Modernism, Age, and the Growth of the Subject

by

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Abstract

“Modernism, Age, and the Growth of the Subject” examines discourses of aging in modernist literature, charting metaphors of age in which cultural norms, genres, and somehow even subjectivity itself have become older. Despite the common association of modernist writing with youth and rebellion, most of the best-known modernist characters are middle-aged people: the protagonists of Woolf’s later novels, beginning with Mrs. Dalloway, are almost all aging women, and Joyce was only able to write Ulysses by shifting his focus from the soaring ambitions of the young Stephen Dedalus to the thoughtful and bumbling figure of the middle-aged Leopold Bloom. Henry James provocatively described the “new” age by claiming “the novel is older now, and so are the young.” Examining texts by Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, Winifred Holtby, Samuel Butler, Sigmund Freud, and T. S. Eliot, I show how modernists re-imagine processes of maturation and growth at the levels of individual, history, and species, understanding a state of maturity as a metonymy for the age of their own age. Older modernist characters are often better able to navigate the vicissitudes of twentieth-century life than their younger counterparts because they have more distance from the ideological norms which they imbibed in their
youth. The mature modernist consciousness is marked by the ability to critically sift and re-inherit the personal and historical past, and often by an increased openness to the forces of the unconscious mind. Critiquing Victorian models of maturity for their buttressing of authoritative, conventionally “adult” social positions, and the corresponding emphasis on the potential of youth to achieve great things, modernist maturity runs against the cultural grain, suggesting that only those conventionally understood as failures and outsiders can be genuinely mature. Modernist maturity dwells in the state of what Giorgio Agamben calls “impotentiality,” as these authors delineate a communitarian “ethics of maturity” by associating their adult characters not with fulfilled individual potential, but with new possibilities for inter-personal connection and ethical action that emerge only when the individual has forsaken investment in his or her personal future.
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Introduction

Modernism has often claimed to be young. Imagined on the model of the avant-garde, modernism is symbolically youthful whatever the age of the actual persons involved, for the avant-garde is disruptive and aggressive, shrugging off the truisms of the previous generation. In “A Manifesto of Italian Futurism” (1909), F. T. Marinetti bragged that “the oldest among us are not yet thirty; this means that we have at least ten years to carry out our task. When we are forty, let those younger and more valiant than us kindly throw us into the wastebaskets like useless manuscripts!” (quoted in Howe 171). Ford Madox Ford famously referred to Ezra Pound’s circle as “les jeunes,” saying that their discontent represented the spirit of the times (Harvey 188-9). The definitions of modernism put forth in the 60s and 70s, highly dependent on Marinetti, Pound, and the authors in their circles, tended to focus on this “heroic” avant-garde version of modernism, imagining the artists as youthful renegades, caught in an Oedipal struggle between generations. In such accounts, Stephen Dedalus, with his soaring ambitions, was often taken as the emblem of Anglo-American modernism, echoing Satan with his rebellious *non serviam*.¹

The image of modernism as youthful and heroic, however, tells only half the story. Age, both in the life of the individual and in the sense of an historical progression of “ages,” is a pervasive concern in modernist literature. But most of the best-known modernist characters are middle aged people: the protagonists of Woolf’s later novels, beginning with *Mrs. Dalloway*, are almost all aging women, and Joyce was only able to

¹ Heather K. Love notes that the “heroic” and transgressive version of modernism Stephen represents has most often been taken as modernism’s key note (Love 19).
write *Ulysses* by shifting his focus from the young Stephen Dedalus to the thoughtful and bumbling figure of the middle-aged Leopold Bloom. Many modernist literary critics defined their activities through the rhetorical position of “maturity.” T. S. Eliot uses the word maturity incessantly in his essays, claiming that an indefinable quality of maturity is the primary criterion of a classic (*CSP* 116). F. R. Leavis echoes Eliot throughout his critical writings. Wyndham Lewis launches a prolonged attack on Stein, Bergson, and others in *Time and Western Man* (1927), claiming they represent a “child cult”—a claim which implies by contrast that Lewis occupies a more adult position (*TWM* 51). Even Ford’s statement about “les jeunes” needs to be taken in its context. In his Literary Portrait of “Les Jeunes and Des Imagists,” the 40-year-old Ford is remarking that of all the poems in a recent collection, his is the only one so outdated as to use rhyme; so while Pound and the other contributors may all seem to be young, Ford, himself a major writer, is coining the term to express the fact that he feels old.¹

Older characters in modernist literature are frequently more successful at navigating the vicissitudes of modern life than their younger counterparts: in *Lord Jim*, Conrad’s mature narrator Marlow is more stable than the emphatically youthful Jim, who is described as “the youngest human being now in existence” (213); in James’s *The Ambassadors*, Lambert Strether emerges as a more promising centre of modernist consciousness than the young man, Chad, he is sent to rescue. Woolf’s older protagonists almost all find options open to them that were not open in their youths: Lily Briscoe in

¹There is also, however, an aspect of Ford’s life which aligns him with childhood; Levenson highlights this aspect of Ford as a man who claims he had never really grown up (*Genealogy* 57). Ford can be situated partially within the Edwardian cult of childhood as a writer who reacted against the overblown Victorian images of adulthood by asserting a permanent childishness. Ford’s John Dowell, however, in *The Good Soldier*, is an older man who could be very much a part of this study, for his discovery of ethical agency in his profound and crushing disillusionment.
To The Lighthouse must wait until her 40s to have her vision; Eleanor Pargiter in The Years must wait until her 70s. In contact, of the younger characters in modernist literature—Stephen Dedalus, Rachel Vinrace, Lord Jim, Hardy’s Jude—are ironized or imperiled. Noting how individual beliefs such as Stephen Dedalus’s Romantic idealism or John Dowell’s Victorian codes of morality crash against literary and social structures for which those beliefs are not suitable, Michael Levenson argues in Modernism and the Fate of Individuality that many modernist narratives can be understood as representing “nineteenth-century characters seeking to find a place in twentieth-century forms” (xii).

What is curious is that these outdated expectations so often lead not to the replacement of the old by the young, but instead to the downfall of the young and the ambiguous thriving of the old; Dowell, in his painful confusion, discovers an ethical agency in his rescuing of Nancy Rufford, while Stephen perhaps only survives to June 17th 1904 because an older man helps him home. Counter-intuitively, older characters seem more capable than their younger counterparts of transcending the strictures of the past, re-negotiating and re-interpreting past traditions in a manner appropriate to 20th-century life.

David Rosen has argued that modernist poetry after Eliot tends to speak from the subject-position of maturity; as Rosen claims, “modern poetry was never young” (Rosen 473). The same tendency pervades much modernist prose, where the less idealistic and ambitious perspective of age is utilized to contain, narrate, and understand the desires and goals of the more youthful characters.

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2 Jed Esty’s recent work on modernism and the Bildungsroman argues that the deaths of young characters in modernist fiction is a reflection of the fragmentation of linear time by colonial experience. I discuss this at more length in Chapter One.
If the modernists cast older characters as better able to negotiate the vicissitudes of modern life, I argue that this is because the subject position of maturity embodies many of the aesthetic and ethical ideals of their projects. In the following chapters, I examine aging characters and discourses of maturity in British modernist writing, arguing that modernists turn to older figures first and foremost as emblems of their own historical situation. Seeing themselves as aesthetic latecomers to a long history of literary and cultural forms, the modernists are drawn to older persons with long pasts behind them as representatives of the archetypically modern condition. As many critics have noted, the modernists are never simply interested in rejecting the past; even Pound, with his clarion call to “make it new,” was consumed by ancient China and Greece. The modernist engagement with the past is complex because modernist authors, like the post-modernists after them, have a sense of the past as vast and unwieldy—impressive, yet of questionable relevance. For the modernists, the past is onerous. The need to sift through and critically interrogate the massive amount of cultural and literary past finds its emblem in older characters with a substantial accumulation of individual past. In texts such as The Ambassadors or The Years, historical and personal pasts overlap, allowing the older person to have both the most fruitful and the most critical relationship to what has come before. The aging characters I investigate are therefore in no sense conservative.

3 The scholarship on the category of “the past” in modernist literature is substantial. Stephen Kern, in his seminal book The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918, notes that the past was a highly contentious terrain for the modernists, cast as either highly restrictive or wonderfully vivid as a source of meaning and beauty (45). Ronald Schleifer argues that the fragmentation of the Enlightenment progressive narrative of time leads to a pervasive sense of “coming after” in the early 20th-century, but adds that this “coming after” can involve its own sense of richness (17-18). Zemgulys, in a recent work in this field, argues that a sense of literary heritage—of the past not just as past but as national literary inheritance—sets the scene for modernist self-consciousness (Zemgulys 1).

4 Of course, the idea that the past is large and onerous is not entirely new with the modernists; Christine Bolus-Reichert has argued that the Victorian culture of eclecticism is an attempt to deal with exactly the same sense of the past I am describing (see Bolus-Reichert).
or reactionary; rather, they are the most effective rebels, because their rebellions are concrete critical engagements rather than abstract impulses to overthrow everything at once. With more distance from the years of their socialization, older characters exhibit an increased opportunity for the sceptical reconsideration of traditions and norms than the young, who are locked into definite, restrictive images of what counts as rebellion. Modernism’s aging subjects are its most effective sites for the emergence of a critical awareness.

The Ethics of Maturity

The metaphorical overlap between the ages of an individual and the “ages” of history was posited long before the modernist period. Thinkers of the European Enlightenment and the 18th century German counter-enlightenment cast modern Europeans as adults, while those in other parts of the world were imagined as mired in a primitive childhood. This understanding of the “primitive” survives well into the modernist period, evinced by the popularity of Haeckel’s recapitulation theory in biology, and summarized in Conrad’s well known remark in *Heart of Darkness* that travelling up the Congo was like journeying into “the earliest beginnings of the world” (41). The modern age is never the first age; it is always coming after something. But the modern age, particularly in the 17th-18th century Enlightenment sense of modern, can also be symbolically youthful, because it is invested in progress; like a young person, modernity is full of future. This ambiguity about the “age” of the modern age hides within it a dialectical tension: any period that is concerned with futurity and potential must also be afraid of waste, exhaustion, and demise. Though Lord Henry Wotton may
tell Dorian Gray that “there is absolutely nothing in the world but youth!” (Wilde 25), Dorian’s true self, reflected in his portrait, becomes hideously withered and aged by following this advice. This tension lasts into the early 20th century, as fears about early decay, and the potential unreadiness of British men for military manhood, pervade the late Victorian and the pre-World-War-One periods. There are certainly modernist authors who use the figures of aging to suggest decadence, such as the Sibyl at the opening of “The Wasteland.” And the projection of anxieties about progress, vitality, and national health on to the young has never really gone away.

But the authors I investigate are not so much concerned with decay as with a positive ethical shift away from the naïve celebration of the potentiality of youth. This shift is in part shaped by the authors’ declining confidence in the grand narrative of historical progress. Modernist maturity marks a shift away from the investment in futurity; the older characters of modernist literature serve instead as ethical models precisely because they have forsaken the egotistical investment in their own potential. There can be a considerable portion of egotism in the celebration of potentiality—in the attitude I call, borrowing from philosopher Eric Santner, “the life of the talents” (Santner 18). The tendency to egotism does not arise from a hopeful attitude towards futurity at the level of the community, but rather by the investment in individual potential, which tends to be experienced competitively, as a contest between individuals to see who will turn out best. Thus, as I note in my first chapter, egotism is a pervasive concern of the 19th-century Bildungsroman because individual self-interested potential must be directed towards a broader sense of group futurity. But the-modernists, living with less faith in

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5 On the historical tendency to see young men as weak delinquents around this time, see Gillis (133-148).
progress, seek an even more radical form of humbling; in texts such as Holtby’s *South Riding*, the subject seems almost to require a complete abdication of her own hopes and ambitions before she is able to help build the future of the community. Such hope for communal improvement transpires, however, without a total investment in the ideology of progress; the forms of improvement advocated by the modernists in my study shift from an unquestioning belief in inevitable progress as a grand narrative (which lends symbolic import to youth) to a hope for improvement with minor inroads and in small ways (which is more age-ambiguous).  

I explicate the modernist alternative to individual potentiality through the vocabulary of impotentiality, a term I borrow from philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Through this term Agamben suggests the close connection between human potential and human weakness, and the need to overcome a triumphalist view of potential and accomplishment, looking instead at the ethical position that emerges only from a respect for human vulnerability. While Agamben casts the re-thinking of potentiality as an overthrow of all of Western metaphysics, I situate his claims more moderately, noting the important similarity between Agamben’s attack on conventional potentiality and Habermas’s critique of what he calls “achievement ideology” as a feature of capitalist culture. The individualism of modern capitalist culture is sustained by a celebration of the futurity of the individual and the drive towards accomplishments yet-to-come.

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6 As Suzanne Bailey pointed out at an MLA panel on aging in January 2012, if one divorces oneself entirely from futurity one might not bother to try to build relationships, which require a certain investment in what will happen in the coming days and weeks. I would note, however, that the futurity of “relationships” is precisely not the abstract investment in potentiality that finds its emblem in youth, for relationships involve futurity but not deferral; the new friendship is happening right now, and it will also be happening tomorrow. Things that develop, and are pleasurable while they do so, require less investment in potentiality, and ethical practices can be just such developmental processes, as they are for Aristotle.

7 For Habermas’s use of this term, see *Legitimation Crisis*. 
bourgeois interiority is profoundly future-driven. The “ethics of maturity” espoused by modernist texts looks instead to the contributions made by vulnerability and human weakness, often casting mature people who have experienced failure as more ethically open to others than the young and rebellious. Failure and impotentiality are the source of ethical agency, because they foreclose one’s imaginative image of oneself as a striving hero whose own goals come before the needs of others.\textsuperscript{8} The modernist ethics of maturity thus connects the twilight of individual potential with a communitarian ethics. The emphasis on impotentiality also marks another important way in which the modernists diverge from their Victorian predecessors. Whereas Victorian novels and self-improvement literature tended to emphasize the realization of one’s potential and the attainment of an authoritative, “adult” social position, modernist maturity runs against the cultural grain, suggesting that only those conventionally understood as failures and outsiders are open-minded enough to be genuinely mature.

Modernist maturity operates, then, along two overlapping axes, representing a subjectivity that mirrors both the aesthetic and ethical projects of the modernists; mature modernism is simultaneously engaged with the re-negotiation of the historical past and the ethics of humility and selflessness. The ethical person has to live with the confusion and excess forces of modern life, but also manage to improve herself through the

\textsuperscript{8} Neither aging nor failure has been emphasized in the recent “turn to ethics” in literary studies, though there has been a substantial interest in the possibility that engagement with texts might produce humble readers. Dorothy Hale describes a substantial trend in ethical criticism as “self-binding,” whereby the ethical work of the text is accomplished by the reader’s putting herself in thrall to the otherness of the text (Hale). This aspect of literary ethics clearly owes something to Levinas’s philosophy of extreme respect for the Other, though it also needs to diverge from him in many important ways. For the best attempt to articulate the complexities of bringing Levinas into literary study, see Eaglestone. My project can also be situated in the context of the new “turn to ethics” inasmuch as several projects have claimed an ethical role for the modernist destabilization of consensus and certainty (see for example Berman 1-27). Cuddy-Keane argues for the exemplary relevance of modernist literature in an ethically pluralist context (“Ethics”).
confrontation with that confusion; she must be ready both to criticize dogmatic over-certainty and to thrive without that certainty. My accounts of modernist maturity, therefore, often attempt to capture “dwelling” and critique together, describing someone who is not only critically aware but also able to neighbour the excess forces of modern life.  

Modernist maturity is a model for the critical adulthood of the historically situated subject.

The Age of Aging

The late 19th and early 20th century was a strange time for the ancient trope of the “ages of man,” as the meanings of both childhood and adulthood changed radically. As Douglas Mao has recently argued, the period is marked by increasing anxiety about the effect of environment upon the young, partly as a result of the declining confidence in Romantic images of childhood (Mao 5-10). The concept of youth—always a slippery and highly charged term—became even more charged as the concept of the adolescent gained ground and universality; historian John R. Gills notes that only after 1880 were individuals of all classes now included in the problematic category of the “adolescent,” as a result of the prolonged period of education and training (Gillis 138). Groups such as

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9 My use of the term “dwelling” derives from Heidegger, who uses the term to suggest a possibility for nearness, for living in proximity rather than keeping the rational distance of critique. Heidegger claims that modern life tends to eradicate the possibility of dwelling (See PLT 163). In using the term, I am not intending to borrow much from Heidegger’s mystical and bucolic later philosophy; I simply find the word highly evocative for its suggestion that being able to live near something comfortably, without restlessness, is not the same as being able to launch a rational critique. One who claims to be a committed Marxist may still be unable to communicate with actual working class people; one who has studied anxiety may be unable to control his own.

