illustrating good design principles. This is, of course, an even greater departure from the method Betjeman sets out in “The Graver Side of School Life,” and it indicates that just as he exhorts designers and critics to consider the living environment for design, he also recognizes the need to build a living context into instruction. Placing a picture of a Regency chair next to one of an abortive art nouveau piece in a textbook might educate the public in a sense of taste, but giving them a view of how the superior piece can be incorporated
into contemporary life is a much more valuable lesson. Betjeman thinks the Soane museum, housed in the Georgian architect Sir John Soane’s former home, is exemplar in this regard, for “it is a personal collection. You feel you are calling on someone who will be down directly” (29). In this case, the lesson is built on harmony rather than contrast—it is the collection in tune with the domestic environment that compels the visitor, rather than the jarring clang of ambition and deflation. And yet, museums such as the Soane are only too rare; he writes, “I am sure of this—until museums become more like private houses people will remain at home. They will continue to base their standard of value on what have been England’s museums for the last hundred years—the shops” (29). Essentially, Betjeman revises Gloag’s idea of “aspirational” taste education; rather than a mobile, aristocratic aesthetic elite, Betjeman wants domestic museums for taste clearly rooted in place. He wants to provide a non-commercial context that will instruct people in a system of taste value rooted firmly in the living environment.

Of course, Betjeman himself was not about to turn curator in his quest to access the heart of England through its eyes. There was another kind of “culture bearer” which he could directly influence: the guide book. Even as early as 1928 Betjeman was thinking through his redevelopment of the genre, writing to Ward Lock & Co. to offer his services, “I think it would be a good idea if guide-books, instead of following the public taste, should lead it” (39). Rather than giving the public the view of England’s past it has come to expect—dry and antiquarian—Betjeman suggested instead to reawaken the eye and use the guidebook as a tool for aesthetic instruction, rather than simply a record of the tastes of the past. Betjeman, wise to the power—as well as the danger—of modernity, notes in his letter, “there was never such a chance of educating taste by means of the guide-book as in this day of motors and a reawakened interest in surroundings” (40). This interest was not simply an aesthetic interest, but a nationalistic one as well. Seeking to capitalize on Britain’s turn inward, Betjeman writes in 1932 to his friend,
Lionel Perry, “there are at present no adequate guide-books to any part of England. They either give wide-angle views of Public Libraries and Infirmaries or else they mention in detail what rent the land paid to Hubert de Burg in 1286 and who the glebe passed to after the Reformation” (102). Betjeman viewed the current style of guidebook writing as the textual equivalent of traditional museums, which offer facts displaced from living, human context.

It was not until 1933 that Betjeman would be given the opportunity to shape public taste through the guidebook medium. He had managed to convince Jack Beddington, publicity manager for Shell, to produce a series of county guides to England. The arrangement proved beneficial to all parties: it provided Betjeman with a platform (and augmented his income) and it encouraged the public to take motor-trips—a clear boon for Shell. As was the case for all his 1930s publications, Betjeman insisted that the Shell Guides had to be carefully planned inside and out (Mowl 56). The prototype, Cornwall Illustrated, was published in 1933/4. This was soon followed by more edited by friends and colleagues of Betjeman’s, such as Robert Byron, who compiled Wiltshire (1935), Paul Nash, who edited Dorset (1936), and Christopher Hobhouse, who assembled Derbyshire (1935). By 1939, thirteen Shell guides had been published, but production was stopped during the war and only resumed in the 1950s.

As was the case for Betjeman’s other attempts at educating taste through, firstly, architectural criticism, then poetry, Betjeman’s Cornwall Illustrated proved methodologically unsound. This continual problem might be due, in part, to the fact that, as Mowl suggests, “at this stage in [Betjeman’s] career his skills were technical and artistic rather than literary” (56). Certainly, the guides were effusive in their visual presentation, with their unusual spiral binding,

---

103 In fact, Betjeman’s first television appearance was his program entitled “How to Make a Guidebook,” which aired on the BBC on September 21, 1937.
104 In 1964 Betjeman rewrote the Cornwall guide, noting in the introduction, “Cornwall has changed so much in appearance since the first edition of this guide was published in 1933 that now, thirty years later, the text has had entirely to be rewritten. Three chief causes of the change are: the motor-car, electric light and power and the
idiosyncratic layout, and variety of typefaces. Part of the problem, perhaps, with *Cornwall* is its clearly polemical tone; he writes in the Preface, “there are two kinds of guide books, the antiquarian and the popular” (n.p.). The former, he argues “gives a full account of the history of the county, long extracts from Domesday Book and Leland, coupled with rhapsodical paragraphs on some thirteenth-century font. It has, however, rarely any remark to make on a building later than the reign of Charles I” (n.p.). The latter, on the other hand, “has little concern with antiquarianism. It gives a full account of accommodation, bathing facilities, rambles and hotels, a view or two of a public library and sunset over the sea, and it must, perforce, confine itself rather to a single district than to the county entire” (n.p.). In other words, Betjeman sets up the current crop of guide books along the same terms as he categorizes styles in “Antiquarian Prejudice”; the first guidebook is the “Tudorbethan” to the popular guidebook’s “jazz-modern.” Of course, Betjeman posits his guide as the middle ground, or, to borrow the phrase from his earlier essay, the “magic centre” of tradition: “the pioneer service [*Cornwall*] performs is that it draws attention within its confined limits to the many buildings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that have architectural merit” (n.p.).

For all of his railing against the “antiquarian prejudice,” Betjeman fails here to see the irony of his own polemic, since the inclusion of meritorious eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings in his guide book seems to be an extension, rather than a critique of, the “antiquarian” guide books he discounts. Aside from referring to the book as an “anthology,” Betjeman here leaves little indication that *Cornwall* will be a departure in form from the standard guidebooks. While the book is visually innovative, its organizational principles are obscure—notable churches are separated from the gazetteer, for instance—and as a whole *Cornwall* reads confusedly. Indeed, as many have noted, the original *Cornwall* guide was stuffy and pretentious;
Betjeman’s tone was, as Mowl puts it, that of “the prep-school master telling a readership of semi-ignorant small boys what to think, even though, at that moment, he was far from sure what to think himself” (60). The inclusion of a glossary of architectural terms does little to dispel Betjeman’s didacticism, and his dismissive attitude towards anything he dislikes—mostly everything not built in the late-eighteenth- or early-nineteenth-centuries—hardly encourages readers to share in his tastes. Indeed, the best parts of Cornwall are those written by others, such as the guide to fishing, written by Betjeman’s own father. In fact, the greatest disappointment is that, having spent his holidays at the family home in Cornwall all his life, Betjeman conveys little of his love for Cornwall; there is, simply, no heart in the book. As was the case for his books of poetry, his theoretical indecisiveness, his waffling between two extreme poles—in this case between polemic and pretentiousness—gets in the way of his desire to change tastes. Having tried his hand now at three media—criticism, poetry, and guide-writing—Betjeman still had not found a way to convey his ideas about the nature and importance of architecture and landscape. The problem, as it turns out, was not a formal one; it was intellectual. Until he could make up his mind about taste, he would be forever an “Amusing” dilettante.

3.3 “Beauty is a historical document”: Betjeman’s Search for Community

It is not until 1937 that the thirty-year-old Betjeman’s work shows signs of maturity. It is Betjeman’s next guidebook, Devon, that exhibits a softening of Betjeman’s attitude towards taste. Visually, this guide resembles its predecessor in its employment of classic Betjemanian notes: expressive, nineteenth-century typefaces mixed with modern ones, eighteenth-century engravings interspersed amongst modern photographs, and whimsical visual detail. The tone,
however, is markedly different; it is lighter and more enthusiastic, and Betjeman uses Devon’s folkloric past to inspire his presentation, including witches’ spells, superstitions, recipes, and more. It is, in Mowl’s words, “positively elfish” (64). Even his attitude towards guidebooks is softened in this edition; in the preface to the gazetteer he writes, “I used as guide books to my journeys Kelly’s Directory, which tells you almost everything you want to know, and Methuen’s ‘Little Guide,’ which is invaluable, though it has a strong antiquarian bias” (16). Gone is the polemical angle, as Betjeman shows his debt to the traditional guides, and, instead of distancing himself from them, acknowledges that, as was the case for Cornwall, his attempt at capturing the county is complementary, not contrary, to his predecessors’ work: “my gazetteer has noticed, by way of corollary to these guides, buildings of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries which abound in Devon and which improve the landscape” (16).

Betjeman begins Devon with curious advice: “if you want to know about a county, before you read its history, before you rush off to sentimentalise over its old abbeys and churches, even before you go to the county at all, first consult a geological map” (7). Betjeman admits “this may seem very dull advice” (7), but it does point to one of the tenets of his guidebook revolution—facts about churches and title-deeds tell you specific things about a county, but they don’t tell you what is specific about a place. In Devon it is clear Betjeman wants to strip back understanding to the most basic topographical layer: what makes a place unique? On what is it built? What resources does it offer? For it is these facts that shape how churches and title-deeds come to be, and as such, they are the starting point to understanding a place. Here again Betjeman reveals his penchant for that eighteenth-century sense of spaciousness and landscape as the foundation of taste. It is geography rather than culture that ultimately informs Betjeman’s

---

105 Although this is the year in which Continual Dew was published, most of those poems had been written earlier.
106 In this, Betjeman was inspired by the Wiltshire guide. Though Robert Byron was the general editor, it was Edith Olivier, Mowl notes, who contributed the most influential material to Wiltshire (72).
didactic angle in *Devon*; he notes in the gazetteer: “anyone with commonsense and curiosity and intelligence can use the one-inch ordnance survey and find hidden farms, deep lanes, wooded combes and moorland paths, which are generally far more beautiful than the recognised beauty spots. If this gazetteer induces you to use the one-inch ordnance survey map, it will show you Devon outside the guide books” (16). In spite of the militant tone of *Cornwall*, it is Betjeman’s more mild-mannered *Devon* that truly subverts the genre. For, although *Devon* includes notably iconoclastic pronouncements, such as Betjeman’s notorious dismissal of Exeter cathedral as “the most disappointing thing about Exeter” (24), what distinguishes *Devon* as a “taste-making” guide is not the pronouncements Betjeman makes, but the manner in which he frames these pronouncements. Rather than simply assessing architectural elements as mere buildings, he situates the buildings within space and provides the context for best appreciating them. Betjeman does not merely praise the Georgian houses of Exeter, he writes that he knows “of no lovelier sight in Devon than those ilex trees in the Southernhaye, Exeter, contrasting with the red Georgian terraces” (9). It is the fine Georgian building in harmony with the natural environment that renders the scene tasteful, just as it is the discordant proximity of “the really vile” St. Mary Major, a Victorian-era church, to Exeter cathedral that brings out its “singularly ill-proportioned” west front (24).

Tastefulness is not, for Betjeman, meaningful unless tied to specific communities; for instance, in describing the geology of Devon, Betjeman turns his attention to Dartmoor, which is unusual in its near treelessness. He writes,

it is called a forest, but there are hardly any trees, nor ever were. Not even Douglas firs, those hideous conifers with which the Government and race-horse trainers like to ruin the landscape of England because the trees are quick growing, often grow there. And this we must be thankful for. Dartmoor is all granite. It
crops up out of the earth all over the moor. [. . .] Those surface granite boulders are harder to work than any other stone because the rains have washed them to the core for thousands of years and there is no yielding in them. I think that is why I find the granite churches of the Dartmoor district as impressive, rude and small as they are, as some graceful lace-like cathedral made of softer stone. (9)

What Betjeman prizes in Dartmoor is its singularity—a singularity dictated by both geology and human history. The medieval cathedrals may be “rude and small,” but they could only have developed out of the particular geographic context that Dartmoor provides, unlike the Douglas firs which can grow in seemingly any environment. Betjeman offers readers a rationale beyond mere aesthetics for developing a taste for such architecture, teaching them to value building that is, above all else, directly representative of place, rather than representative of an idea.107

Although Betjeman is keen to tune his architectural criticism to the exigencies of local circumstance, there are several common threads which inform his reading of Devon. He is quick to denounce the vagaries of Victorian “restoration,” even if he might admit, occasionally, that a town might be “Victorianised but still interesting” (16), or, as in his description of Werrington, that while the church’s interior “was rendered hideous in 1891,” it is, “all the same[. . .] well worth going out of your way to see this odd 18th-century eye-catcher” (45).108 Betjeman is even less forgiving of what he refers to as the “bungalow manner” (17) infecting the English counties, though he singles out the rare case of the builders of the Dartington Estates—a recent

107 J.B. Priestley makes a similar point in English Journey—another mold-breaking guide-book. He writes, “I believe most of my pleasure in looking at a countryside comes from its more vague associations. Clamping the past on to the present, turning history and art into exact topography, makes no appeal to me; I do not care where the battle was fought or the queen slept, nor out of what window the poet looked; but a landscape rich in these vague associations—some of them without a name—gives me a deep pleasure, and I could cry out at the lovely thickness of life, as different now from ordinary existence as plum pudding is from porridge (61).