10 As Bennett’s New Keywords points out, “youth” is a sociological term in English, rather than a biological term (as “puberty” is), and so its meaning is more susceptible to change and manipulation; the authors also note that over the course of the 20th century the term has come increasingly to be associated with lifestyle rather than biological age (380-1).
the Boy Scouts were founded around the fin de siècle to manage boyhood and produce adults. But though childhood was policed, it was also fetishized as an escape in new ways; the Edwardians in particular are famous for their “cult of childhood” with its central myth of Peter Pan. But as both childhood and adolescence were elaborated as sites of anxiety and escape, old age was also of new interest. The term “gerontology” was coined during the modernist period to describe an emergent field; the new discipline arose in part because improvements in health and medicine lengthened the life span, but also in part because these very improvements led to the medicalization of old age, which began to be seen as a sort of illness in and of itself. With the rise of specialists and disciplines, both childhood and old age became special problems. As women in particular tended to live longer (and as massive numbers of men were exterminated in the World War I), the spinster was a person of special concern; as many began to anxiously note the declining birth rate, women without children increasingly came under attack even in their old age. But old age also began to defend itself in the period. G. Stanley Hall, in his popular book Senescence (1922), repudiated the negative representations of the elderly, claiming that the 20th century marked “The Youth of Old Age.” For, Hall claimed, “modern man was not meant to do his best work before forty but is by nature,

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11 Levenson notes the coincidence of the Boy Scouts and Peter Pan as opposite approaches to childhood popular in the Edwardian era (Genealogy 58-9). On the complications of seeing Peter Pan as the high watermark of the Edwardian cult of childhood, see McGavok. Jonathan Rose casts the widespread fascination with childhood in the period as a response to the decadent movement in literature (184-89).
12 For a critical account of the rise of Gerontology around this idea, see Katz.
13 See Gullette for an account of the period’s attacks on “the postmaternal woman.” My fourth chapter investigates this material and looks at the rehabilitation of the spinster.
14 Hall made considerable use of the metaphorical overlap between the ages of history and the ages of an individual. Drawing inspiration from H. G. Wells’s The Salvaging of Civilization (1921), he argued that the species as a whole was coming into its dotage, and that alongside eugenics, it was the “development of a richer, riper old age” that could save the sapping vitality of the species (Hall 30). This is a curious demonstration of the flexibility of the metaphorical conflation of individual and history; Hall is able to use the fear that the species is in a state of elderly decay in order to defend the elderly.
and is becoming more and more so, an afternoon and evening worker. The coming superman will begin, not end, his real activity with the advent of the fourth decade” (29-30).

The problem of generations was also of special interest during the period. German sociologist Karl Mannheim noted that while the biological fact of generation might be a constant, the social experience of being a part of a generation happened only occasionally, when a body of ideas popularized in a localized geographical location created a sense that “we” as a generation have a certain attitude; he also argued that rapid change might lead to an increased number of generational experiences (276-320). The modernist era was often marked by a sense of rapid generational secession, placing the mature subject in the position of the outsider, as one who has already been replaced. In contrast with representations of the Victorian patriarch—perhaps the quintessential insider—modernist maturity describes a subject who has missed what might have been conventionally seen as “his” time.

Maturity might be seen as a sort of balancing of the extremes of childhood and old age; the modernist medicalization of the endpoints of the life-course echoes in some

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15 While the historical shifts of the early 20th century have been well-treated by scholars in the field of age studies, surprisingly little work has been done on aging and literary modernism. Individual authors have received attention for their examination of age, but literary modernism’s negotiation of youth and age has not systematically been treated (Kathleen Woodward’s psychoanalytically informed investigations of modernism and aging is a notable exception). Part of the reason for this neglect is that age studies tends to focus on positive representations of later life in an attempt to combat negative stereotypes of the aged—much of the work is therefore driven by feminist concerns, because older women are cast more negatively than older men in contemporary North American culture. Some of the terms of aging studies provide fruitful avenues for engagement with modernism; Barbara Fey Waxman, in her feminist study of later 20th century literature, coins the term Reifungsroman (novel of maturity) for novels about the unfolding or maturing of consciousness in older age (Waxman 16-21). Another term, the Altersroman, (novel of age) has been put forth by Linda A. Westervelt, who reads primarily modernist authors in terms of the confrontation with mortality (Westervelt 21). Such a term could certainly be applied to some of the novels I examine, such as Henry James’s *The Ambassadors* or Vita Sackville-West’s *All Passion Spent*, but my work aims to broaden the conversation by engaging the ethical and aesthetic value of aging in the context of the early 20th century thought.
ways the medieval understanding of aging as a wheel with its high point located in the middle. But for the authors I examine, middle age and old age also tend to be of more interest than the “prime” of life, in part because they aim more radically to set aside youth. Maturity tends to drift towards old age in these novels, simply because as an ethical model, modernist maturity is demanding. While “impotentiality” does not mean the end of all possibilities, it does imply a certain forsaking of individual hope, as if one’s youthfulness must be entirely burned through. The most important protagonists in my study (Lambert Strether, Eleanor Pargiter, Lady Slane) are not just middle aged, but emphatically not-young, if indeed not elderly.

In addition to the period’s professional and scientific discourses surrounding age, several philosophical key terms of the period are intrinsically linked with maturation. Representations of aging run into many of the signal concerns of the modernists, such as time, consciousness, and tradition; indeed, it is difficult to think of a familiar trope of modernism that cannot be accessed through the exploration of the aging consciousness. Four highly contentious terms figure in particular as keywords of my discussion:

*Experience*: Tony Bennett’s *New Keywords* (2005) claims that experience is “one of the most compelling and elusive words in the language” (121). Experience can be associated, for example, with immediacy (“I experienced it myself”); with a sense of challenge or event (“a life-changing experience”); with disillusionment (“hard, bitter experience”); or with expertise (“she was experienced”). Adding to the confusion, we associate the first two of these meanings with youth, and the latter two with age. Experience was also a

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16 See Katz 30-33; Dove. I discuss these models at more length in Chapter One.
much debated term in the modernist period; William James described his radical empiricist philosophy as a description of a world of “pure experience,” and philosophical movements from Phenomenology to Bergsonism to Dilthey’s Hermeneutics all cast themselves as returns to experience. The contrast between two German words for experience, Erlebnis (experience in the sense of life, Leben) and Erfahrung, (experience in the sense of journey, Fahrt) was central to the work of Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel. In Chapter Three, I emphasize the importance of an Erfahrung experience in James’s The Ambassadors, where experience involves contact with the public historical world rather than an emphasis on inner continuity. But the re-definition of what counts as an experience is a concern throughout the project. Since experience happens in time, there is a sense in which maturity must be a function of experience; experience involves the trading in of abstract potentiality and hope for concrete actuality. But in the context of my project, this trading-in is not a diminishing so much as a concrete project of subject-formation, replacing the ideologies in which young persons are instructed with the dialogic negotiations of experience. Joan Scott has argued for the importance of not conceiving of experience as an obvious given that occurs to a pre-formed subject (27). Experience is instead part of the shaping of the subject—and in modernist texts, experience often involves the dissolution and reformation of the subject. As philosopher H. G. Gadamer claims, it is the experienced person who is radically open to new experience, and it is in Gadamer’s sense that modernist maturity is “experienced.” While some experiences can lead to closedness, false certainty, or bitterness, the experienced person in these texts has been opened by seeing the failings of the ideologies that constituted his or her former beliefs.
Inheritance: For the most part, experience is what happens to the individual, while inheritance is what pre-dates the individual, coming from the past and providing the context for new experience. It is also the case, however, that in the work of Freud and some others, past generations’ experience actually can live on in the present, inherited somehow as experience without being undergone by the current individual. But in the works I examine, the inheritance of the past is more commonly onerous as a direct burden on consciousness, necessitating a critical sifting. Experience, situated in history, often functions as the way that one’s inheritance can be re-interpreted; the re-formation of the subject is also her re-inheritance. Because the older characters of modernist literature are so often both rebelling against doctrines they were taught in their youth and recovering other elements of the past that still hold value, inheritance becomes an ongoing process rather than a single event. Maturity involves continuously looking back to the past and understanding it anew.

Tradition: Tradition is firstly the subject matter of inheritance; what we have inherited from the past is a variety of traditions, which we must edit for ourselves. There are two things to emphasize about tradition: one, noted by both T. S. Eliot and Gadamer, is that tradition is not a static thing; since every generation re-interprets the past, tradition is always a dynamic, unfolding event that gives context to the present. The multifariousness of the past by its very nature allows for the kind of re-inheritance I discuss above, for “tradition” never recommends only one thing with a unified voice. To deny the dynamism of tradition and assert that tradition does in fact insist upon one thing is perhaps to become a traditionalist, which is just the opposite of being a critical sifter of
tradition. If the modernists are excessively concerned with tradition (evidenced by Eliot’s seminal essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”), this is often because they are determined not to be traditionalists, who adhere doggedly to a particular way of understanding tradition. The past is foreign country because it is large and dynamic. But the modernists do feel that many aspects of tradition are outdated, and that a radical re-casting of traditional moulds might be needed for the new age.

Unconscious: The relationship to the past in modernist texts often involves an unconscious element. In Freud’s connections between childhood events and adult trauma, in Proust’s exploration of memory, or in T. S. Eliot’s emphasis on the unconscious continuity of communal traditions, we find a lingering of past life in a part of the mind of which we are not entirely conscious. As I claim in the final chapter, any relationship we might have to the evolutionary past is necessarily unconscious, for we obviously have no conscious memories of being slugs or monkeys; in the work of Freud, Butler, and Eliot, “maturity” is a matter of finding the proper relation between benefitting from, and differentiating oneself from, the unconscious inheritance of the evolutionary processes of nature. But throughout the dissertation, some form of relationship to the excessive forces of the unconscious appears as an aspect of maturity. The models of the unconscious mind upon which I draw are not necessarily limited to Freud’s model—in my chapter on The Ambassadors I also chart some connections to older, Romantic models of unconscious creativity; nonetheless, all models relate to psychoanalytic discourse and share in the basic characteristic of excess that we associate with Freud. For characters such as Maisie Farange, or Lambert Strether, or Eleanor Pargiter, a central aspect of their maturity is an
ability to hear and respond to the forces of their unconscious minds and those of other people. To quote Santner’s revision of Levinasian ethics, “the Other to whom I am answerable has an unconscious” (Santner 82). This means that ethical maturity involves intuiting and navigating the excessive energy in the desires and fears in those around us (which makes Levinas’s separation of epistemology from ethics problematic). One of the curious things about the modernist books I explore is that maturity seems for the most part to be the time of life when one is open to the unconscious. The same critical distance from socialization that makes one into an older rebel also seems to create an openness to the surplus forces of unconscious life.

The dissertation moves chronologically from the Victorian period, through Henry James’s turn of the century novels, to the post-suffrage authors; it also moves from younger to middle aged to elderly characters (the final chapter, however, breaks both these rules, shifting to consider theories of evolution throughout the periods I have covered.) Chapter One, “The Potentialities of the Victorian Bildungsroman,” begins by tracing the long tradition in post-Enlightenment European thought that charts history through metaphorical comparison between the ages of an individual and the historical period. I develop the idea of youth as a metonymy for progress by exploring the negotiation between youthful potential and egotism in three Victorian Bildungsromane: Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, and Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*. Through these examples, youthful potentiality emerges as something valued but imperiled in Victorian culture, something that might very well be swallowed by its absorption in rapacious competition if it does not learn to moderate its
expectations. A state of maturity, for Dickens and Eliot, appears as a state of moderated egotism where one’s promise and power are at least partially divorced from one’s individual potential, and thereby made to serve the communal and historical grand narrative of progress instead of individual competition; the potential of one is traded in for the potential of all. But in Hardy’s later novel *Jude the Obscure*, this moderation no longer seems possible, and the entire natural world is folded into the realm of egotism. Hardy’s novel describes a tragic and savage state of competition which lies beneath the conventional understanding of potentiality; the novel thereby gestures towards the importance of a model of impotentiality.

In Chapter Two, “Childhood and Perception at the Dawn of Modernism: *What Maisie Knew*,” I move to examine an alternate but contemporaneous representation of childhood in Henry James’s *What Maisie Knew*, using the text as a launching point for modernist theories of the growth of the mind. Maisie is a child who manages to thrive even in a decadent environment, because James develops a model of growth that actually depends on a position of being a confused outsider in order to function. I argue that although Maisie may only later in the novel (if at all) be able to understand the literal facts of the adult sexual situations around her, her education nonetheless endows her with a mature understanding of the unconscious investments of others. Using the vocabulary of the “enigmatic signifier,” derived from Laplanche and other psychoanalytic thinkers, I argue that the powerful but vague words in Maisie’s life, full of unconscious erotic investment and anxiety, enable her to come to grips with what is difficult to put into words. The production of Maisie is the birth of the characteristically Jamesian perceiver on whom “nothing is lost,” because her unconventional education leads her to understand
the nuances of unconscious energy that are so often covered up by moral qualms and prudishness.

Chapter Three, “Experience in The Ambassadors,” argues that the fullest development of the Jamesian perceiver can be articulated only when James turns to a middle aged character as his centre of consciousness. Lambert Strether, a character much like Leopold Bloom in his bumbling friendliness and his experiences of loss (both men have lost children) is a Jamesian figure of consciousness as impotentiality; he is liberated from his prudishness and open to the possibility of neighbouring the unconscious mind, but only because his personal losses seem to have blazed the trail for that liberation. I argue that Strether comes into contact with the unconscious mind of himself and others after experiencing a “belated latency period,” through which he keeps the sexual truths of the situation in which he is immersed out of his mind until he is ready for them. But the type of consciousness James explores through Strether also has an important historical and political dimension which I chart through modernist era philosophies of experience articulated by Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel; Strether’s Parisian experiences emerge as Erfahrung experiences, which set him in the context of history, rather than Erlebnis experiences, which tend to be more contained in the private inner realm of one’s own consciousness.

In Chapter Four, “Aging and Inheritance in the 1930s: Older Women in Woolf, Sackville-West, and Holtby,” I explore alliances between older and younger women in the 1930s era novels. Each of these authors, in the context of the newly won victories of the women’s movement, stresses the necessity of an elderly woman’s perspective to counterbalance the opportunities now available to younger women. While the image of
the empowered woman was consistently equated with young women in popular discourse of the time, these authors cast older female characters as the bearers of a perspective necessary for the developing and enriching of the gains women have secured. In this way, the perspective of “impotentiality” is woven into the progressive narrative of women’s political history.

Shifting from a focus on aging to considerations of age in relation to broadly conceived ideas of human and cultural development, I end by proposing a parallel between the understandings of maturity addressed in the previous chapters and modernist constructions of the maturity of the species. My final chapter, “Modernist Time and the Epidemic of Immaturity: Evolution and the Unconscious in Freud, Butler, and Eliot,” considers models of evolutionary maturity in the works of Samuel Butler, Sigmund Freud, and T. S. Eliot. Despite wide differences in approach, each of these three writers seeks in evolutionary theory the foundation for a less restless and more humble attitude, advocating a species-maturity that counters the anxious management of biological potential associated with much of the eugenics movement.
Chapter One: The Potentialities of the Victorian Bildungsroman

*Each century has its special ideal, the ideal of the nineteenth is a young man.*

—George Moore (176).

Is the modern age an old age or a young age? Is modernity a time of youth or a time of maturity? As people of all ages manage to live in the modern age, it presumably cannot simply be one or the other. But just as Rita Felski demonstrates in *The Gender of Modernity* that it can be fruitful to ask after the gender of the modern period, I want to claim that there is much at stake in deciding whether the age that imagines itself as “modern” identifies with an old person or a young person. In order to count as modern, a period clearly must postdate some other periods—the first age can never be modern. But modernity is also imagined as a state of process and a time of novelty; one can attempt to be, as in Rimbaud’s dictum, “absolument moderne,” only by divesting oneself of the past and pressing forward with an energy associated with youth. Endlessly rejuvenating itself in novelty, and yet conscious of itself as the latest and hoariest age arriving with a long memory, modernity can see itself as very old or very young. It can also locate itself somewhere in the middle of the march of progress, in a sober middle age. And yet the age of the age seems to be frequently at stake, as the concept of modernity is fashioned to fit narratives of progress and hope, or of decadence and decay.

Europeans have conceived of themselves as belonging to a “modern” age for several centuries, although I will not have room here to parse all the possible meanings of the term. While the use of the word goes back, in English, to the 15th century, I focus on a specific tendency, beginning in the philosophers of the late 18th century and spreading throughout the 19th, to imagine modernity not only as a unique temporal period, but also
as a way of relating to time. The thinkers of the 16th- and 17th-century Enlightenment (Bacon, Descartes, Locke) are interested in tossing off the shackles of superstition and dogma, and they do seem to think the time for reason may be ripe. But it is later, with Kant and Rousseau, with the German Counter-Enlightenment and the Romantics—what has been called the “second wave” of modernity—that the modern period becomes much more deeply imagined in terms of temporality. Metaphors comparing the history of the world to an individual lifetime begin to appear as an important part of the philosophical story at this time. The bold decision of the French Revolutionaries to restart the calendar at year One speaks to this aspect of Enlightenment thinking. Modernity now becomes self-consciously a “time”—a time concerned with time. Philosophies of history sprout across Europe, describing history as a narrative with a definite direction. The tendency to imagine history as progress or regress, to figure the future as a bold youth or conversely to value tradition and stability, as Wordsworth does in his figures of childhood, is a major force in 19th-century thought. The “ages of man”—and especially childhood, youth, and old age—have symbolic associations in any historical period. But the way they are associated with the movement of history in the late 18th and 19th century gives them an urgency not to be found in ancient Greece, in Medieval Europe, or even in

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1 The first citation in the OED for modern in any sense is 1485, but it is another full century before any citations give evidence of the term being used to mean “relating to present or recent times” (1585) (OED “Modern” 2a), or being “not obsolete” (1590) (OED “Modern” 3a)—prior to that the word seems only to mean “being in existence at this time” (OED “Modern” 1). The opposition between “Modern” times and antiquity is present in the French root, however, for the word from the 14th Century (OED “Modern”). For a brief account of the conflict between positive and negative connotations of the “Modern” see Raymond Williams’s Keywords (208-9).