108 He also notes that Gilbert Scott’s restoration of Exeter cathedral was executed “with considerable sensibility for a Victorian” (24).
development intended to combine rural and industrial life—for “actually improv[ing] the landscape with their houses” (22).

Whereas his earlier attempts at taste education failed in their critical indecisiveness, *Devon* succeeds because, even though his architectural pronouncements are always subject to specific context, Betjeman had found a consistent rationale for taste. No longer is architecture subject to merely academic analysis; in *Devon* he demonstrates how place, history, and community converge to create tasteful spaces, while at the same time guarding against the loss of this sense of taste in the face of a “bungalow” infection. *Devon* represents not so much a departure for Betjeman, but rather a crystallization of his technique of taste reformation. In the place of his Pugin-esque contrast, Betjeman uses context to develop the sense of taste through the celebration of place in geographic, social, and historical terms.

This contextual tastefulness hinges on the development of pride in both the built and natural landscapes, and surely the guide-book is a convenient medium through which Betjeman can access the heart. But Betjeman had not yet given up poetry as an effective complement to his guide-book writing. In 1940 Betjeman published a collection of new poetry, *Old Lights for New Chancels*. This book announces itself as a departure from Betjeman’s earlier verse collections. Gone are the eclectic typefaces and papers, and in their place are a sedate frontispiece, a modern, serif type, and regularized composition. In part this aesthetic change was motivated by external factors, in that wartime rationing made the decadent production in which Betjeman had reveled unfeasible, but in his assertion that “a cheap, unillustrated edition like a Victorian hymn book would be nice’ (qtd. Peterson 36), Betjeman reveals another motivation. As Peterson points out, Betjeman modeled the design of *Old Lights* on the work of nineteenth-century publisher, William Pickering, and even borrowed two of the publisher’s ornaments (36). While wartime shortages may have made this aesthetic shift necessary, the design of *Old Lights*—largely done
in collaboration between Betjeman and Murray—remained the standard for Betjeman’s poetic collections even after the war (Peterson 36).  

Book design was not the only indication that *Old Lights* was a new beginning for Betjeman’s tastes. In Betjeman’s preface—its a new feature for his poetry collections—he makes clear that, like the sober design of the book, he wants to be taken seriously as a poet. He writes, “an English master writing on my last volume of verses in the magazine of my preparatory school accused me of preciosity, unkindness, snobbishness, and affectation, and advised me to confine my humorous writing to subjects that are in better taste” (xi). Betjeman goes out of his way to disprove this claim by situating himself within poetic tradition, arguing his particular brand of poetry, which deals in, among other things, middle-class villadom and nonconformist ecclesiastical building, is not, in fact, a departure from the English tradition of visual poetry, but rather a continuation of it. He notes, “until the middle of the nineteenth century poets who wrote in the visual manner confined themselves for the most part to descriptions of nature. This was because natural scenery was more in evidence than it is now. The tradition has died hard and it is still thought by some people that all visual poetry should mention stooks and wains and elderberry bushes” (xi). Betjeman’s point is that his poems are no less landscape poems or, as he puts it, topographical poems, simply because they describe a landscape that is no longer entirely natural. Betjeman’s topographical mode is, quite simply, descriptive rather than proscriptive—it is an attempt “to catch the atmosphere of places and times in different parts of England and Eire” (xvi-ii). Moreover, he claims, the absence of rook and wain in his landscape poetry does not a novelty poet make:

---

109 When it came time to publish the next collection, *New Bats in Old Belfries*, Jock Murray wrote to Betjeman and suggested “the same format I think as the last which is elegant, period & not facetious. Your work has reached a stage when eccentric instincts in production should be restrained” (qtd. Peterson 48).

110 To underscore his commitment to the visual manner—and to poetic convention—Betjeman subtitles the collection, *Verses Topographical and Amatory.*
I see no harm in trying to describe overbuilt Surrey in verse. But when I do so I am not being satirical but topographical. […] The suburbs, thanks to *Punch* which caters for them, are now considered ‘funny.’ Some people still think Victorian industrial scenery is only fit for invective. Churches are always ‘funny’ unless they are written about by a devotional writer. Gaslight is funny. Pont Street is funny, all sorts of places and things are funny if only the funny writers are funny about them. I love suburbs and gaslights and Pont Street and Gothic Revival churches and mineral railways, provincial towns and Garden cities. They are, many of them, part of my background. From them I try to create an atmosphere which will be remembered by those who have had a similar background, when England is all council houses and trunk roads and steel and glass factory blocks in the New Europe of after the War. (xvii)

Indeed, there are, Betjeman claims, only two poems which might be considered satiric, “In Westminster Abbey” and “Bristol and Clifton,” though, he notes, “the second is only slightly so, for it was my chief intention to mirror a back solitude of Clifton” (xvii).¹¹¹ For many of Betjeman’s readers—and indeed many of his friends—such a bold statement might have seemed surprising. And, no doubt, Betjeman was not being entirely honest in his assertion that he was never being “funny” about suburbia and Victorian church-building. Still, in comparison to the confusion of loyalties that characterizes both *Mount Zion* and *Continual Dew*, the thematic clarity of *Old Lights* is significant and refreshing. In both form and tone, this collection is intended to serve a clearly defined purpose: to capture England as it is and not as it exists in the visions of either modernists or antiquarians. As was the case for *Devon*, Betjeman’s didacticism is not directed towards a single ideal of what constitutes taste, but rather towards the conditions

¹¹¹ Though one has trouble reading “Group Life: Letchworth” as anything but satiric.
which inform—for better or for worse—how taste develops. In other words, rather than satirizing suburbia as that which is not tasteful, Betjeman instead aims to describe suburbia outside any monolithic notion of taste. Suburbia is, in and of itself, neither good nor bad, but simply a feature of modern life.\footnote{J.M. Richards later resolves this seeming paradox in his ode to suburbia, \textit{Castles in the Air} (1946), in which he notes, “it is only the architect’s eye that picks out incongruities of style and misleads him into condemning [suburbia] for its failure in knowledge and taste. But taste has not failed, because taste was never exercised” (33).}

The difference between this mode of learning and that which he sets out in “The Graver Side of School Life” is the difference between a catalogic and a reformative approach to taste. While, certainly, Betjeman’s professed “love” for “suburbs and gaslight” does not necessarily preclude his “love” for early-nineteenth-century design, it does suggest that no longer does Betjeman insist these two opposite poles exist in direct contrast. Even if the preface may overstate the poet’s claims somewhat, many of the poems in \textit{Old Lights} function as “revisions” of poems in earlier collections. For instance, “Treherbick” shares much in common with a poem that appeared in both \textit{Mount Zion} and \textit{Continual Dew}, “Westgate-on-Sea.” Both poems describe the topography of sleepy, seaside towns and both are concerned with childhood nostalgia. But whereas both poems are written in the first person, it is clear from the outset that “Treherbick” is the personal poem, and not simply because the place it describes was Betjeman’s childhood haunt. The inclusive “we” of the first line—“We used to picnic where the thrift / Grew deep and tufted to the edge” (20)—contrasts sharply with the somewhat artificial first lines of “Westgate-on-Sea”: “Hark, I hear the bells of Westgate, / I will tell you what they sigh” (50). While both poems exhibit closely controlled metrical patterns, the rigid trochaic tetrameter of “Westgate-on-Sea” tends to impart to the poem an air of amateurism. Though the poem would not be considered one of Betjeman’s more comical verses, the effect of the metrical scheme serves, as it does in some of his more flamboyant poems (such as, for instance, “Hymn”), to distance the
reader from the poem. In contrast, “Tretherbick” is a much more formally complex poem, and
the iambic tetrameter of the first six lines of each stanza avoids the jaunty, brass-band clanging
of the other poem. The shift in the last part of each stanza to anapestic trimeter lends the poem a
dreamy manner that corresponds to the nostalgic subject matter. Compare, for instance, this
passage from “Tretherbick”—

Waves full of treasure then were roaring up the beach
Ropes round our mackintoshes, waders warm and dry,
We waited for the wreckage to come swirling into reach,
Ralph, Vasey, Alastair, Biddy, John and I. (21)

—to this comparatively insubstantial passage from “Westgate-on-Sea”:

Striving chains of ordered children
Purple by the sea-breeze made,
Striving on to prunes and suet
Past the shops on the Parade. (51)

Both examples reminisce about childhood play at the seaside, but whereas in the first case the
remembrance is direct and unmediated, the second is filtered through the gaze of an adult
watching the scene from a balcony. The sing-song effect of the second example underscores the
layers of distancing between poet and subject, whereas in the first passage the melodious meter
closely links poet and subject—a fact further emphasized, of course, in the poet’s inclusion of
himself within the list of children’s names. Furthermore, while the intent, so to speak, of both
poems is the same—to reflect on and secure the happy memories of childhood—the delivery of
this final message is markedly different. In “Westgate-on-Sea” the speaker “decodes” the sounds
of bells as childhood memories, addressing them in the last stanza: “For me in my timber arbour
/ You have one more message yet, / ‘Plimsolls, plimsolls in the summer, / Oh goloshes in the
wet!” (51). The childish rhyme at the end completes the memory, but also tends to depersonalize or deflate the reminiscences in which the poem deals. “Treherbick” bears a similar nostalgic message, but in decidedly sobering terms: “Blesséd be St. Enodoc, blesséd be the wave / Blesséd be the springy turf, we pray, pray to thee, / Give to our children all the happy days you gave / To Ralph, Vasey, Alastair, Biddy, John and me” (22). This final invocation is not only extremely personal, but much more successful in demonstrating the powerful effect of place on memory—an effect to which “Westgate-on-Sea” alludes, but never fully expresses.

While it may be unfair to indict “Westgate-on-Sea” as an insufficiently personal poem, even in the context of topographical description it cannot quite compete with “Treherbick.” The “Happy bells of eighteen-ninety, / Bursting from your freestone tower! / Recalling laurel, shrubs and privet, / Red geraniums in flower” (50) hardly achieves the fine balance of specificity and otherworldliness of “Treherbick”: “Thick with sloe and blackberry, uneven in the light / Lonely ran the hedge, the heavy meadow was remote, / The oldest part of Cornwall was the wood as black as night / And the pheasant and the rabbit lay torn open at the throat” (21). None of the poems in Betjeman’s first two collections can approximate the complexity and depth of “Treherbick,” and certainly few can match its topographical effect. Betjeman’s experiments in more sedate poetic form no doubt contribute to Old Lights’s air of maturity; the variety of metrical forms in “Sir John Piers” keeps the five-part narrative poem from descending into bathos, while the dialogue-form of “Bristol and Clifton” complicates and expands Betjeman’s semi-satiric poem in ways that “Hymn” and “Camberley”—the two most closely related poems to “Bristol and Clifton”—can never quite achieve. Even when Betjeman is being satiric in Old Lights, the places in which he stages his poems are not, as they tend to be in Mount Zion and Continual Dew, chosen strictly for comic effect. Betjeman develops character within place, as in the church of “Bristol and Clifton” or the “tall red house” of “Holy Trinity, Sloane Street,”
instead of using place to establish characters ready-made. Whereas place had always played a central role in Betjeman’s poetry, what distinguishes Old Lights is his attention to not simply the physicality of place, but also the atmospheric sense of place that functions as a point of contact between the human and the material, just as, in Devon, Betjeman was quick to praise those scenes, buildings, and landscapes that best reflected the integration of people and place.