2 For the origin of this term see Strauss (50).

3 Though parallels between the lifespan of an individual and the progress of history take on a new urgency in this later period of the Enlightenment, there are important precursors as well. Calinescu argues that the metaphors of modernity as maturity are important beginning with Bacon, who he claims as the inventor of the idea that it is the moderns, not the ancients, who should be considered old by virtue of their knowledge (Calinescu 23-26).
Shakespeare. So while the term “modern” is in some ways applicable to the periods of Bacon, Hobbes and Locke, I will restrict my use of the word to the period from (roughly) the French Revolution forward. For despite the many obvious differences between 1789 and 2012, we are still the inheritors of an image of history as linear motion, as progress or regress, and often as accelerating “modernization.”

The genre of the Bildungsroman is also born at the beginning of this era, with Goethe and his contemporaries in late 18th-century Germany and spreading to other countries in the 19th century. As Tobias Boes notes, Bildung and the Bildungsroman are inseparably bound up with a new sense of history as a narrative with a direction, rather than as a compendium of events: in its initial sense, “Bildung refers not to the personal formation nowadays associated with the term (largely due to the legacy of the Bildungsroman), but to a form of historical emplotment” (Boes “Bildungsroman” 275). In The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in Modern Culture (1987), Franco Moretti argues that the Bildungsroman is the “symbolic form of modernity” because it is a novel of youth: as modernity is a time of process and revolutionary change, it imagines itself as a rebellious young person shaking off the chains of tradition. And yet, we are not prone to see the Victorian period—the great age of the Bildungsroman in English—as a time that straightforwardly lionizes youth. We are more likely to associate it with the authority of the father figure, picturing a period when age and experience were valued and youth was nearly a fault. Moretti’s argument turns on the claim that the young person appears to be representative of the modern subject because the story of the young person draws attention to the confusion and anxiety about socialization, norms, and the future in modern times; the genre does not so much laud youth as police it. In England, the
century that warmed to new, idealized images of childhood put forward by Wordsworth and Dickens was simultaneously a century that expressed increasing anxiety about whether or not “maturity” was being properly achieved. Jacques Lacan relates an anecdote from Lord Macaulay, who claimed that it was only in Macaulay’s lifetime that one began to insult a person not by claiming he was a fool, but rather through “the excellent weapon of affirming that [his] mind was not fully adult.” Lacan adds, “this attitude, which is historically datable since you find no evidence of it in any previous history, is the sign of an interval, a break in historical development. In Pascal’s time, when one speaks of childhood, it is simply to say that a child is not a man” (Seminar VII 25).

Even when a thinker wants to identify the modern age with progress and Enlightenment, that does not mean that the age is imagined in any simple or automatic way as “young,” though it does tend to mean that metaphors of age come into play. Philosophers of the later 18th century continually have recourse to the metaphor that parallels the history of the West with the maturation of a person. Other periods (such as the Tudor dynasty) might have conceived of themselves as special or chosen in some way, but I know of no previous period that imagined itself as finally “adult.” Rousseau associates his State of Nature with the “childhood” of man, whereas one century earlier, Hobbes and Locke do not; their States of Nature are thought experiments which do not chronologically pre-date their states of civil society. When Kant defines Enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” (54), he commits his hopes to

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4 Philosopher David Owen notes that “maturity,” though it first becomes a term in political philosophy with Kant’s use of it in the late 18th Century, becomes a central concern of more thinkers about a century later, in the time of Nietzsche and Weber (Owen).
the forward momentum of time, drawing implicitly on this metaphor to suggest that what defines modernity is “maturity;” modern humanity is adult because it escapes childish gullibility. The grand narrative that describes Western history moving through a primitive infancy, a glorious Greek youth, and a mature modernity is spread by Kant and Herder in the 1770s, and is crucial for Hegel in the next generation. This image also gestures to the unfortunate tendency for the story of history-as-maturation to feed into the belief that “savages” in other parts of the world remain mired in permanent childhood (a belief that can be found in earlier periods, but gathers currency and importance in the 18th and 19th centuries). And yet, already in Herder’s work in the 1770s there is some possibility that the “adult” status of Europeans also means Europeans are too old, and perhaps even nearing exhaustion; Herder compares his contemporaries to the “thin and whispering” twigs at the top of a tree, far from the roots and lacking both the virtues and the vices of earlier times (332)—though he adds that “it is precisely on the tree’s highest twigs that the fruits bloom and bud” (347). Herder’s example demonstrates that metaphors of age can become charged in multiple ways, since the overlapping of history with the age of a person allows for several different rhetorical moves. Victorian England draws on such metaphors (though also on metaphors of history-as-cycle) when it compares itself to the fading Roman Empire, and both conservative and leftist radical movements claim the time is ripe for a decayed and ancient society to fall.

Though he does not cast the project in precisely this way, Moretti’s account of the Bildungsroman is an attempt to explain the dialectical tensions contained in the question of the age of the modern age. For Moretti, Europe after the French Revolution is cast into modernity “without possessing a culture of modernity,” and this leads Europe to identify
with the “mobility and inner restlessness” of youth (5). The identification of Europe with futurity finds a natural restriction in the story of the young person; since youth does not last forever, the genre offers a way to curb the restlessness of the young person in socialization. Choices are made, mores and traditions internalized, and wide possibilities for marriages narrowed down to a single decision. In Moretti’s provocative account, narrating the story of “coming of age” is precisely the way many confronted the uncertainties about the future of an age marked by a new volatility, rapid change, and the upward mobility of the middle class. Moretti follows through several different threads of the Bildungsroman, each with its own way of balancing individual and society. In the classical Bildungsroman of Goethe, he argues, socialization is completely achieved and, in a repudiation of the French Revolution, freedom is traded in for determinacy. Wilhelm Meister takes his place in the society of the tower that has plotted his life for him: “meaning, in the classical Bildungsroman, has its price. And this price is freedom” (Moretti 63). Arguing for a trajectory of increasing irony in the genre over the next generations, Moretti claims that Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert place more and more emphasis on the disjunction between the individual and the social order in 19th-century France; this is the trajectory of the genre he prefers. In England, however, he finds a contrasting tradition, arguing that England in the 19th century was simply too confident in its ability to fuse tradition stably together with progress, and so did not need to focus on the volatility of youth; it could focus instead on the more obedient state of childhood.

5 Moretti avoids discussing the long tradition of reading *Wilhelm Meister* ironically. For a summary of this tradition, see Kontje (10-16). It serves Moretti’s political aims to see the original Bildungsroman as a direct matching of the individual and society in perfect harmony, so that it can properly lay the conservative grounds for the genre. Ultimately, I think *Wilhelm Meister*, even if ironic, still holds as a regulative ideal—or perhaps as a fantasy—the idea that the potential of the individual can be matched fully to an actuality in a social institution. The fact that the institution is so mysterious, however, certainly adds to the sense that this goal is a fantasy.
Moretti is harshly critical of all English Bildungsromane prior to Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, likening them to childish fairy tales, with plots driven by monsters. In his reading of *Great Expectations*, Moretti argues Pip is punished for the vanity of the aspirations precisely because they led him away from permanent childhood. According to this model, Pip must end the novel without a bride because he aspires, while Joe is rewarded with marriage to Biddy precisely because he has been a “good” and childish-minded labourer, who never attempted to grow up into upward mobility.6

There is an important kernel of truth in the idea that the Bildungsroman serves to curb the symbolic energy of youth, controlling the possibilities of the subject in an age of class mobility, industrialization, and progressive ideals. In a period that not only experiences rapid change but also frequently imagines itself as the age of change par excellence, the young person is the person who could be anything. I disagree, however, that the politics of the genre are as straightforward as Moretti believes them to be, even in its English examples, because the politics of “youth” are by no means simple. While Moretti emphasizes the way the English Bildungsroman inhibits the progress of class mobility by punishing the youth who pushes for such progress, the dynamic possibilities of the young person may also stand in these works for the motion towards rapacious competition and commodification. Conversely, Moretti associates maturity with a conservative position of compromise by default, drawing on the commonplace sense that mature people aren’t revolutionaries. But the position of maturity is also complex. The equation of youth with leftism, for example, is far from obvious; in fact, it seems to arise

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6 Moretti does set *Middlemarch* apart from this indictment, claiming that Eliot lauds historical action on a small scale, though he is also sceptical of this form of “mature” liberal compromise (222). Ultimately, all the English forms of the genre appear in his model as various pathways either to the avoidance of politics, or to ameliorist liberal politics.
primarily in generations like the Baby-Boomers, which happen to experience leftist youth movements.

At the heart of Moretti’s analysis, however, is a very helpful latent contrast between potentiality and actuality. For a progressive age to identify with a young person is ultimately to place a bet on process and potential, and to hope they yield more of whatever we want and less of whatever we don’t. Perhaps there is little else to bet on if rapid change exacerbates our anxiety about our ignorance of the future. Walter Benjamin famously described this aspect of modern life in his image of the “angel of history”:

A storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 257-8)

Mary Russo has connected Benjamin’s image with the experience of aging, suggesting that the rapid pace of change casts aging as a “scandal of anachronism” (Russo 20). Benjamin reminds us that in an age of progress, change is disorienting and the experience of the elderly comes to be devalued; it is the old who inevitably feel, like the angel of history, that they are blown backwards into a future that does not match the world of their memories. Benjamin accordingly connects this experience of progressive time with the devaluation of experience in his essay “The Storyteller,” noting that in the post-

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7 Jed Esty has recently picked up this thread of Moretti’s argument, noting the way in which the 19th Century Bildungsroman pairs the potentiality of the subject with the actuality of the nation to give a stable identity in the end. Esty notes that as the Bildungsroman passes over into Modernism, the time of youth tends to be exaggerated, as the stable national identity no longer seems an adequate container for the subject’s potentiality, which now runs amok and wastes itself in youthful dalliance until it comes to a sudden end; as Esty writes, the obverse of eternal youth is sudden death (“Virginia Woolf’s Colony” 84). For Esty, this is part of the break between the realist clock of nationhood and the unbounded time without clear goal set loose by the experience of colonial modernity. See also Esty’s “Virgins of Empire” and “The Colonial Bildungsroman.”
World-War-One period, people have become “poorer in communicable experience” (84). As the massive scale of technological war and progressive mechanization increases, Benjamin believes, the ability to tell a story based in experience is diminished and with it the consciousness of death. Without the wisdom of experience and narrative, the old and sickly must be hidden away. Conversely, the potential of the young is perhaps the most urgently needed asset: no one can guess what they will be confronting tomorrow.

If the modern age invests in potentiality, what becomes of actuality? If restless youth is a metonym for the possibilities and fears wrapped up in the broader narrative of historical progress, then the end of youth must always be a form of compromise in a dual sense: not only must the individual settle down to adulthood in a historical age somewhere in the middle of the march of progress, but in fact any adulthood at all amounts to a kind of diminishing of expectation. Moretti notes that in versions of the Bildungsroman where a final form of maturity is emphasized—in Goethe and in the English Bildungsroman—we find novels that end in marriage, as a metaphor for the finishing point of adult identity and the assuming of a social contract. By contrast, the French novels that stress process and unending youth are novels of erotic dalliance and adultery (7-8). One thing that is at stake in this form of contractual resolution is the possibility of successfully trading in potentiality for actuality. The young, modern person needs to be given a shape, and any specific shape will not in fact match up to all the rich possibilities one might project forth in youth. The narrative that ends with marriage can both acknowledge this (as it sets the protagonist up for a life full of the compromises and everydayness that go into a marriage) and also cover it up to some extent, drawing on the long history of marriage as the chief symbolic destination of comedy. But marriage is by
no means the only kind of compact that stands in for this compromise with actuality, and we shall see that other vocations and institutions are frequently marked in the 19th-century Bildungsroman by the sense of settling down to the smallness of adult life.

Actuality emerges, then, as a kind of diminished potentiality—which means that youth inevitably takes on more value than age and maturity. The fact that it is arguably really true, in the experience of many, that adulthood is about compromises and does not meet all the expectations of youth is important, but only part of the picture. I would also argue that the fact that so many people experience maturation in this way has a lot to do with the fact that, in the 19th century as in our own, young people are encouraged to think that youth is a time when one should dream big, and to value their potential above all else. As Lee Edelman has argued about the contemporary political landscape, nearly all modern ideologies justify themselves on the grounds that one must protect the futurity embodied in children (Edelman 1-4). Edelman claims (in an American context) that Whitney Houston’s song lyric “I believe the children are our future” might as well be the national anthem (143). Edelman’s critique of “reproductive futurism” as a logical system that associates queerness with negativity and death has been controversial in the field of queer theory; what I want to take from it is simply the continuing vitality of the tendency to invest all our hopes for improvement in the young person, thereby deferring to the future. If our ideals are ensconced in a vision of the future, not only is actuality devalued, but older people are quite possibly obstructions.

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8 The fact that contemporary ideologies position themselves as a protection for the children of the future also draws attention to the continuing vitality of the Wordsworthian association of children with permanence.

9 Many theorists of age studies, which I discuss in my fourth chapter at more length, have noted this point.
Not all societies have valued youth in exactly the same manner. Mary Dove has described a various and widespread Medieval discourse about aging that describes a “perfect age” of man’s life somewhere in the centre, visualizing the process of aging as a wheel of rise and decline modelled on the wheel of fortune (Dove 67-79). While the “perfect age” was often situated at the relatively young age—30—at which Christ died and was resurrected, the image of the wheel suggests an understanding of aging in terms of a cycle and a peak. Aristotle, in the *Rhetoric*, also argued that lives peaked somewhere in the middle, using the model of the golden mean to claim that men in their prime combined the virtues of youth and those of age. And indeed, he situated this “prime,” both for the body and the mind, at relatively advanced stages of life:

As for Men in their Prime, clearly we shall find that they have a character between that of the young and that of the old, free from the extremes of either. They have neither that excess of confidence which amounts to rashness, nor too much timidity, but the right amount of each. They neither trust everybody nor distrust everybody, but judge people correctly . . . To put it generally, all the valuable qualities that youth and age divide between them are united in the prime of life, while all their excesses or defects are replaced by moderation and fitness. The body is in its prime from thirty to five-and-thirty; the mind about forty-nine. (1390a28-1390b10)

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10 Dove notes that because the Medieval discourse tended to imagine this “prime” age relatively young, there was a correlative tendency to combine all the positive traits of youth and middle age into an image of the peak of life that could stretch much of the way to old age. Dove argues for a contrasting tendency in the Renaissance, to so value the position of the experienced and aged man that the position of age began to annex all stages of life that could be classed as “adult”—“Whereas the protraction of the age of ripe understanding tended to increase the opposition between youth and man’s mature adulthood, forcing youth into ingenuousness or blatant inanity, the medieval protraction of the part of life preceding old age made it possible for man’s ripe age to be annexed to youth’s territory” (Dove 40).