What happened, then, in those three years that separate Continual Dew and Old Lights? What happened to the “Amusing” campiness of Betjeman’s poetry? Most critics point to Betjeman’s introduction to the painter, John Piper, as the catalyst for Betjeman’s tempered attitude. Piper had done work for the Architectural Review in the mid- to late-1930s and had been recommended to Betjeman by J.M. Richards, who felt that the painter would be a good match for the Shell guides (Hillier, New Fame 96). Piper espoused what Mowl calls an “anarchic aesthetics” (98)—he painted scenes and wrote articles for the Architectural Review that promoted beauty in unexpected places. Piper was a staunch supporter of individuality and idiosyncrasy in design—even if such designs were in “bad taste”—at the expense of rational, uniform designs. In an Architectural Review article from 1945, for instance, Piper argues it is “better to be too vulgar than too nice; too funny than too simple [. . .] that to express your taste in your shopfront, whether it is good or indifferent taste, is more laudable—and will ultimately attract more and better custom—than to adapt a fashion that forbids self expression” (“Shops” 89). Flying against conventional wisdom that Victorian shopfronts were especially egregious examples of bad design, Piper suggests that, at least in the sphere of self-expression, Victorian shopkeepers were unmatched. Rather than mimicking the latest ultra-modern designs for shops, Piper suggests in his article that shopkeepers take a cue from their Victorian predecessors and express not current notions of “good taste,” but rather their own design interests.
Given Piper’s genuine sympathies for the eccentricities of nineteenth-century design, it is little wonder that Betjeman and the painter became fast friends. They put together the Shropshire Shell Guide in 1939, though due to wartime printing restrictions the publication was delayed until 1951. *Shropshire* successfully blends the curious tastes of these two men. In the preface they explain their criteria in compiling the gazetteer: “particularly we have remarked on previously unnoticed examples of good Georgian, Victorian and even Edwardian architecture and planning” (7)—another strike at Betjeman’s humbug, antiquarian prejudice. Even more so than *Devon, Shropshire* suggests a peculiar brand of nostalgia; Betjeman is slightly less fixated on the crimes of Victorian “restoration,” but he still takes an unusual position on preservation. For instance, in the entry for Buildwas, he describes the abbey as “very much preserved now,” adding, “only with difficulty can one see it as did the aquatint engravers, as a picturesque ruin, the picture of decay. It is now the picture of nothing but arrested decay” (18). Given that Piper contributed illustrations to the guide, Betjeman’s directive here seems quite apt in his desire for visitors to see the abbey not as it originally was, but as it existed to the eyes of eighteenth-century engravers. No doubt Piper’s influence explains Betjeman’s increasing tendency in the Shell Guides (and, later, in the *Murray’s Architectural Guides*) to frame his descriptions of counties in terms of landscape painting. Betjeman does more than describe places to visit in *Shropshire*, he describes living pictures to view, as when he exclaims, “the progress up the gorge to Ironbridge on a sunset evening is unforgettable beautiful and desolate” (25). This picturesque prose is even more apparent in his description of Tong church, when he notes, “it is possible in an evening light to imagine the effigies rising from these slabs and peopling the church and giving it a look of delightful and exaggerated venerability such as one sees in a Victorian engraving” (56). In this passage and throughout *Shropshire*, Betjeman describes potentialities of vision; not content to describe what the eye sees, Betjeman insists on describing what the artist’s
eye sees, thus teaching an appreciation of place through aesthetic, rather than factual, contexts. While *Shropshire* may lack the whimsy that defined *Devon*, it abounds in strikingly visual descriptions—a characteristic bolstered by Piper’s atmospheric sketches. More than anything, *Shropshire* is devoted to cherishing, rather than cataloguing, place.

Doubtless Piper’s greatest influence on Betjeman’s aesthetics can be seen in the poet’s 1939 article on Piper published in the *Architectural Review*, “The Seeing Eye, or, How to Like Everything.” The title alone is indicative of a major shift in taste theory. For, although certainly catholic in his tastes, up until the late 1930s Betjeman was still focused on promulgating a singular—if unconventional—notion of “good taste.” But as is clear from “The Seeing Eye,” Piper had managed to convert Betjeman to a more holistic understanding of taste. Betjeman writes in a passage which surely finds echoes in his preface to *Old Lights*, “instead of despairing of what we have always been told is ugly and meretricious, [Piper] has accepted it at façade value and brought it to life. He has made us look a second time, without any sense of satire, moral indignation or aesthetic horror. He has done the job of an artist” (202). Betjeman posits the Piper approach to taste as the golden mean between the blind, unseeing navigation through space and the academic, catalogic comparison of not places but architectural objects. Musing on the fate of visual culture in the midst of world war, Betjeman notes, “we will have to go further than good taste, Norm and Perp., Queen Anne and the Orders and genuine modern, if we are to retain our senses. By following Mr. Piper, and by taking scenery as it is and not what we have been told it ought to be, we will be getting all the good we can out of the war. Perhaps at the end of it, those of us who are alive will emerge with a deep sense of jazz-modern and a genuine desire to preserve the bogus Tudor of the new industrialism. I hope so. In any other direction madness lies” (202). There is no clearer admonition of “good taste” than Betjeman’s argument in this article, for he explicitly communicates the sense that had been eluding him in his work
throughout the 1930s—the sense that “good taste” has no meaning of its own but only gains richness in a human context. But with the regularization and policing of “taste” throughout the period, good design gradually abstracted itself from humanity, which is why, perhaps, the artifacts of “bad taste” so easily captivated critics like Betjeman and Piper, for the markedly unacademic designs that failed to fit the criteria of “good taste” were often better at revealing the human scene. In a BBC special of 1949, Betjeman admitted that “the people of Swindon first taught [him] not to be so la-de-da and architectural, not to judge people by the houses they live in, nor churches only by their architecture” (“St Mark’s, Swindon” 207). This willingness to look beyond conventional tastes became Betjeman’s and Piper’s signature style; in the Murray’s *Architectural Guide to Buckinghamshire* (1948), which Betjeman compiled with Piper, Betjeman admits that they were “aware, too, that [they] may seem to be deliberately unconventional in finding a beauty in Victorian stained glass and possibly going to extremes in illustrating twentieth-century suburban villas” (viii), and yet their purpose in doing so was to illustrate the comparative delight to be found in objects which “good taste” decreed to be ugly. In the manuscript to his 1945 broadcast, “Looking at Things,” Betjeman suggests the first step in the essay’s eponymous activity is to “tell yourself that nothing is ugly” (1). Despite Betjeman’s reservations about heavy-handed Victorian restoration projects, he was always willing to find merit in original Victorian work, even if, according to convention, “Victorian can never be smart. It will defy the analysis of the ‘doctors’ busy classifying everything around us” (“Victorian Architecture” 132).113 For the Piper-influenced Betjeman, taste was as much about people as it was about things, a fact overlooked by the academic notion of taste. It is this philosophy that