11 As so often with Aristotle, these assertions do not entirely line up, in a way that suggests they are meant to complicate themselves. After speaking of the (male) person in the prime of life combining all the virtues
The Aristotelian and Medieval models of aging emphasize the cyclical and the moment of “peak” or balance somewhere in the middle of the life course. While I don’t want to claim that these concepts are entirely absent from the 20th-century understanding of aging, I think that attention to these older cyclical models helps throw into relief, by contrast, how deeply linear the modern imaginary of aging is. A culture invested in potentiality will tend towards a linear image of the unfolding of that potential. Of course, this does not simply lead to a universal celebration of youthfulness; we still speak of experienced persons at the height of their powers, and commonly imagine this professional virtue—the climax of talent—to come somewhere in later middle age. We still lend considerable authority to the “distinguished” patriarchal male. And we increasingly value the discovery of entirely new possibilities in later life—but this last trend is partially a worship of youth, as we increasingly try to model all periods of life on the open field of possibilities we associate with the young person. In the 21st century, aging persons are reassured that they are “only as old as they feel.” I do not claim this has any terribly negative effects, and it certainly seems preferable to trying to stifle the dynamism of subjectivity by forcing people to stop changing once they grow up. But only a culture that valued youth immensely would spend so much energy reassuring the old that they are really young.12

12 Of youth and age, some of which are more involved with the body (like bravery) and some with the soul (like judgment), he then suggests completely different periods when the body and the soul reach their prime. So perhaps the pride of the strong citizen-soldier should defer to the wisdom of the aged? But of course, we are also invested in making sure that those young people do not become trapped in puerility. One of the shifts in discussions of aging between the 19th century and the early 21st century is perhaps a deepened fear that maturity—imagined not only as the critical mindset of Kant but more simply as an adult sense of responsibility and consideration—is simply something Western culture is failing to achieve. Grumbling about the irresponsibility of young people is nothing new, but the sense that we are deadened into a psychological childhood by the distracting energies of modern entertainment and
All metaphors have two sides, and the investing of the desire for progress in “youth” has ramifications not only for the historical narrative of progress, but also for the way young individuals imagine and understand their lives. For one, investing in a model of subjectivity that centres on potentiality can lead to a paradox, as actuality begins to appear as a disappointment. Only something resembling the bizarre wizardry of the society of the tower in *Wilhelm Meister* can convert the individual’s rich content directly into social reality; in the absence of such an institution, other avenues of actualization will likely fail to live up to the possibilities of the individual. If pushed to an extreme, as it is in Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, this becomes a tragic equation. The triumphalism of human potentiality that may or may not succeed in passing into actuality is hardly any triumphalism at all, because once these become the categories of evaluation, no actuality ever measures up. Accordingly, what we see in the history of the Bildungsroman after Goethe is in many ways a litany of failure and compromise, a reaching after goals that come crashing down, or at best a process of humbling.

That humbling can, of course, be the humbling of the desire for upward mobility, as it is in *Great Expectations*. But many other kinds of humbling happen as well. The protagonist of the Bildungsroman does not always want to be a gentleman, as Pip does, but he or she always has some ambition, or some excess force or sensibility (as Jane Eyre does) that makes her not belong. Nancy Armstrong has claimed that the novel in general is driven by the power of a kind of “additive” or supplement—that the prime criterion for

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advertising is a fear that gained considerable currency during the 20th century. For a recent and very perceptive philosophical articulation of this position, see Steigler.

13 Goethe, of course, is not only the author of the first major Bildungsroman, but also of *Faust*, the drama that Marshall Berman identifies with “the tragedy of development.” For Berman, Goethe believes the development of inner life and the exterior development of the world must be made parallel, but making them so actually somehow destroys the inner life (Berman 68).
a character to serve as a protagonist in a novel is that she must have a restlessness and excess that makes her refuse to stay in place (Armstrong 4). This is certainly true of the Bildungsroman (and even more so of the Kunstlerroman): the protagonist is both restless and talented, an exemplary individual and yet somehow representative. The metonymic connection between the individual and progressive time can be made to serve purposes more diffuse and less commercial than the emphasis on upward mobility; Charles Taylor has described the tendency of late-Enlightenment progressivism to inspire individual subjects to identify with projects thrown far into the future, well after their own demise (Sources 351-2). The three major Victorian Bildungsromane I investigate in this chapter, Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, and Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, all offer their protagonists, with varying degrees of hopefulness, participation in a satisfaction in the distant future—and they offer this in part as a substitute for the upward mobility of individual economic potential.

In my epigraph to this chapter, George Moore proclaims the young man to be the ideal of his century, yet he later describes himself as exhausted by the age of thirty; ultimately, this dialectical tension, holding together the possibility of an intense youthfulness and an extreme exhaustion, is attendant on any celebration of someone for being full of future.\(^\text{14}\) To value youth is inevitably to fear decay, and the fear functions at both the individual and the social level. As Northrop Frye notes:

> In proportion as the confidence in progress has declined, its relation to individual experience has become clearer. That is, progress is a social projection of the

\(^{14}\) A parallel examination of the dialectical tension between youth and decadence arguably drives the plot of Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray*, which I treat more fully in chapter four.
individual’s sense of the passing of time. But the individual, as such, is not progressing to anything except his own death. (35)

Frye invites a question here: if the individual as such is progressing only towards her own death, why would an enthusiasm for progress ever have emerged from the projection of individual experience? I suggest the answer is that while one’s own individual experience of time is not inherently progressive, progress is a pretty good projection of the experience of being young, when one’s mind changes and grows quickly. And the grand narrative of progress accordingly demands that we imagine the representative individual as the youth.

**Agamben and Potentiality**

The theme of potentiality has been highlighted in recent years by the sweltering popularity of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. As Leland de la Durantaye notes, however, most discussions of Agamben focus only on his *Homo Sacer* and do not actually confront his concept of potentiality, despite Agamben’s own claims for the centrality of this concept to his thinking (Durantaye 11; 228-9). Agamben has argued that his entire oeuvre is an attempt to think through the meaning of the phrase “I can”—and to offer a re-evaluation of what the potential to do something really means (*Potentialities* 177). This re-evaluation begins in a critique of a long history of understanding of potentiality as the simple opposite of actuality, which Agamben thinks is rooted in a misreading of Aristotle. Contrastingly, he argues for a notion of potentiality that does not

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15 Tobias Boes has drawn a connection between Agamben’s philosophy and the Modernist Bildungsroman. Boes does not explicitly discuss Agamben as a thinker of potentiality, but rather makes use of his idea of the “inclusive exclusion” as a way of rethinking whether individuals can be incorporated into social groups (see Boes “Conrad”).
stress so much the power to do something, as the power not to: “To be potential means: to be one’s own lack, to be in relation to one’s own incapacity” (Potentialities 182). The fullest experience of actuality, for Agamben, is one that contains the abyss of impotentiality within it, so that this lack of power is actualized. Agamben gives the example of a master pianist like Glenn Gould choosing not to play, or to play in such a way that silence and refusal are somehow included in his performance (CC 35). We might imagine writing a novel in such a way that the failure to write and the very limits of what can be written are part of the story. (Although Agamben doesn’t note the example, most of Beckett’s fiction arguably aims at something very much like this.) Agamben’s Messiah-figure of impotentiality is Melville’s Bartleby, who asserts a kind of rich power in his refusal to assert his will, remaining immovable in his mildly stated mantra that he would “prefer not to” (Potentialities 243-71).

What is crucial for Agamben’s thought is a model of the human, and human politics, divorced from purpose—not lacking a rich sense of potentiality, but lacking the sense of being called to a specific task, and so acknowledging “the essential inoperability of humankind . . . the radical being-without-work of human communities” (Means 141). In place of a celebration of potentiality, Agamben recommends an insistence on impotentiality—on the sense in which human potentiality, tied to no task in particular, is both a rich source and an abyss of weakness. To use an image of my own, we might imagine the contrast between the traditional, “metaphysical” model of potentiality and Agamben’s model in this way: in the traditional model, potentiality is something like a holding bay, where possibilities await a delivery that may or may not ever come. Some possibilities are actualized, but the contrast between delivered and (as of yet) undelivered
goods remains clear. And something always remains in the bay. But in Agamben’s model, potentiality is something more like a dark well, while actualities are objects that have come to the surface. What is important to Agamben is the paradoxical attempt to linger in the well, and indeed, *to make its very darkness somehow appear in the sunlight*. In the first model, a kind of triumph is possible; the best possibilities can be delivered and other possibilities avoided. And we always have a reserve of power, because the bay never empties. In the second model, while one might still of course hope for better outcomes on an everyday level, the idea of triumph has been deflated, because actualizing all one’s possibilities also means displaying one’s ultimate weakness. This does not mean the individual might not be capable of great things—only that our abilities are most clearly seen when presented together with their limits.

Agamben claims that our thinking about potentiality has been a powerful background influence throughout the philosophical legacy of the West; following Heidegger, he tells the story of a progressively more caustic loss of the human capacity for dwelling in the world, and argues that our models of potentiality have kept us sealed in to this path. Because his model makes the stakes for rethinking potentiality remarkably high, some of his claims can be hard to take; Agamben arguably fails to give enough evidence to substantiate his claims about the immense influence that the “holding bay” model (as I am calling it) has had in the history of the West. But the ethical import of

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16 In Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, he attempts to explain the force the opposition between actuality and potentiality has had over the history of law. But in the crucial passage which explains the connection, Agamben only notes that “the sovereign ban, which applies to the exception in no longer applying, corresponds to the structure of potentiality, which maintains itself in relation to actuality precisely through its ability not to be” (46). That is to say, Agamben derives a key causal claim from the fact that the decision of a sovereign power as to who is subsumed under a law has the same “shape” as the persistence of the potential to do something over the actual doing of it. This is logically problematic; as Catherine
his claims becomes significantly clearer when he gives a concrete example of the
efficacy of emphasizing human weakness. In Means without End, he describes the
importance of the figure of the refugee, “perhaps the only thinkable figure for the people
of our time and the only category in which one may see today . . . the forms and limits of
the coming community” (Means 16). The refugee is for Agamben the best image of the
political person, as an abyss of impotence; to emphasize the political person qua citizen
is to celebrate the better possibilities (citizenship, the opportunity for action) being
delivered from the holding bay, while ignoring the well from which human political life
emerges, which is the possibility of being abandoned and left helpless.17 In many of his
writings, he claims that for all 20th century philosophy has stressed finitude, uncertainty,
and fallibility, we have actually not yet felt the real weakness of the human being enough
yet to arrive at a just model of the political order.18 That is, there are very concrete ways
in which our insistence on potential, power, and capability welds us to focusing on the
power of states (and the accomplishments of people who have the opportunity to
contribute to their success), rather than on the incredible vulnerability of individual

Mills notes, Agamben tends to let relationships of correspondence slip into relationships of identity (Mills 16).
17 Worded this way, the argument does begin to resemble Hobbes’s claim about a brutal “State of Nature.”
Agamben would not agree, however, that the state of being a refugee is “natural” or prior to politics; only
that it is a recurrent possibility which reveals the truest picture of the impotentiality of the subject in the
face of state power in our time. Other figures besides the refugee may have been appropriate at other times.
18 Agamben states this eloquently in his early book Language and Death:
Perhaps man—the animal who seems not to be encumbered by any specific nature or any specific
identity—must experience his poverty even more radically. Perhaps humans are even poorer than they
supposed in attributing to themselves the experience of negativity and death as their specific
anthropogenetic patrimony, and in basing every community and tradition on this experience. (LD 96)
The claims here are very large, but the spirit of the thinking is simple: the argument is that we have to cut
the imaginary tie between death and human “nature” that leads us to see death as having a special meaning
for us that it does not have for other animals. Humanity is the animal that knows it will die, but it should
not, even in the limit spirited of an existentialist project carried out against the backdrop of finitude, see
this as the grounding of meaning. Agamben’s belief that we must see ourselves as potentiality without any
specific destiny builds on what we might call a recognizably postmodern ethics, in that it asserts that
ethical catastrophes arise from subordinating ourselves to teleological projects of meaning.
people. Agamben opposes the old, “metaphysical” model of potentiality for being too triumphalist, and for encouraging Westerners to think of their power and abilities in a way that leads them to strive restlessly forward.

On my reading, the holding bay model of potentiality is precisely a modern conception, tied to the narrative of progress, and what is necessary is to conceive of the possibilities for individual experience in a way that escapes the putative parallel between the individual and the momentum of restless historical upward motion. What I draw from the theory of impotentiality is just such a model of possibility that emphasizes the vulnerability of persons in the present. This shift from the temporal to the atemporal is not precisely Agamben’s own emphasis, while he does discuss temporality in many of his works, what really interests Agamben is the pure limits of human ability. But the “holding bay” model of potentiality lends itself to a more temporal conception of possibility (the best things are yet to arrive) whereas the dark well model tends to operate in the present tense. So while I do not agree with Agamben’s claim that potentiality has governed the entire history of the West, I am drawn to his model because I believe that the emphasis on weakness, finitude, and impotentiality—an emphasis on the dark well of possibilities operating in the present—is a vital element in the attempt to temper the mixture of anxiety and triumph that guides the way we conceive of potentiality in a

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19 Agamben does not emphasize a shift from potentiality (as a temporal category) to impotentiality (as an extra-temporal category) because the shift for him has to do with reconceiving our notion of “existing” potentiality, which is not a temporal category to begin with. Agamben is mainly interested not in what he calls generic potentiality, which is the potentiality of the child to become an adult, but only in “existing” potentiality, which is the modality of possibility in the present (Potentialities 179). The latter is the type of potentiality that operates in the present tense; it belongs to someone who has an ability already, but is not using it—such as a dancer who is currently asleep.

20 While he does not foreground temporality in most of his books, Agamben has followed and built on Benjamin’s critique of the modern understanding of “empty, homogenous time” as the time of progress. See the essay “Time and History” published in Infancy and History (IH 97-116).
progressive society. Conceiving the subject along the lines of a triumphalist model of potentiality is a central imaginative element of the age of the Bildungsroman, essential for a social imaginary that includes both (social) progress and (personal) upward mobility. In this sense, Agamben’s claims about the dangers of triumphalist potentiality have something in common with Habermas’s description of capitalist ideology as “achievement ideology.”

Bourgeois interiority, being based on what one might achieve, must be profoundly future-oriented. To some extent our obsession with youth corresponds then to the Bildungsroman’s emphasis on the protagonist as an exemplary person, for both are based in a middle-class emphasis on the universality of talent, which imagines every child as a secret well of potential market value.

As I have noted already, there are also many other forms in which the ages of an individual person come to stand for broader political forces. The power of the Wordsworthian child as an image of organic community diminishes somewhat around the end of the 19th century, but the image of youth as a metonym for the potentialities of progress remains. As the 20th century dawns, power often comes to be imagined as something more impersonal and abstract, distended from actual human lives. Jed Esty has recently argued that as capitalism advances and becomes increasingly international, it leads the Bildungsroman to abandon the image of nationalized belonging that might

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21 Habermas develops the idea of “achievement ideology” as one of many components of bourgeois celebration of the private in his book *Legitimation Crisis*. Habermas writes that capitalist education procedures “lead to motivational structures that are class specific, that is, to the repressive authority of conscience and an individualistic achievement orientation among the bourgeoisie, and to external superego structures and a conventional work morality in the lower class” (77).

22 A much more recent Bildungsroman, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, is presided over by a song Saleem is sung by his Ayah: “Anything you want to be, you can be:/ You can be just what-all you want” (126). As one critic notes, this celebration of upward mobility in Rushdie’s novel derives from a splitting of the inner and outer self that is simultaneously a splitting of past and future: the little boys may be nothing now, but their inner life offers a promise of future greatness (ten Kortenaar 74).
bring maturity, and instead imagine an unending youth. In 1904, Conrad’s *Nostromo* describes the potentiality of youth solely in terms of money in the figure of the American millionaire Holroyd:

> To be a millionaire, and such a millionaire as Holroyd, is like being eternally young. The audacity of youth reckons upon what it fancies an unlimited time at its disposal; but a millionaire has unlimited means in his hand—which is better. One’s time on Earth is an uncertain quantity, but about the long reach of millions there is no doubt . . . Holroyd at fifty-eight is like a man on the threshold of life, and better, too. (228)

Potentiality has here become capital itself. The young person is too audacious if she sees herself as the possessor of power; the real power lies in pure potency—which composes a youth that never has to compromise itself into adulthood.

Many 19th-century Bildungsromane confront just the problems I have been articulating here—the inherent failure of a model of subjectivity based on potentiality, and the restless egoism of a socialization concerned with the future. The aporia of conceiving subjectivity in terms of potentiality is a great cause of strain in the 19th-century English Bildungsroman, reaching its most dramatic point in *Jude the Obscure*, where the possibilities of selfhood reach an explicit exhaustion in a critique of both social institutions and genre. But before discussing Hardy, I want to take note of an important element of the tradition that Hardy works with by pursuing it through two of the high points of the English Bildungsroman: *Great Expectations* and *Middlemarch*. In each of these novels, models of maturity are put forward that humble the subject by referring his or her desires to other more abstract forms of futurity other than upward
mobility or individual ambition; though both novels advocate humility, both also connect the subject to other larger forms of potentiality.

**Egotism and History Part I: Dickens**

Whatever the consequences of thinking about potentiality on a mass scale, the ethical risks on an individual scale are very clear. To see oneself as a vector of potentiality is also to run the risk of seeing others as subordinate to one’s mission. Thus, Moretti’s criticism of *Great Expectations* overlooks important complexities in the ethical work that Dickens attempts to do by his representations of egotism. In many Victorian Bildungsromane, egotism is the demon that haunts subjectivity in various forms, twisting people towards narrow and obsessive attachments and away from sympathy with others. The movement of the Bildungsroman tends to be a movement out of the self, away from its identification with its own potentiality, and towards sympathy with others. I want to stress this point because, if we are to look for modernist inheritors of the genre, it is first important to be fair to the history of the genre—the Victorian Bildungsroman is a genre concerned as much with the Other as with the self. What we find in all these novels is a model of maturity that is based on the amelioration of competitive egotism.23 The conventional association of youth with selfishness is brought into play, but also

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23 I tend to prefer the term *egotism* here, though George Eliot prefers egoism. Both words are modern coinages. Of the two, *egotism* is the earlier word to appear; Addison is cited in the *OED* as having used it in 1714 to refer to the overuse of the first person singular (“egotism” 1). *Egoism* followed later in the 18th century with a more precise philosophical meaning, referring to the belief that there is no proof of anything outside the individual mind (“egoism” 1). While *egoism* has technically continued to denote a philosophical position, in practice either word could be used by the beginning of the 19th century to describe mere selfishness (“egoism” 2c; “egotism” 2). This slippage is a telling reflection of how egoism/egotism tends to be imagined in a capitalist society; *egoism* begins by meaning simply the presupposition of the ontological primacy of the individual, but very quickly becomes *egotism*, acquiring the baggage of acquisitiveness. For a longer treatment of the history of the two words as an element of modern individualism, see Steiner.
complicated by the tendency in these novels to encourage youth to trade in its selfish potentiality for the participation in a communal form of progress and potential. The difference between these Victorian texts and the modernist ones is largely a matter of degree; what we will find in the later chapters is a further and more radical step in the renunciation of individual potential.

In Charles Dickens’s work, attacks on egotism and vanity take a wide variety of shapes. But in *Great Expectations* they focus on class pretension and upward mobility. This is what has allowed many Marxist critics, including Moretti, to claim the novel’s message is ultimately: stay in your place. But this is only part of the story, for Pip is also a figure of a real potentiality that somehow ends up squandered—that is forced to squander itself in the process of overcoming egotism. Pip is intelligent, and while his desire to be a gentleman and become “uncommon” is a pretension, it is not only that—he also hopes that something special about him, his “excess” selfhood in Armstrong’s terms, might actually be recognized by adults. For all his bitter attacks on himself for betraying Joe’s Christian kindness, the novel also makes it clear that Pip is promising and intelligent in a way Joe is not, despite the fact that they come from the same class. It may be true that the novel is guilty of condescension towards the admirable but “childish” peasant mind in the figure of Joe—but it is also true that one of the things that humanizes Pip in the early chapters is that he begins as a child trying to navigate the awkwardness of being cared for by a good person who cannot share in or understand his interests.\(^{24}\)

\(^{24}\) This situation is made clear in the scene where Pip tries to educate Joe (106-7); even in the midst of berating himself for his shame of Joe’s commonness, the scene simultaneously communicates the difference between Pip’s quick grasp of things and Joe’s slow one.
Pip is symbolically young, portrayed as resourceful and dynamic, and is associated with potentiality inasmuch as his youth itself is seen as a real asset; whereas Satis house is the place where everything is faded and time has stopped, Pip is expected to enter in order to make the clocks start again and let in the light (229). Pip’s wellspring of potentiality has little effect, however, on the exaggerated frozenness of Satis house—a rigidity that Miss Havisham, according to her own claim, has passed on to Estella (395). That is, Miss Havisham has bequeathed to the next generation the immobility of bitterness that functions as a structural contrast to Pip’s dynamism. This particular evil is repeated in the novel, and indeed it is the most operative demon throughout: not the direct desire for upward mobility, but the tendency to make someone else in your image. As the egotism of Wopsle finds a captive audience in children he can read to, so Pumblechook’s great act of comic villainy is that he pretends to be Pip’s benefactor. The novel is invested in the critique of seeing another person as an extension of oneself, whether subordinating them to your use or trying to make them in your image—as Estella has been raised “to wreak Mrs. Havisham’s revenge upon men” (298)—and also in the ethical complexities of trying to “make” someone in the name of benefitting them. This is the failed maturity of some of the other adult characters, who seem to have a predatory relationship to youth and potentiality rather than a supportive one. Magwitch represents the hypertrophy of this tendency, as he struts proudly and brags of the people he has overcome by making Pip’s fortune, seemingly without ever thinking of making one for himself, and with no awareness of the fact that by doing this, he has burdened and chained Pip for life.²⁵ A refugee of sorts from the economic system of the day,

²⁵ Pip notes that Magwitch is boasting in large part for himself, and that he is completely unable to see any
Magwitch is, as many critics have noted, a dark mirror for the forces of acquisition and inheritance. His egotism combines most fully the desire for upward mobility with the desire to replicate oneself in other people, as Magwitch identifies intensely with Pip’s fortunes in his attempt to construct a repaired and idealized version of himself through someone else’s life. In a sense then, Magwitch’s egotism, bizarre as it may be, is also a sort of refraction of the worst parts of the future-driven bourgeois identity, as his attempt to imaginatively re-make himself in someone else is simultaneously a blind subordination and swallowing of that person’s life. This parasitical use of others is something in which Pip does not share, and he is thus divided from the more corrosive forms of egotism, whatever he may say about himself. Pip therefore takes his place amongst other Dickensian children who are used as tools by adults. Pip’s entire narrative is encircled and closed off by the fact that his own ambitions echo Magwitch’s, and this parallel is the source of the novel’s moments of uncanny fear, as Pip sees a double of himself in Magwitch and is repelled in horror. Whether fairly or no, Pip experiences this horror as a repudiation of any ambitions he has ever had. Pip’s own linear sense of ambition is foreclosed by the circularity of being chained to this criminal from the beginning of his life; through this motion of foreclosure the novel presents a sort of tableau of the functioning of extreme egotism as a movement which closes the subject in on itself.

Pip also experiences, however, much more mediated versions of egotism, particularly after he meets Magwitch and begins castigating himself for his ambitions. In

reason why Pip should not also be overjoyed that he has been benefitted by Magwitch’s designs (336). Magwitch’s boasting is folded back into the sphere of egotism in part by being highly competitive; he expresses his victory in the making of Pip as though flinging it back at those who spurned him (317).
contrast to Magwitch’s desire to “make” someone else, Pip seeks the continuity of a moral identity. On the verge of being murdered by Orlick, Pip discovers that his greatest fear is not death, but the loss of the recognized identity that comes from benefitting people. At the moral climax of the novel, Pip discovers an almost supernatural terror at the possibility that his expectation of fortunes will fail to have been traded for moral repute:

My mind, with inconceivable rapidity, followed out all the consequences of such a death. Estella’s father would believe I had deserted him, would be taken, would die accusing me; even Herbert would doubt me, when he compared the letter I had left for him, with the fact that I had called at Miss Havisham’s gate for only a moment; Joe and Biddy would never know how sorry I had been that night; none would ever know what I had suffered, how true I had meant to be, what an agony I had passed through. The death close before me was terrible, but far more terrible than death was the dread of being misremembered after death. (420)

Pip’s good intentions focus themselves in this passage, defining the new, more beneficent and generous form of egotism in which he invests himself after meeting Magwitch. In claiming that Pip’s intention still represents a species of egotism, I do not mean to be hard on it, since the desire to be remembered well is actually inspiring Pip to serve others rather than himself. Pip wants to cash in his fortune for the futurity of being well-remembered. To modify Conrad’s description of Holroyd, one’s time on Earth might be uncertain, but of the long reach of good deeds there can no doubt. This is not Pumblechook’s egotism; it is a mediated, narrative egotism, an understanding of the self as a good person—for Pip actually means to do the things he will be remembered for. In
other words, he wants the potentiality of his future “expectations” to become the actuality of being remembered well. This comparatively humble and concrete project is what *Great Expectations* puts forth as a form of maturity.

Towards the end of the novel Pip is able to set aside even this need for good repute, changing his ways through his anonymous gift to Herbert. As a kindly man who unites futurity and aspiration, but never uses anyone else for his own ends, Herbert stands in for a form of benevolent capitalism in the novel. The association of youth and potentiality with capital, hinted at by the novel’s title, is also latent in Herbert’s aspirations; he is perennially hopeful, and discerns “Capital” hiding around him at various times of the day: “he began to look about him hopefully at mid-day; that he drooped when he came in to dinner; that he seemed to descry Capital in the distance rather clearly, after dinner, that he all but realised Capital towards midnight” (270). Capital is here both the concrete resource one needs to build a business and also, as an abstraction, a figure for aspiration in general; the capitalization of the word providing a sort of gentle mockery of the straightforwardness of Herbert’s approach. Pip identifies with Herbert’s hope and wants to know himself as the person who made it work out, but his anonymous gift to Herbert (and his willingness to work for him) mediates and rarefies that egotism until there is none of the frozenness of Satis house left in it at all. Where egotism tends to freeze people into habit and obsession in Dickens, setting egotism aside brings both moral continuity and workable dynamism.

It would certainly be possible to claim that Dickens is insufficiently hard on the capitalist system. But it is also worth noting that Herbert, the hopeful capitalist full of potential, is completely helpless before Pip aids him. The only effective money-maker is
the hard, impersonal Jaggers (though Jaggers too has a soft side.) And the risk that the individual may squander his or her potentiality is perhaps nowhere better expressed than Pip’s reflection, on his 21st birthday, that coming of age hardly seems worth it in the suspicious world Jaggers administers (288). But what Great Expectations most mistrusts is not the desire for upward mobility itself—or even the desire for a fortune, a project which Herbert approaches in a kindly manner. What the novel attacks is the desire to submit others to one’s use, or to imprint a direct image of oneself on the next generation. Pip’s continual self-castigations are intense, and to some extent I agree with the school of thinking that they are mysterious, and that they operate in excess of what Pip has actually done wrong.26 Pip’s inner “excess,” his talent and potential, becomes instead excessive guilt. But we should note that Pip’s attacks on himself centre on his failure to cherish properly the straightforward goodness of Joe, who, with his lack of pretence, has sealed himself into the continuity of a moral identity from day one. If Pip is guilty of anything, it is not leaving home, but rather adopting in small measure the novel’s most central form of villainy—the desire to make a direct imprint of oneself on another. In his embarrassment about his origins, Pip wishes Joe—the perennial child—to be different than he is, and so Pip takes a step, even if he does not go far down the path, towards squandering his potential by attempting to reproduce an image of himself. But despite his renown as the novelist of childhood, Dickens has put forth a model of maturity, not so much in the humbling of Pip’s ambitions as in the critique of any project of subordinating others to one’s mission.

26 There are many critics who have tried to explain this excess in psychoanalytic terms; particularly helpful is Jack Rawlins’s account of Pip’s attitude to himself as an internalization of the cruelty of the adults (Rawlins 667-83).
**Egotism and History Part II: George Eliot**

Egoism becomes an even more universal principle of subjectivity with George Eliot than it is with Dickens. As J. Hillis Miller argued some years ago, egoism is ubiquitous for Eliot; it is the basic postulate of the subject and skews every interpretation in advance, so that “the act of seeing is the spontaneous affirmation of a will to power over what is seen. This affirmation of order is based on the instinctive desire to believe that the world is providentially structured in a neat pattern of which one is oneself the center” (“Optic” 138). In analyzing *Middlemarch* in terms of the path of *Bildung* from egoism to altruism, I realize that I cover a well-worn territory. It is not my intention to dismiss the many complexities in the novel which complicate or undermine this arc (such as the various ways in which Dorothea and Will Ladislaw are ironized, or the ambiguity of the ending). But if this arc is familiar, it is because Eliot’s rendering of egoism and sympathy inspired generations of readers. For F. R. Leavis, it was the apogee of the moral maturity that criticism should locate and praise in the English novel. Eliot’s maturity—represented as the overcoming or mediation of egoism, but described without the comforts of religion or the Hegelian telos of absolute knowing—is still one of the most potent ideas to emerge from the Bildungsroman; it is difficult to resist the rhetorical force of her claim that “we are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves” (*MM* 198).

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27 Nina Auerbach has recently written compellingly on the ironization of Dorothea and the possibility of siding with Casaubon. (Auerbach 87-106).

28 Leavis claims that only *Middlemarch* represents the real genius of George Eliot’s maturity, the quality that made her “so much greater an artist than Flaubert” (Leavis 78). Leavis supports this point by citing a similar and equally famous remark by Woolf, who describes *Middlemarch* as a “magnificent book which with all its imperfections is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people” (*CE I* 201).
The skewing power of egoism is described in the famous parable that begins chapter 27 of *Middlemarch*:

Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent. (248)

Egoism begins to sound as though it has blanketed the entire world of perception. In the immediate context of the passage, the parable applies to characters’ interpretation of events; Rosamond thinks providence has arranged it so Lydgate will be close to her. But throughout *Middlemarch*, this image also applies to a broader sort of egoism, which involves not only the interpretation of events but also one’s image of oneself. Eliot here conflates in an interesting manner the distinction between egoism and egotism. The image of the light organizing the scratches into concentric circles suggests that perhaps egoism is the only light by which to see—that all mental activity is driven by the need to find oneself somehow bigger, closer to the centre, than others; egoism slides toward egotism because the view that things refer primarily to oneself is inherently competitive.

In *Middlemarch*, very few of the characters actually seek to make a fortune—an enterprise Eliot seems to deem almost beneath discussion: money-making is displaced on
to criminals like Bulstrode and Raffles, and the desire for upward mobility dissolved into Rosamond’s demands for furniture. Eliot’s central characters are mostly reformers and scholars, and yet their goals are continually squandered by an egoism that makes them overreach—a kind of restless upward mobility of the inner life. The major characters of *Middlemarch* are all driven by self-images that place themselves and their intentions somehow at the centre. The forms of self-image are highly various; Dorothea, for example, wishes she had more to do as she settles down to Lowick—“her mind has glanced over the possibility, which she would have preferred, of finding that her home would be in a parish which had a larger share of the world’s misery, so that she might have more active duties in it” (72). This passage is worded precisely so as to keep Dorothea only an inch away from actually wishing suffering on people so that she might assuage it, and so be more central to the mission of kindness. And yet, that inch is important—for it is the beginning of the mediating tendency that makes Dorothea the novel’s heroine.

Casaubon, who represents the abyss—or tomb—of egoism in the novel, demonstrates the comparativity of egoism most clearly; Casaubon, who plans to publish a small monograph “whereby certain assertions of Warburton’s could be corrected,” says very little about his research except to say that other scholars are wrong (264). Eliot’s narrator describes Casaubon’s soul as one that goes on “fluttering in the swampy ground where it was hatched, thinking of its wings and never flying” (262). The proximity to his hatching grounds suggests Casaubon is in some sense terminally immature. In his pale

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29 While Eliot is obviously not opposed to “money-making” as such, she is clearly suspicious of many forms of it. Alan Mintz argues that Eliot’s well-known opposition to gambling goes hand in hand with all forms of profit divorced from concrete labour, and notes that the idealization of Caleb Garth in *Middlemarch* is linked to his direct immersion in labour as the sole source of profit (Mintz 138).
narrowness, he mirrors Miss Havisham—both of them are tomblike figures who bring the potentiality of the subject to an ossified egoism. Miss Havisham’s ego is all bitterness and resentment, which, as Nietzsche saw, is a kind of backwards-willing, and so a direct opposition to the forward momentum of a Bildung plot. Casaubon does seek to finish a project, but his pettiness and lack of real enjoyment keep him nearly as hindered. Both are figures of an almost supernatural vanity that takes up the structural position where potentiality is totally squandered in competition. For potentiality to really get somewhere, it must overcome the competitive ego. All of the characters in Middlemarch who we would say “have potential”—Lydgate, Dorothea, Casaubon (who is not young but has great ambitions), and Will Ladislaw—either lose out to egoism or learn humility. And so, humility is the force we are to see opposed to this frigidity: if one wants to avoid the tomb of egoism, one has to be content to rest in unvisited tombs.

This humility is intimately related to the importance of sympathy. There are of course many critiques that can be and have been made of Eliot’s understanding of sympathy. The humanist humility she directs her characters—and readers—towards is often cast as only a rarefied and self-satisfied egoism. But my point for the moment is

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30 Nancy Armstrong has discussed the tendency of 19th-century Bildung plots to overcome the supernatural in order to establish maturity: “Victorian realism implied that one became a modern adult as he or she surmounted magical thinking” (Armstrong 22). Casaubon is not guilty of this kind of thinking, (though Miss Havisham, with her literal demand that the clocks stop, might be), but there is a sense in which the excess of rigidity in both characters makes them somewhat dragon-like, and real adulthood for those held captive by these characters seems to begin only after they are slain.

31 Mintz notes that Eliot’s concern with the theme of vocation is based in its capacity to incorporate both the risk of egoism and the possibility of dedicating oneself to others (150).

32 Many critiques of sympathy take their bearings from Adam Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments. Smith claims that sympathy is so profoundly based on a projection of ourselves that we imagine others suffering pains they actually do not, because we would in their situation (Smith 7). As a projection of self, sympathy for Smith seems to fall within the realm of the ego. Sympathy for others appears even more ego-driven in Rousseau, where sympathy is a sort of pleasure reminding the sympathizing subject of her autonomy (See Emile, book 4). Eliot is often criticized on the same grounds, though it has also been argued that Eliot sees the matter differently, envisioning sympathy as much closer to what is now more frequently called
only that, more clearly than any other Victorian Bildungsroman, *Middlemarch* establishes the genre as a kind of quest for a genuine relationship to the Other. Casaubon’s bitter provision in his will establishes with finality that his quest for a lover and help-meet never escaped subordinating the other person to his own self-conception; the various other love-plots in the novel (and indeed many of its other plot elements) negotiate the possibilities of relationship without this subordination.