113 He adds, “you have to use your eyes when looking at [Victorian architecture]” (132). The “doctors” he mentions in the passage is a reference to Pevsner, whom Betjeman dubbed “Herr-Professor-Doktor.” The plague of such dry, academic “doktors” is a common theme in his writing, such as in “Love Is Dead” (1952), in which he complains, “the Herr-Professor-Doktors are writing everything down for us, sometimes throwing in a little hurried pontificating too, so we need never bother to feel or think or see again” (5).
allows Betjeman to write, in the parlance of *Old Lights*, about suburbia and gaslight as expressions of the interaction of people and place, rather than as failures of taste.\footnote{In a review of *First and Last Loves* (1952), Waugh attempts to undermine the novelty of Betjeman’s insularity by noting, “a large part of his vogue springs from the recent embargo on foreign travel. Denied their traditional hunting grounds, aesthetes have had to make good with odds and ends at home” (“Mr Betjeman Despairs” 429).}

W.H. Auden best described this approach in his preface to *Slick But Not Streamlined* (1947), a collection of Betjeman’s poetry intended to introduce the poet to America. In the preface, Auden describes what he calls Betjeman’s “topophilia,” which

[d]iffers from the farmer’s love of his home soil and the litterateur’s fussy regional patriotism in that it is not possessive or limited to any one locality; the practised topophil can operate in a district he has never visited before. On the other hand, it has little in common with nature love. Wild or unhumanised nature holds no charms for the average topophil because it is lacking in history (the exception that proves the rule is the geological topophil). At the same time, \textit{though history manifested by objects is essential, the quantity of the history and the quality of the object are irrelevant}; a branch railroad is as valuable as a Roman wall, a neo-Tudor teashop as interesting as a Gothic cathedral. (11; emphasis mine)

This sense of “history manifested by objects” informs and controls Betjeman’s later poetry and criticism, for it provides Betjeman with a rubric for valuing design outside of notions of taste. Rather than exhibiting good or bad taste, objects, buildings, and design exhibit, for Betjeman, the ties of history that bind communities. No where is this sense clearer than in Betjeman’s response to the religious drama that overshadowed his family in the late 1940s. Betjeman and his wife, Penelope Chetwode, had been active members of the Church of England, though Betjeman was horrified to discover that Penelope had begun considering conversion to Rome. The situation was
not helped by Evelyn Waugh, who, in addition to being a friend of Betjeman’s—and reputed lover to his wife—also took upon himself the role of a spiritual *provocateur*. In the previous chapter I quoted Waugh’s letter in 1947 to Betjeman in which he attempted to use architecture to make the case for Betjeman’s own conversion to Catholicism. Betjeman’s reply to Waugh’s theological beratement was considerably more charitable than Waugh could ever hope to be. Betjeman writes, in response to Waugh’s claims that the Church of England was the theological equivalent to sham Tudorbethan architecture, “I am beginning to find that there is a lot to be said for sham half-timber. […] They have much more beauty than the flat moulded stuff of the Atomic Age” (412). Whereas Waugh could only see sham half-timbering as a symptom of sham theology, Betjeman could see in the vast tracts of Tudorbethan villas a symptom of place, and of a peculiarly English idea of home. For the uncompromising theology of Waugh, the intervening years since the Reformation were a false history, but Betjeman could see the continuity of history, and for him, the Church of England was a central link between history and community. Betjeman was aware that the Church of England was, to most, hopelessly outmoded, but it was still, Betjeman insisted, England’s “house,” and, as he writes in “How to Look at a Church” (1938), “an old house reflects the generations that have lived in it. Your mother’s taste for frills and silk lampshades, your grandmother’s passion for framed watercolours, your great-grandmother’s needlework and heavy well-made furniture. It may be a bit inconvenient and muddled, but it is human” (76). It is this sense, ultimately, that kept Betjeman from ceding to Waugh’s theological assaults; in describing the dwindling influence of the church on English life, Betjeman tells Waugh, “it is just because it is so disheartening and so difficult and so easy to betray, that we must keep this Christian witness going” (411). The church may be, to many, a symbol of “bad taste,” but Betjeman was determined to love it for the same reasons he could love Swindon.
But the comparison of faith and architecture was not merely a useful trope for Betjeman, for as he suggests even as early as *Ghastly Good Taste*, an active faith community is crucial to the maintenance of taste. In “1837-1937” Betjeman asserts that “the history of the last hundred years of taste in England is profoundly influenced by three things: increase in population, mass production, absence of any uniting faith” (120). Without the sense of unity that an active community imparts, there is no incentive to construct “good places.” Betjeman analyzes this problem in one of his most despairing essays, “Love is Dead,” which serves as the introduction to the collection of his prose in *First and Last Loves* (1952). In the essay he describes the plague of the “average man,” whose “indifference to the look of things is catching” (2). In the post-war, post-beauty world, “money is even more important than health or road-widening, so it is obviously infinitely more important than something so indeterminate as beauty” (2). The prevalence of the “average man” is a symptom, Betjeman argues, of a nation intent on averages and standards, in which “nationalised or not yet nationalised, the gradual suburbanization of enterprise continues, the killing of local communities, the stamping out of local rivalries and the supplying of everything by lorry from industrial towns” (4). Once again, Betjeman returns to his criticism of the substitution of uniformity in the place of unity, which has destroyed any meaningful sense of community, for “too bored to think, too proud to pray, too timid to leave what we are used to doing, we have shut ourselves behind our standard roses; we love ourselves only and our neighbours no longer” (5). This unthinking, unseeing insularity is translated into the built environment, for, as Betjeman asserts in “1837-1937,” “there is no doubt that architecture is the outward and visible form of inward and spiritual grace or disgrace” (120-21). And, for Betjeman, there is no doubt that the architecture of community-less England was, simply, disgraceful.
For Betjeman, the architecture of industrialism obliterated any sense of the local. In the
*Buckinghamshire Architectural Guide*, the last picture Betjeman includes is a photograph of a
strip of modern, suburban houses. The caption is indicative of Betjeman’s despairing outlook for
the English landscape: “this last picture shows the all-English style; of the small car,
classlessness and the century of the common man. Such a street could be found not only outside
Amersham, but outside Manchester, Wolverhampton, or any other English industrial city, and
many even non-industrial small towns. A distinct Buckinghamshire style, which this book has
been at pains to exemplify, has here ceased to exist” (112). His next book of poetry, *New Bats
for Old Belfries* (1945), takes great pains to preserve this vanishing sense of the local. In its
almost wholesale devotion to the topographical—only seven of the twenty-four poems do not
include a specific place name in their titles—*New Bats* is the perfection of the new poetics
Betjeman attempted in *Old Lights*. Though by and large an optimistic work, *New Bats* is rife with
subtle instances of the dissolution of community and place. Take, for instance, the paired poems,
“South London Sketch, 1844” and “South London Sketch, 1944.” In the former Betjeman
describes a scene in which the natural and the social interact harmoniously:

Rich as Middlesex, rich in signboards,

Lie the lover-trod lanes between,

Red Man, Green Man, Horse and Waggoner,

Elms and sycamores round a green.

Burst, good June, with a rush this morning,

Bindweed weave me an emerald rope

Sun, shine bright on the blossoming trellises,

June and lavender, bring me hope. (8)
The use of the present tense, coupled with the insertion of the first person voice in the last three lines, transform the poem from a mere description to a vision, but a vision not of the poet’s imagination, but rather the landscape painter’s eye—a fact confirmed by the use of “sketch” in the title. In the companion poem, Betjeman registers the passing of the century through the change in building:

From Bermondsey to Wandsworth

So many churches are,

* * *

And schools by E.R. Robson

In the style of Norman Shaw

Where blue-serged adolescence learn’d

To model and to draw. (9)

While it is certainly not out of character for Betjeman to refer to architecture as a chronological marker, what is unusual, in comparison to the first poem, is his use of the past tense in the poem that, ostensibly, describes the present. This attention to the pastness of the present, coupled with the stilted descriptions that leave no room for the first person voice, draw attention to the inhumaness of this sketch:

Oh, in among the houses,

The viaduct below,

Stood the Coffee Essence Factory

Of Robinson and Co.

Burnt and brown and tumbled down

And done with years ago

Where the waters of the Wandle do
Lugubriously flow. (9)

The desultory “oh” that begins the line matches the “lugubrious” movement of the river; this present is marked by the absence of activity—there is nothing, in fact, to describe, except what used to happen there.

Betjeman returns to a similar sentiment in the poem “Anticipation in Spring.”¹¹⁵ Like “South London Sketch, 1944,” this poem reflects on the fate of relics from the past in the present, though, unlike the former, “Anticipation in Spring” specifically addresses the transition between present and future on the eve of invasion. This anticipatory mood is controlled by the repetition of the word “still” in a series of questions addressed to a Victorian building: “And here where the wind leans on a sycamore silver wall, / Are you still taller than sycamores, gallant Victorian spire?” (24). “Anticipation in Spring” is, to an extent, the missing link between the two South London sketches, filling in the gap between the community that once existed (1844) and the desolation that will follow (1944). More than simply accounting for this gap, though, “Anticipation in Spring” reflects on the uncomfortable role of the intervening late-Victorian era in the erosion of community. For instance, the second stanza of the poem begins as a meditation on the indignities this “gallant Victorian spire” suffers, but the sentiment quickly turns to irony: “Still, fairly intact, and demolishing squads about, / Bracketed station lamp with your oil-light taken away? / Weep flowering current, while your bitter cascades are out, / Born in an age of railways, for flowering into to-day!” (24). Though the last line touches on elegy, the overwhelming sense of this ironic “spring” in 1940 is that the “age of railways” also made possible the “flowering” of modernity that now threatens the spire. Implicitly, this same ambivalence to the late-nineteenth century exists in the South London sketches, for between the lavender and jessamine of 1844 and the now defunct Coffee Factory of 1944 is the industrial

¹¹⁵ Later retitled “Before Invasion, 1940.”
development and neo-Gothic church-building of the Victorians. And so, while Betjeman can easily look to the latter half of the nineteenth century as the swan song of locality and community, he must also admit the darker role his Pont Street and gaslight played in setting the stage for the creation of this darker, twentieth-century landscape.

But of course, cognizant as he may have been of the sins of the late-nineteenth century, Betjeman much preferred to indict the contemporary contributions to the “community-less” twentieth century. “The Planster’s Vision,” for instance, is a not-very-subtle attack against the culture of town planning that dominated British development during and after the war. Although many urban theorists of the time were convinced their work was community driven, for Betjeman, the severely hygienic and scientific theories that underwrote such development represented the complete abandonment of everything he believed created and sustained local communities:

Cut down that timber! Bells, too many and strong,

Pouring their music through the branches bare,

From moon-white church-towers down the windy air

Have pealed the centuries out with Evensong.

Remove those cottages, a huddled throng!

Too many babies have been born in there (34)

The wholesale destruction of village and church life that Betjeman here attributes, rather unfairly, to the “Planster,” yields to a dystopia worthy of Huxley:

I have a Vision of the Future, chum,

The workers’ flats in fields of soya beans

Tower up like silver pencils, score on score:

And Surging Millions hear the Challenge come
From microphones in communal canteens

‘No Right! No Wrong! All’s perfect, evermore.’ (34)

“The Planster’s Vision,” while hardly a commendable poem, does serve to underscore Betjeman’s philosophy that even bad taste is better than the academic “good taste” that dictates industrial housing complexes and a secularized, individual-less community. Though it should be noted that, as was the case for “Slough,” Betjeman rejects wholesale the just claims of planning, such as hygiene and stability. In “Sunday Afternoon Service in St. Enodoc Church, Cornwall,” Betjeman revels in everything that creates the sense of local community even, as it happens, egregious Victorian restoration:

Oh ‘drastic restoration’ of the guide!
Oh three-light window by a Plymouth firm!
Absurd, truncated screen! oh sticky pews!
Embroidered altar cloth! untended lamps!
So soaked in worship you are loved too well
For that dispassionate and critic stare
That I would use beyond the parish bounds
Biking in high-banked lanes from tower to tower
On sunny, antiquarian afternoons. (46-7)