At the moral climax of *Great Expectations*, as Pip faced the possibility of his being murdered, he tried to trade in all he had for the long reach of a moral identity; Eliot goes a step further and gives us the climactic moment of Dorothea’s sympathy. Significantly, this moment too is partially based on a kind of futurity, as Dorothea’s mission to save Rosamond and make right the lives of those in her immediate circle is inspired, in part, by the promise of larger life and continuity she sees in figures that suggest a family unit:

She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving—perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life,

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empathy. Elizabeth Ermarth argues that Eliot’s understanding of sympathy is modeled on Feuerbach’s analysis of prayer, and actually requires recognizing the differences between oneself and another; by finding the limits of oneself, one can see one’s actions in productive relationship to other people and not impose oneself on them (Ermarth 34). Eliot defined sympathy as the aim of her art in terms that did in fact suggest a recognition of differences: “The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures” (*GEL* 3.111).
and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining. (741)

Dorothea cannot even see these people clearly from the window, and she fills in the parts she cannot see with an idealized image of a pastoral shepherd. She is looking at some distance, and perhaps using concepts that are still too abstract or imaginative (despite the fact that she resolved in the previous paragraph not to select the objects of her assistance through fancy!). She is still within her own mind, and yet making an effort to stretch outward; what we have here is a tableau of Eliot’s moral agent: she is still held within the window of the ego, but has at least opened the curtains. Egoism is never fully overcome, but maturity consists in at least resolving to expand outward and attempt to meet the Other as best one can. As we shall see, the demands that one overcome egoism have intensified, rather than diminished, as we approach the present day; and because of this, for many the liberal satisfactions of Eliot’s maturity have no longer seemed to be enough. Indeed, they were not even enough for Thomas Hardy.

**Jude’s Potential**

When we come to *Jude the Obscure*, what we find is a deep sense of exhaustion about the potentiality of the subject. This exhaustion does not have a single, clear source. The failure of Bildung in *Jude the Obscure* is connected with the failure of a cluster of related forces: education, marriage, progress, and even biological youth itself run out of steam in the course of the novel. All this, combined with Hardy’s claim that the reaction
to *Jude* cured him of the desire to write novels (*Jude* xxxvii), has made it hard for critics to avoid the sense that *Jude* has something terminal about it. As Ian Gregor’s classic study claims, “Hardy’s last singular achievement was shaped by a conflict between a kind of fiction which he had exhausted and a kind of fiction which instinctively he discerned as meeting his need, but which, imaginatively, he had no access to” (209).

Many explanations for the bleakness of the novel have been offered. Earlier critics tended to take Hardy’s sense of fatalism at face value, and proposed that the novel was simply a depiction of a cosmos in which humanity featured primarily as a victim. Later critics have tended to agree with Terry Eagleton’s assertion that in fact, the tragedy of *Jude* has nothing cosmic about it at all—every force which operates on Jude is historical (62). Most of the forces that cause atrophy in the novel are social institutions, and even seemingly “natural” forces, such as heredity, are mediated to the characters through the narratives that describe them. Indeed, some have claimed that the main thing that seems to have been exhausted in the novel is narrative itself, so that old genres and forms appear only to proclaim themselves irrelevant. Following this logic, most discussions of the relationship between *Jude* and the Bildungsroman tradition see the novel as a parody or satire of the genre. Frank R. Giordano Jr. describes it as an “anti-Bildungsroman,” claiming that Hardy chose a naturally optimistic form with which to

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33 For example, Elliott claims that “Jude is a victim of a predetermined state of things. His will is not free: character has no part in his destiny” (51). A more sophisticated example of this viewpoint is developed in Miller’s influential *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire*.

34 The role of narrative in mediating genealogy is explored by Tess O’Toole, who sees genealogical repetition as the central locus of exhaustion in the novel (65-73).

35 Pyle discusses the impossibility of accessing a sense of continuity with history using narrative (374-5); see my discussion of the problem of the past below. For other variations see Hollington, Matz, O’Toole.
deploy his pessimistic vision, so as to heighten the irony (589). Gregory Castle cautions against this reading, claiming that the novel is not so much a parody of the genre as an attempt to use it to open up a space for new possibilities—“the failure of genre is essential for the success of critique” (Castle 82). For Castle, the target of Hardy’s critique is the pragmatic, capitalistic understanding of self-development that he claims had come to dominate the form in England by the end of the 19th century. In making this critique, Castle believes, the novel succeeds in opening up the ground for the modernist defense of an older, 18th-century model of Bildung as aesthetic inner harmony.

I agree with Castle that a critique is occurring, but I want to argue that Hardy’s emphasis on potentiality also opens up a critique on another scale. If we focus on potentiality as an element of the Bildungsroman, we see that its cancellation in Jude the Obscure amounts to an ostentatious sense of exhaustion, insinuating that the belief in the potential success of youth has failed so entirely that biological life itself is imperiled. It is clear that Hardy wanted to implicate a number of the institutions of his day, but it is equally clear, as the earlier critics tended to stress, that he also meant to make universal and even cosmic statements, even if those statements themselves take historical root. Gillian Beer notes that, as a reader of Darwin, Hardy was thinking about grand narratives set against the broader timelines of the natural world (Darwin’s Plots 224).

A number of critics note in passing that the novel is a reversal of the Bildungsroman, though there are actually surprisingly few studies of how the novel relates to the history of the genre. Bouhmela points out that Jude abounds in “inversions of the classic English Bildungsroman” (Bouhmela 244); Collins calls it an “inverted Bildungsroman” (139); Hollington describes it as an ironic “send up” of the Bildungsroman (101). Alden does examine the relationship between the novel and the ideal of social mobility expressed in the 19th century English Bildungsroman, and also concludes that Jude is an “anti-Bildungsroman” based in Hardy’s resentment of the class-structure (66).
Obscure imagines Darwinian competition lurking behind nearly everything.37 In a letter recorded in the Life, Hardy claims to have believed that the only moral law in Nature was “pain” and that mimicking Nature would “bring disaster to humanity” (Life 315). Accordingly, the novel repeatedly condemns not only British society, but the entire natural world, for its competitive character. From early on, Jude seems to want to escape the competitive law of the natural order, which “sickened his sense of harmony” (13). Phillotson later says that “cruelty is the law pervading all nature and society; and we can’t get out of it if we would!” (335). Lest we think this only Phillotson’s opinion, it is confirmed in the scene where Jude kills the pig, and learns that if the pig does not die in slow agony then the meat will not be as valuable (63).

If egotism was a general affliction in Dickens’s Bildungsroman, and a universal one in Eliot’s, in Hardy’s the condition has become transcendental. There is no life for anything without rapacious competitiveness. On one level, this competition certainly is a refraction of the capitalist spirit of competition—all of nature seems subsumed in the globe of egotism. On another level, it implicates all narratives of progress and development. Of all the terrible forces that oppose Jude, none is so grandiose or disheartening as the fact that success is frequently conceived as a form of murder. Hardy inflates Eliot’s globe of egotism, pulling it tight until it becomes a balloon suffocating his characters. And in a world so imagined, Eliot’s maturity—the maturity of sympathy and moderated egotism—hardly seems like a sufficient response.

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37 Darwin has been criticized for projecting backwards into evolutionary history the competitiveness of his own historical period; some have claimed Hardy is doing the same. This case against Darwin is made by Nancy Armstrong (98). John Goode makes the parallel claim about Hardy, claiming that the statements made about nature in Jude are refractions of the social order (150).
Paralleling human exhaustion with natural competitiveness allows Hardy to enlist genetics to help portray the exhaustion of the subject’s potentiality in Little Father Time—the child with the octogenarian face and no interest in the future. In the figure of father time, the projection of egotism into nature intersects with the potentiality of the subject that I have been tracing in the Victorian Bildungsroman. In reading the novel so that Little Father Time figures centrally, I privilege the element of the novel that generations of readers have found hardest to digest. Father Time disrupts the conventions of realist style, and critics have tended to respond to him based on whether they think this disruption an aesthetic catastrophe or a promising rupture that presages new narrative possibilities. What is so indigestible, and even comical, about Father Time is the unrelenting excessiveness of his characterization; he is nearly a parody of himself. This excess, however, is the natural product of the scale of Hardy’s social critique, which drives him to represent the tragic impasse to which youth is brought by the investment in potentiality.

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38 Even Havelock Ellis’s positive review of the novel found the murder of the children “comparatively unreal” (Cox 307). D. H. Lawrence wrote that Father Time “is very badly suggested, exaggerated, but one can see what is meant” (120). For Lawrence, the obvious thing that was “meant” was a sense of exhaustion quite different from what that perceived by most other critics, namely the exhaustion of the vitality of gender represented by Sue’s failure to be a real woman. Nonetheless, most later critics follow the spirit of Lawrence’s comment in seeing Father Time as an allegorical figure whose embarrassing excess arises from his being a mouthpiece for Hardy’s own cynicism. Daleski’s comment is representative: “That Little Father Time should be made the agent of the catastrophe is somewhat unfortunate, for he is an alien figure in an otherwise powerfully realistic mode, but given the mood of the author, he must have forced his way into the novel” (204). Bouhmela views Father Time’s disruption of realistic conventions positively, seeing those disruptions as undermining the normative force of the nuclear family (70). Hollington, whose Benjamin-inspired approach has much in common with my own, reads the boy as “Satanic deus ex machina” who undermines modern realism with allegory (111).
An Easter Weekend of the Mind

*Jude the Obscure* begins with a rich sense of the potential of Jude as an individual. He projects himself boldly forward, imagining himself an archdeacon or a bishop after he is educated (34). He gazes at the city of Christminster in the distance and takes it to be a “city of light” (21). Jude identifies his youthful potentiality with the institution of formal education which will actualize it through an unending process of *Bildung*, such that “my present knowledge will appear to me but as childish ignorance” (34). While Jude’s reveries are in part opposed by the distractions of erotic desire, sexuality is far from the only force that disrupts this actualization. Another force of opposition is the limited access of the poor to education, against which Hardy clearly means to protest. But, as many have noted, formal education is not only inaccessible in this novel, it also offers no hint of actually providing the form of edification Jude seeks; the students who do attend the school are identified with smug pretension rather than with curiosity (342). Education seems to amount only to egotism; Jude’s original aspirations are eventually called “mundane ambition masquerading in a surplice” (133).

Like Pip or Dorothea, then, there are elements of Jude’s learning process that involve the discovery of humility, and a setting aside of these first soaring aspirations. Jude’s failure to enter the university does lead him to discover that his life belongs among the workers rather than among the rich, and this is even described in terms that echo Dorothea’s vision in *Middlemarch*. Whereas Dorothea has a vision of “involuntary, palpitating life” (*MM* 741), Jude first finds himself at home among the workers when he begins “to see that town life was a book of humanity infinitely more palpitating, varied, and compendious, than the gown life” (121). But the important difference between the
two books is that Jude’s ambitions return, with the vengeance of the repressed, in his son. Little Father Time is not only Jude’s biological son, but also an extension of his failed Bildung plot. Both characters wish themselves out of the world in nearly identical language: at the first discovery of how difficult the cultivation of knowledge will be, Jude “wish[es] himself out of the world” (27), while Little Father Time believes that it is “better to be out o’ the world than in it” (351). There is a kind of wisdom in wishing oneself out of a world of competing wills, since the best one can ever be is a cruel victor. And yet, no matter how hard his own failures hit him, Jude still cannot help but imagine a career like his own for his son, hoping that what he could not accomplished might be accomplished by Little Father Time (292). Jude here succumbs to a pathetic final gasp of egotism, still attempting to see his dream live on, even into a next generation that is “deficient in all the usual hopes of childhood” (303). If living through the next generation posed an ethical risk in Great Expectations, it is comically out of place here; brought to utter misery by his own aspirations, Jude now hopes that they might be also be the aspirations of a child who hates being alive.

Little Father Time provides a grandiose demonstration of how the social institutions that allow for continuity and an interest in the future have become bankrupt. There is some suggestion that the cause of his premature agedness is the fact that his parents do not want him (288), but the sense of waste inscribed in the character is clearly meant to go beyond attacking Arabella as a bad mother. The institution of marriage is one target of critique, for Father Time is before anything else the product of a mandatory bond. As a character who sees suffering everywhere in the competitive natural order, he also implicitly bemoans the way human potential has lost itself in the competitiveness of
the capitalist world. But the excess of his character goes beyond any of these targets; the portrayal of youth turning against the future is a meta-historical figure, bespeaking a sense of waste that implicates human biological potential itself. Sue notes how odd it is that “these preternaturally old boys almost always come from new countries” (294), suggesting that the lands usually imagined as virgin fields—and hence as images of futurity and potentiality — are ironically producing ashes instead. In the suicide note left by Little Father Time, we find a self-condemnation of potentiality itself: “Done because we are too menny.” Growth and generation have reached the point of surfeit, and so potentiality turns on itself, foretelling—according to the doctor—a “coming universal wish not to live” (355).

If Hardy’s characters are denied progress, they are also denied the past; their egotism is encouraged by the fact that they have hardly any access to continuity what came before them, foreclosing yet another possibility for community. Jude’s love is so deeply attuned to the individual, that he can find no solace in procreation because it fails to reproduce Sue perfectly:

He projected his mind into the future, and saw her with children, more or less her own likeness, around her. But the consolation of regarding them as a continuation of her identity was denied to him, as to all such dreamers, by the willfulness of Nature in not allowing issue from one parent alone. Every desired renewal of an existence is debased by being half alloy. ‘If at the estrangement or death of my lost love, I could go and see her child—hers solely—there would be comfort in it,’ said Jude. And then he again uneasily saw, as he had latterly seen with more and more frequency, the scorn of nature of man’s finer emotions. (184)
On one level, perhaps we shouldn’t expect Jude to celebrate the existence of the offspring of Sue and Phillotson. But the passage also makes a universal claim, gathering the failure of a single identity to last forever into the conspiracy of Nature, which requires individuals to dissolve themselves into continuity with their species. Hardy’s implied author may or may not bemoan what Jude bemoans, but either way he depicts his characters as deeply isolated in their lack of continuity with others.

The exhaustion of Little Father Time’s is also related to his lack of access to the past. The narrator tells us:

Children begin with the detail, and learn up to the general; they begin with the contiguous, and gradually comprehend the universal. The boy seemed to have begun with the generals of life, and never to have concerned himself with the particulars. To him the houses, the willows, the obscure fields beyond, were apparently regarded not as brick residences, pollards, meadows; but as human dwellings in the abstract, vegetation, and the wide dark world. (292)

The implication is that human dwellings in the abstract are not something within which human beings can properly dwell. Little Father Time feels no joy in his abstract existence, alienated from the love of particulars that used to be guaranteed by continuity with tradition. In expressing the need for children to learn regard for the world first from particulars, Hardy evokes the idea, propounded by Wordsworth among others, of the importance of learning loyalty from the local; to some extent his exhausted child is therefore a lament for the loss of the Wordsworthian child of Nature. Many critics have
documented Hardy’s concern with the loss of heritage and his desire to retain the past.\textsuperscript{39} The first chapter of \textit{Jude} ends with a description of the loss of locality, one that recalls Wordsworth’s views on the importance of the local dead: \textsuperscript{40}

Many of the thatched and dormered dwelling-houses had been pulled down of late years, and many trees felled on the green. Above all the original church, hump-backed, wood-turreted, and quaintly hipped, had been taken down. . . . In place of it a tall new building of modern Gothic design, unfamiliar to English eyes, had been erected on a new piece of ground by a certain obliterator of historical records who had run down from London and back in a day. The site whereon so long had stood the ancient temple to the Christian divinities was not even recorded on the green and level grass-plot that had immemorially been the churchyard, the obliterated graves being commemorated by eighteenpenny cast-iron crosses warranted to last five years. (6)

And yet, despite this sense that local history is lost, the past is simultaneously present everywhere in \textit{Jude the Obscure}, but as the oppressive weight of convention. When Phillotson tries to behave unconventionally, he discovers one cannot do so in “an old civilization” which demands one cultivate a “sense of the same” (379). When Sue gets

\textsuperscript{39} See O’Toole, Pyle. Taylor describes a similar loss of connection with origins and tradition in Hardy’s analyses of language.

\textsuperscript{40} See in particular Wordsworth’s description in his \textit{Essays on Epitaphs} of the “wholesome influence of that communion between living and dead” that rural life promotes (\textit{Selected Prose} 340). This trope emphasizes above all the importance of continuity—the important thing about local landmarks is that previous generations of people with whom we can imagine a relationship have lived and died on a specific spot, and this motivates one to care for it. The vital sense of continuity that makes landscape and location seem possible to “dwell” with is also obliterated in Hardy. This idea, though it tended to be associated with conservatism in the 19th century, also strongly resembles Benjamin’s claim in “The Storyteller” that humanity will lose its memory if people live in houses in which no one has ever died.
married, the centuries of convention hang ominously over her head (216). The past is still present, but only as a dead letter, not a vital sense of continuity.