For Betjeman, that “dispassionate and critic stare” can never take precedence over the objects that are loved. Even despite Betjeman and Waugh’s theological grappling, “Sunday Afternoon Service” reaches much the same conclusion as *Brideshead Revisited*, that “good taste” cannot stand in for the love that people feel for objects that are directed towards a community of faith. And, though Huxley does not share the conventional religious attitudes of Waugh and Betjeman, even his metaphysics runs to a similar logic: that which can take the self out of personality and
into a broader spiritual reality is, ultimately, tasteful. Betjeman’s third taste is local and human—it does not wholly exclude the possibility of personal or professional preferences in taste, but it depends entirely upon Betjeman’s assertion in “Looking at Things” that “nothing is ugly”—a truly dissident position.
In 1988, American artist and *enfant terrible*, Jeff Koons, opened his show *Banality* simultaneously in New York, Cologne, and Chicago. The show was comprised of grotesquely large trinkets inspired by the gift-shop tastes of the proverbial maternal aunt, mixed with the detritus of a vaguely eroticized late-1980s popular culture. Gargantuan “Popples” and mildly indecent “Pink Panther” tableaux were intermingled with more Hummel-esque fare, such as cherubic children and barnyard animals. Koons claims to have intended these postmodern *tchotchkes* as a spiritual purgative in order to relieve the bourgeoisie of “‘their sense of guilt and shame, from their own moral crisis and the things they respond to’” (qtd. Holzwarth 260). In other words, in representing the taste of the middle-class in the space of “pure art,” which is otherwise hostile to such mass tastes, Koons argued the kitsch stigma could be reclaimed, nay, even celebrated, as a legitimate, rather than ironic, taste. Koons, perhaps too canny in his adoption of the mask of sincerity, asserts, “‘I don’t see a Hummel figurine as tasteless. I see it and respond to the sentimentality in the work’” (qtd. Bonami 58). The banality his colleagues may associate with the *bibelot* genre as a whole is, for Koons, productive and redemptive, a liberation of the bourgeoisie from the values imposed by the art community.

In some respects, *Banality* could stand in as the living embodiment of dissident taste. It represents an enthusiastic embrace of taste’s shadow value—what Koons would call “‘cultural history’” (qtd. Holzwarth 252), but which I here call the third taste between good and bad. Of course, to give Koons the benefit of the doubt and assume he sincerely wanted to soothe the existential crisis of the bourgeoisie by reproducing, on a Brobdingnagian scale, their tell-tale tastes, the actual effect of such a show was quite different. For Koons was not speaking to the
masses; he was speaking to the art community, who have no dearth of confidence in their own tastes. And the art collectors, of course, while sincere, perhaps, in lavishing praise on Koons, entirely misperceived the point and assigned to the figures at best a theoretical value, and at worst an ironic value, while those who criticized his motives were no closer to valuing “bad taste” on its own terms. Rather than appreciating the sculptures for the reasons Koons imagined the middle-class themselves would appreciate them, the critics seized upon the knowingness, the subtle perversities of the show, further contributing to the “in-ness” of the joke. Rather than escaping the label of kitsch, these figures became desirable as kitsch, futher alienating the genuine—if lamentable—tastes of the masses from the consensual tastes of the experts.

For Huxley, Waugh, and Betjeman, this curious regard for consciously “bad taste,” of which Koons is merely one of countless examples, was precisely not the point of taste reform. They had no desire to elevate “bad taste” to the level of “good taste.” Indeed, their own tastes—setting aside their pet eccentricities—were almost pathologically “good.” Yet, what their work displays is not a particular taste which one ought to adopt; rather, they wanted to interrogate what it is for which taste stands in. Huxley would undoubtedly have been the most offended by the postmodern substitution of taste value. Banality for him would have represented the supreme egoism of ersatz taste, the ultimate barrier to Suchness. Waugh and Betjeman, while more amenable to certain elements of kitsch, were nevertheless resistant to the tendency to ascribe to “bad taste” absolute value. Bad taste was not meant to be ideological in their work; in appreciating the ugly, Waugh and Betjeman appreciated moments of feeling, of community, of spontaneity, of private histories—the very elements elided when one jokes about taste. The

---

116 As Lynne Cooke noted in a review of the show, “so arresting are these objects that critics have fallen over themselves trying to coin phrases to indicate precisely how dreadful they are. Collectors too are falling over themselves, but this time in a frantic endeavour to secure at least one prize specimen from a total which it is estimated will gross a minimum of $5 million” (246).
dissent of all three authors is not ironic; it is an attempt at recognizing without commodifying an ethical value inherent in any taste. For Huxley, this value is transcendent, a conduit to the Ultimate Reality; for Waugh it is theological, a manifestation of love; and for Betjeman it is communal, steeped in the particularities of time and place. But the key is that this value can never be fully accounted for—it cannot be in the inventory. They each refuse to theorize or particularize this numinous taste, insisting instead on breaking up the binary of taste without proposing a fully realized replacement. This third taste cannot be taught, it cannot be captured—it is merely an infinitely changeable placeholder; it is a recognition that there is something between good and bad taste, but that that “something” cannot be labeled. Indeed, the confusions, inconsistencies, and impracticalities that inhere in their work on taste demonstrates the taste dissident’s freedom to explore the possibilities of the third taste, subverting our expectations of critical absolutes. Expertise, authenticity, discernment, or nostalgia do not require absolute assignments of positive or negative value. Yet in complicating taste in such a way, in thinking it to be an infinite spectrum rather than a closed system, Huxley, Waugh, and Betjeman in many ways simplified the critical discourse of taste. They reveal that our aesthetic choices are not purely psychological, or commercial, or authentic, or nostalgic, but rather an assemblage of meaning; our choices express our conception of our own place in relation to the world around us. Likewise, our responses to the choices of others express our ability to make sense of others, not simply aesthetically, but socially and spiritually. Yet this dissident theory does not simply allow aesthetic judgement to flounder in an abyss of relativity—all is not merely “a matter of taste.” Dissident taste proposes a set of values, but it acknowledges that these values are always contingent on context, always subject to revision. If taste judgements are to be meaningful, these dissidents argue, then they must be humane.
Works Consulted


———. *After Many a Summer.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1939.


———. “The Outlook for American Culture: Some Reflections in a Machine Age.”


Logan, Thad. “Decorating Domestic Space: Middle-Class Women and Victorian Interiors.”


Manganiello, Dominic. “The Beauty that Saves: Brideshead Revisited as a Counter-Portrait of


----------. *Confused Roaring: Evelyn Waugh and the Modernist Tradition.* Bloomington


Sep 1930): 263-5.


Murray Davis, Robert. “Harper’s Bazaar and A Handful of Dust.” *Philological Quarterly* 68.4


Olsen Theiding, Kara. “Anxieties of Influence: British Responses to Art Nouveau, 1900–04.”


Walmsley, Fiona. “Pragmatism and Pluralism: the Interior Decoration of the *Queen Mary*.”


___________. “Cities of the Future.” Gallagher 63-5.


___________. *Decline and Fall*. Box 3.1, ms. Evelyn Waugh Collection. Harry Ransom Center, Austin.


———. “In Quest of the Pre-War Georgian.” Gallagher 164-70.


———. “Let Us Return to the Nineties But Not to Oscar Wilde.” Gallagher 122-5.


———. “Take Your Home Into Your Own Hands!” *Gallagher* 44-5.