If the past is both absent and yet a ghostly weight, the future is similarly unreachable, even though the ideal of progress limps in the background. In the penultimate chapter, Jude speaks of “schemes afoot” for improving the university and making it less exclusive, but emphasizes that it is “too late, too late for me” (421). He then learns that Sue has gone back to Phillotson, and remarks, “As for Sue and me when we were at our best, long ago—when our minds were clear, and our love of the truth fearless—the time was not ripe for us! Our ideas were fifty years too soon to be any good to us” (422-23). These are essentially Jude’s last cogent words before he falls into delirium. While they express hope for the future, they do not reserve any experience of improvement for Jude, nor for any other characters in the novel. So while a liberal idea of “progress,” expressed in terms of increasing access to education and the loosening of sexual mores, remains a regulative ideal in Jude the Obscure, it is not one which any of the characters are allowed to experience. Both the past and the future are unreachable. Perhaps we can see the novel’s, “The letter killeth,” unaccompanied by the usual rejoinder that “the spirit giveth life,” in terms of the potentiality of the subject that underwrites historical narratives of progress. The epigraph would then suggest that Jude the Obscure is sealed inside a permanent Easter weekend, taking place after the crucifixion of progress, but before its resurrection.
Remainder

The alienation from continuity with previous generations of people—indeed, the radical lack of operative community in this novel altogether—isolates Jude and Sue. Jude is the modern individual, taken to an extreme: isolated from the past, he has only his aspiration and love interests, the defunct containers for his individual potential; isolated from the future, he can only hope he is the precursor for something better to come. We can read *Jude*, then, as a novel that presents the aporia to which the celebration of individual potentiality has brought the genre of the Bildungsroman. The potentiality of talent, still very much alive in Jude, finds so little expression of itself in social institutions that might actualize it (marriage, the university) that the new potentiality it gives birth to is born with grey hair. And in an important consequence, maturity is leapt over entirely. On one level, Hardy is mounting a critique of social institutions; on another level, and especially once Little Father Time enters, Hardy is letting the competitiveness that lurks in the celebration of personal talents, projected outwards, collapse back on to the individual and kill its potential.

Hardy has frequently been compared to Agamben’s Messiah-figure, Bartleby the scrivener.41 Like Bartleby, Hardy frequently gives the impression of a man who would “prefer not to”; his final published poem is entitled “He Resolves to Say No More.” Of course, Hardy does not seem to attempt, like Agamben, anything that resembles the

41 Hollington notes the resemblance between Father Time and Bartleby (Hollington 114). Matz draws attention to Hardy’s own Bartleby-esque indications that he might actually prefer not to be writing both before and after Jude was published (Matz 542-3). Bayley begins his study by suggesting that Hardy’s novels give the impression of a man who would rather be silent than speak (1).
overcoming of metaphysics. But the resemblance is significant inasmuch as it suggests some of the ways that Hardy’s own self-proclaimed exhaustion might in itself begin to gesture forward to other ways of considering subjectivity. There is one passage in Jude which perhaps hints at a way beyond this impasse. In the final section, Jude gives a speech to a number of workers in a bar. The speech wins the approval of the workers, and Tinker Taylor suggests that it is better preaching than one hears from “jobbing pa’sons” (345), suggesting that it is perhaps the closest Jude ever comes to living out his vocational dreams. Jude says:

It is a difficult question, my friends, for any young man . . . whether to follow uncritically the track he finds himself in, without considering his aptness for it, or to consider what his aptness or bent might be, and re-shape his course accordingly. I tried to do the latter, and I failed. But I don’t admit that my failure proved my view to be the wrong one, or that my success would have made it a right one; though that’s how we appraise such attempts nowadays—I mean, not by their essential soundness, but by their accidental outcomes. . . .

However it was my poverty and not my will that consented to be beaten. It takes two or three generations to do what I tried to do in one; and my impulses—affectations—vices perhaps they should be called—were too strong not to hamper a

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42 Indeed, as J. Hillis Miller points out, Hardy’s belief in “immanent will” is a sure sign he is deeply mired in the opposition between the subject and the object that is usually taken, after Heidegger, as the sine qua non of a metaphysical view (Miller Hardy 14). For Miller, Hardy’s thinking in general emerges from the dichotomous context that produced both the scientism and pessimism of much late Victorian thinking.

43 As Patricia Alden astutely notes, if the novel ended with this scene, we would see Jude as a triumphant and defiant man, having succeeded in learning to preach and to appeal to the people; it would also be a profoundly political conclusion, finishing the novel with an articulate critique of the class system (Alden 63). That the murder of the children happens in the next chapter is simultaneously an indication that this is the high-point of the novel for Jude as a character, and also that Hardy wanted to make a critique that went beyond the unfair institutions of his day.
man without advantages; who should be as cold-blooded as a fish and as selfish as a pig to have a really good chance of being one of his country’s worthies. (344)

Jude’s speech is driven by a powerful internal tension. Jude condemns the kind of society that rewards scheming and competition with success and then dismisses those who fail. But it is important to note that such a critique, even as it elevates “essential soundness” over “accidental outcome,” still extols the value of success (outcome) by attacking the society that systematically and necessarily denies success to so many; Jude accordingly looks forward, progressively, to what might happen in “two or three generations” when his plan might be successful. To some extent, this tension is understandable; it would be highly unfair to use the distinction between intent and outcome as a justification for quashing the hopes of common people. But we might also see, in Jude’s suggestion that an endeavor be evaluated not by its success or failure, a small remainder sticking out of the text. What would the world of Jude the Obscure look like if one were able to transcend the dichotomy of success and failure, and so move away from the holding bay model of potentiality? We might see here an arrow pointing at an alternate scale of values beyond the celebration of the “I can,” and accordingly beyond the investment in the youth who will someday, in the future, be able to.
Chapter Two: Childhood and Perception at the Dawn of Modernism: What Maisie Knew

“The novel is older now, and so are the young.”

An early reviewer of What Maisie Knew noted:

Mr. James, it is true, refrains from that crowning feat of making the father and mother marry each other again. That would have exposed him to the charge of attempting to enter into rivalry with the hideous finale of Jude the Obscure. But it could not have rendered the book more disagreeable than it is. (Hayes 285)

It is not difficult to see how the comparison might come to a reviewer’s mind; Maisie was published only two years after Jude the Obscure, and both novels centre on divorce and unwanted children. Both are also arguably texts of cultural decline; just as Jude the Obscure is frequently cast in terms of the degeneration and exhaustion of the fin de siècle, Maisie is often read as an attack on the decadence represented by the uncaring baseness of the adult characters. ¹

In other ways, however, the novels are clearly opposed. Hardy claimed that the critical response to Jude cured him forever of the desire to write novels. What Maisie Knew, by contrast, is seen as the launching point of James’s “second go.” It is the novel during whose writing he hired William McAlpine and began dictating, taking a step toward his later style. It is also a novel in which he seemed to advance some distance in the development of his so-called “religion of consciousness.” As Barbara Everett puts it, Maisie “in herself generates the peculiarly Jamesian heroes and heroines of the last

¹ Christina Britzolakis notes that James’s characterizations of Maisie’s parents and Sir Claude correspond in many ways to his description of the decadent “confusions of the present” in his notebooks, including the mixing of gender roles (Britzolakis 378; Notebooks 120).
novels” (318). Biographers of James are inevitably drawn to see Maisie as the locus of a creative re-birth. Fred Kaplan calls the novel “a telling fictional embodiment of James’s sense of his own development” (418). Edel claims that the sequence of books James wrote about precocious girls in the 1890s was a form of therapy through which James was able to rediscover his own belief in the power of artistic development after the disappointment of Guy Domville (Life 481). James’s insistence in his notebooks that the “scenic method” he has learned from his time in the theatre is the “only salvation” that will get him through Maisie lends considerable credence to the view that while writing about the development of a child, James was also concerned with his own development, constructing a narrative about how his previous experience was necessary to bring him to his current level of ability (Notebooks 167). If Hardy tells the story of the exhaustion of Bildung, James discovers new forms of learning in what might have seemed the most unpromising of places, rolling around the feet of an uncurious, egotistical cast of adults. We also see in Maisie a dramatic reversal at the level of the representation of children. While generations of readers have found Hardy’s child-man, Little Father Time, to be unrealistic, James is often praised for introducing a new realism into writing about children in What Maisie Knew.\(^1\)

*What Maisie Knew* is an account of what might be called a perverse education, tracing the upbringing of a little girl who learns almost nothing from her rather uninformed and moralistic governess, but volumes from watching the salacious and petty

\(^1\) Susan Honeyman argues that the anxieties surrounding childhood in the 1890s actually promoted James to think critically and realistically about children in *What Maisie Knew*—“it is because of his unique historical vantage point, at a neurotic intersection of extreme child worship and child scrutiny, that James has become the central exemplar in modern American figuration of children” (Honeyman 31-32). Muriel Shine complicates this claim, arguing that James does in fact idealize children as vessels of consciousness, but that he does so to overcome a long Romantic tradition that sees children as innocent and therefore lacking in substantial consciousness (22).
adults about her. This education, despite its “immoral” character, succeeds in producing an unsettlingly mature protagonist. The novel thereby articulates unconventional new forms of cultivation. Because Maisie’s education has much to do with being able to anticipate and navigate the excessive and partially unconscious desires of others, it anticipates, as James so often does, aspects of psychoanalytic thinking. Henry James traces much of the psychological energy in the novel through his use of individual, charged words; *What Maisie Knew* depicts an intense awareness of the power of particular words to either access or disavow unconscious desire. Many words in the novel combine ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning with the quality of being super-loaded with psychological energy; it is not only that the signifiers admit of many meanings, but that they simultaneously access unconscious forces. I investigate the way specific words function in the novel, therefore, in the light of the psychoanalytic theory termed “the enigmatic signifier.” Maisie learns to navigate the terrain marked by these signifiers, and by the end of the novel Maisie is really the only character who can be considered a contender for anything like “maturity,” because her education has made her into an ethical agent with an understanding of the desire of those near her. If we follow Eric Santner’s claim (quoted in my introduction) that “the other to whom I am responsible has an unconscious,” then Maisie is hyper-responsible, even if her mounting sense of knowledge is unsettling, and must be directed mainly towards self-preservation.

Maisie’s perceptions and her ability to navigate the libidinal investments of the adults also seem, for James, to amount to a form of beauty. I argue that the beauty James associates with Maisie’s perceptions has to do with the overcoming of egotism. In the last chapter, the mediation of egotism was a key feature of maturity; what the novel’s
perverse education seems to bring about is a particularly Jamesian maturity—the maturity of perception, which in itself poses a counterpoint to a competitive and self-aggrandizing attitude. Perception for James seems to generate its own sphere of beauty specifically through its contrast with the sphere of competition and self-interest. As in the case of so many Jamesian characters, however, Maisie’s experience of beauty in the novel also seems to have to do with a sense of loss. Despite being the only childhood protagonist included in my study, Maisie’s unconventional and unfortunate upbringing means she already lives with a sense of loss that anticipates the fuller treatment of maturity in James’s *The Ambassadors*.

“*This Interminable Little Maisie*”

James’s essay “The Future of the Novel,” published in 1900 (ironically as an introduction to a volume of drama), engages with the symbolic meaning of childhood while also echoing many of the concerns of *What Maisie Knew*. In the essay, James uses the figure of the child to outline an evolutionary model of the novel, giving a genre-based answer to the question of the “age” of the modern age. The essay expresses a curious admixture of bleakness and hope about the possibilities of the novel. Indicating that his fear for the novel’s future is based in an attitude that prefers to unthinkingly consume art as a pleasure, James is anxious that much as the vulgar crowds objected to his “unfamiliar” play, *Guy Domville (Letters 3 516)*, readers may increasingly become able to appreciate only what is easy for them to digest. James expresses this fear, at first, in gendered terms:
The high prosperity of fiction has marched, very directly, with another ‘sign of the times,’ the demoralization, the vulgarization of literature in general, the increasing familiarity of all such methods of communication, the making itself supremely felt, as it were, of the presence of the ladies and children—by whom I mean, in other words, the reader irreflective and uncritical. (Future 34)

Casting the decline of fiction as a “sign of the times” (even while using scare-quotes to deal with his own anxiety about the cliché) James seems at first to associate the rise of an uncritical readership with the loss of the cultural capital of an adult male identity. Yet he soon complicates this analogy. Unfolding a metaphor that sees the development of the novel running alongside the growth of a person, James suggests that in the 18th-century, Fielding and Sterne could write of ribald subjects because “the young then were so very young that they were not table high” (39). Once the young reached the age at which they could read the books, however, sexuality had to hide itself. But now, James suggests, in the context of the women’s movement, the very people whom the rules were made to protect might feel the lack of completeness in the novel’s avoidance of certain issues.

For, “the novel is older now, and so are the young” (40). With this startling formulation, James begins to undermine his own condescending metaphor of the uncritical reader as a woman or child. The very people who once had to be protected are about to show their critical sense by demanding the novel live up to its potential, and survey the whole field of human character and possibility. The mistake of ignoring any part of this field, any part of “the immense variety of life” that “will stretch away to right and to left” is the only unforgivable mistake that the novel can make, because it is a mistake about “its own soul” (38). What began sounding like an anxiety about female readers ends up sounding
nearly lurid, as James seems to imagine himself in collusion with a crowd of curious women and children who want an education about what has been hidden from them. Ultimately, the essay suggests that as much as James might fear the vulgar and childish consumer-reader, his solution to the problem is not a narrow and elitist formalism. What James proposes in this essay actually resembles the cultivation of a democratic maturity. James hopes that the adulthood of both the novel and its audience will be found in the consideration of any topic and the inclusion of the previously excluded readers.

“The novel is older now, and so are the young.” In *Jude the Obscure*, children were old because childhood, potentiality, and even narrative had been extinguished. James does consider this possibility in “The Future of the Novel,” but dismisses it, asserting instead the universality of the kingdom of the imagination:

So long as life retains for [man] its power of projecting itself upon his imagination, he will find the novel work off the impression better than anything he knows. Anything better for the purpose has assuredly yet to be discovered. He will give it up only when life itself too thoroughly disagrees with him. Even then, indeed, may fiction not find a second wind, or a fiftieth, in the very portrayal of that collapse? Till the world is an unpeopled void there will be an image in the mirror. (41)

Hardy’s villain, “the coming universal wish not to live,” is displaced by the rich potential of an image it might make of itself. No matter how disagreeable life is, the image of the world in the imagination has “second wind” to offer.

*What Maisie Knew*, accordingly, depicts something like the inversion of Hardy’s ancient child. Maisie is not exhausted and destroyed by Victorian strictures; indeed, the
parents in *Maisie* seem barely to have heard of the mores over which Hardy’s Sue tortures herself. Maisie is an old child in another sense, the sense adumbrated in “The Future of the Novel”—she is the child becoming an adult reader, who demands the book include every human weakness. In describing this new childhood, James also suggests, in this subtly lewd novel, a new and paradoxical form of education.² It is not my claim that James would actually recommend to anyone an education modeled on the events of *What Maisie Knew*; he reminds us quite often in the novel that the protagonist’s life is unhappy, confusing, and fraught with loss. But he also clearly values the perspective of his protagonist, who as he says in the Preface, sheds a beautifying light on the dilapidated adults. But despite (or because of) her unhappy surroundings, the figure of Maisie is something of an incubator for the Jamesian perceiver of the later novels.

Though several previous critics have agreed that Maisie is a sort of prototypical Jamesian perceiver—the sort of person on whom nothing is lost—the novel has not always been seen as containing any genuine learning. Critics before the advent of theory tended to view the novel moralistically, claiming that its saving grace was that by the end of it, Maisie had managed not to learn anything at all (a reading one can almost refute by pointing out how uninteresting it renders the novel’s title.) Contemporary reviewers tended to either think the book was offensively immoral or (in the majority of cases) to praise James for having portrayed a bold innocence surviving unscathed through gross wickedness.³ Mid-twentieth-century critics tended to continue to debate the novel in

² Virginia Woolf wanted to call Henry James “lewd” in a 1921 review of his ghost stories, but her editor would not allow it (Lee 415-16). James’s novels are full of subtly prurient moments; I discuss an important one in *The Ambassadors* in the next chapter.
³ The reviewer in the *Critic*, for example, writes: “Maisie, wise and innocent, chooses with wrenching of the heartstrings to go with Mrs. Wix. In other words, she knows, by what amounts to inspiration, that the
these terms, defending Maisie’s purity when they wanted to defend the novel. Harris W. Wilson countered, arguing in a notorious 1956 article that Maisie was offering her virginity to Sir Claude, claiming there was “no other explanation for the highly emotional content of the scenes that occur when she and Claude return, after their breakfast, to Mrs. Wix and Mrs. Beale” (281). For the next decades, critics who celebrated the book felt bound to refute this argument. While contemporary criticism has set aside this moralistic language, more recent studies have often had their own reasons to be suspicious of whatever “learning” might happen in the novel. Critics of the 1990s tended to see Maisie’s development as a form of ideological obfuscation—perhaps as a legitimation of James’s own narrative authority. If James is taken, as he often has been, to be an aesthetic elitist seeking to cultivate a minority of readers who would rise

conventions of which she has only heard in their transgressions, are necessary, inevitable, right” (Hayes 296). The critic in the Pall Mall Gazette claims that the glory of the book is that at the end, Maisie knew “nothing” (Hayes 284). It is important to acknowledge that the novel portrays Maisie’s original parents as so cartoonishly selfish that it is not hard to see how it could be read as a complex moralistic tale, revealing the poverty of soul that generates divorces. The same reviewer in The Critic also described Maisie’s original parents as flat “Punch and Judy” figures (Hayes 295).

Leavis, for example, claims that “the consummately ‘done’ theme of What Maisie Knew is the incorruptible innocence of Maisie; innocence that not merely preserves itself in what might have seemed to be irresistibly corrupting circumstances, but can even generate decency out of the egotistic squalors of adult personal relations” (156). I do not believe that Maisie remains in any sense “innocent,” but I do share Leavis’s emphasis on the egotism of the adults. Though James does say in his Preface to the New York Edition that Maisie shines a light of “dignity” on the adults, he does not say that she remains innocent; he indicates instead that her fine consciousness must be saved as a “register of impressions . . . rather than coarsened, blurred, sterilized, by ignorance and pain” (Maisie 24). These are not precisely the same thing. For a representative example see Gargano (45).

Juliet Mitchell’s classic essay, “The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl,” has become something of a fault line in James criticism dividing those who see the novel through the lens of such suspicions from those who do not. For Mitchell, James portrays Maisie’s journey as reaching a climax where she essentially becomes James himself: “What Maisie knows is what we know, which is what the narrator knows, which is what James knows” (168). Critics skeptical about James’s putative aestheticism and elitism have tended to respond to this argument by claiming that James did in fact precisely set out to portray the birth and development of a Jamesian perceiver in Maisie, and that this means the novel functions as a smokescreen disguising the difficulties of the “master”—a theatre in which James tries to cover up the fact that he cannot perfectly play all the parts. Thus Barbara Eckstein argues that the first-person intrusions by the narrator late in the novel signal places where James is covering over the holes in his mastery of language so that Maisie’s sensibility can be “saved,” meaning really that both he and Maisie can be “saved” from uncertainty (184). Sheila Teahan makes a parallel argument claiming that Maisie’s “knowledge” has no literal term at all, and exists only in the narrator’s re-assurance of the reader (“Improper” 226).
above the baseness of the market, should we not see the transformation of Maisie into a Jamesian knower as a justification of this aestheticism? Sir Claude does describe her final proposal that she will stay with him if he flees Mrs. Beale as “beautiful,” a refined and great work of art (262). If Maisie’s consciousness, as James claims in the preface, lends a beauty to the shoddiness of the adults, is this beauty an aesthetic veneer by which James asserts the power of his own art?

That James held some elitist views is certainly true, and I understand why some critics are suspicious of the “mastery” of James’s aestheticism. I will return to James’s engagement with aestheticism later, but it is important to note that, broadly speaking, I side with Jonathan Freedman’s paradoxical formulation that what James ultimately tends to do is put aestheticism “to work in the social world” (231). In a parallel fashion, John Carlos Rowe also stresses the social orientation of James’s work, arguing that despite his elitist views, he directs the reader consistently towards the historical and the political. Rowe reads *Maisie* as the depiction of a thoroughly historical education, in which Maisie brushes up against governesses, servants, racial others, and all the other supposed “nobodies” whom she must learn to navigate (*Other* 152-4). Whatever James’s own beliefs about his mastery, the education he portrays Maisie as undergoing is an education not in the cultivation of a transparent masterful self, but rather an education of the self that dwells near and respects others. It is also an education that confronts a psychological

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7 Rowe provides an articulate summary of this view of James as a nostalgic and elitist writer, though he argues that *What Maisie Knew* is one of the few Jamesian texts that does not exhibit these tendencies: “Such aristocratic pretence is disguised as an aesthetic elitism that is by now one of the hallmarks of Anglo-American high modernism. The ‘new’ aristocrats will be those ‘happy few’ capable of seeing through the illusions of the modern age and preserving the enduring values of a cultural heritage otherwise being lost in the tawdriness and evanescence of fashion” (*Other* 120).

8 More broadly, we might see such arguments in the light of Fredric Jameson’s claim in *The Political Unconscious* that James’s own cultivation of perception is a desperate recuperative attempt to make bourgeois subjectivity satisfying (221-22).
excess that cannot be mastered. James’s portrayal of Maisie’s education does not just give us the more mediated, mature egoism of bourgeois sympathy, as George Eliot does, but rather points towards a contact of the self with a sea of psychological excess.

Hieroglyphs in the Desert

In a curious scene near the beginning of *What Maisie Knew*, Maisie is bewildered by the way adult men tease her. They accuse her of having thin, “toothpick” legs—and we are told “The word stuck in her mind and contributed to her feeling from this time that she was deficient in something that would meet the general desire” (40). Taking the men’s jokes seriously, Maisie can only think she is actually deficient in fat. She wonders what is wanted of her when in fact she is the object of a game in which men pinch her and have her light cigarettes, teasing her in a way that brushes up against adult sexuality. The word “toothpick” sticks itself between the teeth of Maisie’s memory, leaving her to wonder what everyone wants out of her, and how she is failing to measure up; ultimately, this happens because the sexual energy that hides in the background of this scene of teasing is beyond her comprehension.

Functioning as a microcosm of Maisie’s confused childhood, this scene suggests that she is constantly surrounded by forces which she does not understand but which she must nevertheless negotiate with words. Maisie’s childhood therefore particularly resembles psychoanalytic accounts of the “enigmatic signifier.” Her unconventional

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9 Maisie’s ability to work with signifiers is constantly in process, which connects her with an aspect of Agamben’s philosophy. In his earlier *Infancy and History*, Agamben uses the term “infancy” in its etymological sense to denote a permanent aspect of the human condition, wherein we always do and do not have words for our experiences. Infancy is analogous to impotentiality in that both emphasize an aspect of permanent incompleteness, though infancy doesn’t emphasize weakness and “impotence” as the latter term does. The term “infancy” returns in my chapter 5.
education, I argue, occurs primarily in and through the charged, ambiguous words that she learns from her environment. It is these enigmatic signifiers which grant her a maturity beyond her years, allowing her to learn to neighbour the unconscious minds of others.

The idea of the enigmatic signifier has been used in various ways by various psychoanalytic thinkers, beginning with Lacan and then, most centrally, Laplanche.\(^\text{10}\) The term refers to signifiers that contain meanings that they do not fully articulate, because they are the bearers of unconscious energy. For Laplanche, these signifiers are largely physical gestures—the bodily contact between parents and children inserts itself into the child’s mind, becoming the source object for the drives, and this happens because these moments of physical contact are pregnant with undigested sexual messages derived from the parents’ unconscious. Laplanche argues that the desire of parents, and especially mothers, operates on children as a signifier of something “to” them, even though it is not clear what it is a signifier “of.” He writes of a “nagging question” in the infant’s mind, “what does the breast want from me, apart from wanting to suckle me, and, come to that why does it want to suckle me?” (New 126). Because these messages are addresses “to” the infant but without clear content, Laplanche calls them “hieroglyph[s] in the desert”—“we know that they signify . . . but we do not necessarily have a signified we can ascribe to them (New 45).”\(^\text{11}\) In this model, the enigmatic “hieroglyphic” messages, full of hidden content, transfer the excessive energy of the

\(^{10}\) Lacan uses the term in his Écrits (159-60).

\(^{11}\) This term is also borrowed from Lacan, who uses it in a 1958 essay, “On a question preliminary to any possible treatment of Psychosis.” Lacan is describing, however, not a general condition of signifiers to infants, but rather the role of signifiers in the discourse of the psychotic: “their chain is found to survive in an alterity in relation to the subject as radical as that of as yet undecipherable hieroglyphs in the solitude of the desert” (Écrits 194).
unconscious drive from one generation to the next, like the Trojan horses of the unconscious.

Laplanche insists on the primacy of the physical in his account of the enigmatic signifier. But other contemporary psychoanalytic thinkers, including Jonathan Lear and Eric Santner, have adapted his account and reintroduced the linguistic valences of the term; because What Maisie Knew is so concerned with the power of words, it is these linguistic accounts that are most helpful for exploring the growth of the mind in the text. Santner in particular has argued that the social norms which sustain individual identity are powered by the excess excitation of the mind in response to the linguistic enigmatic signifier. For Santner, the traumatic excess imprinted on the mind by words in infancy is later invested in social norms (49-51). There is an uncanny surplus energy in one’s desire to be regarded as a “good” man or woman, a good professor or banker, a good father or mother, which is in itself the borrowing from the unconscious energy first traumatically implanted by the hieroglyphic messages of infancy. In this linguistic account of the enigmatic signifier, what matters is that there is a relationship between the forces of the unconscious and certain more or less empty words and images that both excite and contain that excess. We might think for example of the incredible surplus energy we have available to defend certain amorphous terms such as “morality” or “America.” These words, I suggest, have a certain poverty; an enthusiastic citizen’s excess emotional energy for “America” may actually run against the grain of a reasoned

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12 On his objections to the linguistic model see Essays on Otherness (73).
13 Jonathan Lear, in his book Happiness, Death, and the Remainder Life gives philosophical examples of the power of the enigmatic signifier, noting that “happiness” for Aristotle, and “death” for Freud, function as enigmatic, powerful words that seduce both thinker and reader alike into believing in a teleological structure to human desire. As in Santner’s account, Lear’s emphasis on the enigmatic signifier as a circularly defined, empty term suggests the ultimate poverty of such words.
account of what is positive about that country. Thus, for Santner, enigmatic signifiers sustain social norms and ideologies primarily through tautological emptiness: the law is the law, morality is morality. Enigmatic signifiers are understood on this model as both exciting unconscious energy and then disavowing that excitement through their emptiness. By normalizing our unconscious stimulation and directing it towards legitimate targets, such as “America,” the work of the enigmatic signifier actually includes a denial that there is anything excessive about our enthusiasm. Santner punningly calls this reference to established social norms the structure of the “ego and the ibid” (50), as there is a need for the subject to cite a legitimate hieroglyphic signifier in order to demonstrate that her experience and enjoyment of the excess energies of the unconscious is justified. Only when one’s surplus energy is experienced in an established pattern is it seen as legitimate, because it has disavowed its unruly unconscious origins.

In *What Maisie Knew*, we definitely do see this normalized containment of unconscious energy operating—but we see it in Mrs. Wix. Mrs. Wix insists upon “moral sense,” and her own desire seems to be sublimated through her judgmental use of this term. Maisie, by contrast, receives what I have called a perverse education, in which the excessive energy of the words she learns can be confronted directly. Maisie is not so much exposed to the empty tautology of culturally charged words as the ambiguous fullness of signifiers that, while linguistic, also have the “Trojan Horse” quality of Laplanche’s physical signals. Maisie is not immersed in ideologically charged terms, but in sexually charged ones; these signifiers do not attempt to legitimate social norms, but are instead overfull words which serve as placeholders in the complex situations that Maisie is trying to unravel.
If the empty hieroglyph operates on the principle of “the ego and the ibid,” that is, in terms of citation, then *What Maisie Knew* provides us with a curious counterpoint, for Maisie struggles for sources to cite. Maisie’s early childhood is organized without any stable place for her to stand, and in a sense without any role models. The manner in which she is raised means she is constantly close to the complexities of the adult world, with the conventional buffer between childhood and adulthood removed; she is simply is not spoken to like a child, and never hears many of the discourses her culture holds ready-made for children. On my reading, this is a crucial thing to understand about Maisie’s childhood: if all childhoods are marked by the ambiguous and sexually charged signals from the adult world—“hieroglyphs in the desert,” then in Maisie’s childhood that problem is magnified to the point of becoming entirely explicit, unmediated by ideological content. Maisie’s childhood is called “phantasmagoric” (39), because virtually every signifier is an enigmatically charged signifier.¹⁴

As a result of this perverse education, Maisie experiences a sense of loss and melancholy. Both of her parents essentially function as melancholic lost objects. Furthermore, she is always running behind understanding her situation, and she experiences a backlog of meanings she must continually catch up with: “By the time she had grown sharper . . . she found in her mind a collection of images and echoes to which meanings were attachable—images and echoes kept for her in the childish dusk, in the dim closet, like games she wasn’t yet big enough to play” (41). These shapes on the shelf

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¹⁴ We might note that if one of Maisie’s parents were responsible and offered her a secure place to identify, allowing her to take one of her parents as a role model and to dislike the other, her socialization would perhaps follow much more standard lines, as it is but there is nowhere she can go where the confusion of the adult world will be mediated for her.
later begin to move and to take on a dangerous aspect, making Maisie realize she has to disguise her understanding in order to keep herself from being used as a weapon. She knows that the signifiers are dangerous because she sees their effects, even while not understanding their significance. At first, this leads to a sense of responsibility; Maisie develops a strategy of concealment out of a sense of guilt that would become a familiar narrative only later in the 20th century, when divorce became more common. On one level, James certainly intends Maisie’s situation to be more pitiable than exemplary. But her sense of responsibility and her survivalist’s need for interpretive acumen also provides James with an opportunity to trace the development of a character who is removed from the conventional buffers that keep us from the excess energies of the unconscious mind.

**Straighteners and Seeing: Language and Perception for Maisie**

The problem of the enigmatic signifiers—the “full” Trojan-Horse-like hieroglyphs—is figured in *What Maisie Knew* through an abundance of words that become complex placeholders. James writes in his preface that “small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them” (27), and accordingly there are many words in the novel which do the work of approximating, hinting at, and euphemizing several different concepts. Maisie is continually trying to take over and work with words that the adults use to describe a sexual reality of which she is only dimly aware. Terms such as “squared,” “free,” and “bolt” play complex roles like this.

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15 Thus when Maisie hears her parents fighting: “She puzzled out with imperfect signs, but with a prodigious spirit, that she has been a centre of hatred and a messenger of insult, and that everything was bad because she had been employed to make it so” (43).
These words, while not inherently sexualized, refer to sexual aspects of the adults’ lives in the context in which they appear in the novel; because these situations are neither properly explained to Maisie nor hidden from her, such terms are all she has. The contrast can best be seen if we compare these full signifiers to one in the novel which is more truly an empty hieroglyph: the word “abroad.” When Maisie is taken to France, it does in fact represent a kind of ideal to her; like Jude’s shimmering city of Christminster on the horizon, France is a locus of cultivation, and the word “abroad” denotes for Maisie an excess associated with the ideal which she rushes into, ahead of her actual experience:

She was ‘abroad’ and she gave herself up to it, responded to it, in the bright air, before the pink houses, among the bare-legged fishwives and the red-legged soldiers, with the instant certitude of vocation. Her vocation was to see the world and thrill with enjoyment of the picture; she had grown older in five minutes and had by the time they reached the hotel recognized in the institutions and manners of France a multitude of affinities and messages. (181)

James’s quotation marks draw our attention to his awareness of the charged nature of the individual word. Maisie’s sense here of suddenly developing a “vocation” for culture responds to and to some extent parodies the idea of going abroad to cultivate oneself. This is one of the few passages where James confronts the issue of potentiality—potentiality is not a major theme of Maisie because for most of it Maisie is too young to be concretely concerned with the future. But Maisie’s impatience here to believe she has gained insight into French culture (and “culture” itself) in five minutes in France represents an excited, youthful foreshortening of the imagined potential of cultivation. Maisie here does briefly experience “the ego and the ibid”—her understandable
excitement in this passage for the ideal of cultivation allows her a certain pride that she can decipher the secret messages France has to offer. Her intense interest is here the result of finally being old enough to leap into a conventional norm. If it seems I am taking this passage more parodically and negatively than most readers would, that is probably because most readers (including myself) have actually experienced similar moments of youthful excitement. Maisie is, at this moment, experiencing something like normal socialization.\footnote{There are other examples of Maisie trying to imitate role models, though often she has to imagine them. In a scene in the park, she decides to express surprise that the Captain does not know Lord Eric, judging that a young lady at a ball would say this (128).}

But most of the enigmatic signifiers in the novel do not function in the manner of the word “abroad”; instead, most of the words Maisie learns to negotiate are sexual euphemisms that only half succeed in euphemizing their content. Thus she must work her way around the word “compromised,” which she has been able to rattle off since the age of five (141). Maisie gives no indication of knowing the precise facts of sexual intercourse which the word “compromised” suggests, but nor does she have any other literal meaning to ascribe to it—it is simply part of the air she breathes. “She knew as well in short that a person could be compromised as that a person could be slapped with a hairbrush or left alone in the dark” (141). There are many other words Maisie is able to use quite successfully by working around the sexual content they intimate, such as “squared.” In the scene in the park where Maisie and Claude run into Ida, she can tell from Claude’s demeanor when he returns from speaking to her mother that the conversation has “drawn blood” (133). Because of this, she further knows that no one has really been “squared” (135). That the word also hints at the permission to have sexual
affairs she does not understand at the literal level, but since she is able to apply it successfully she does in fact understand something of the emotional investments involved in it. The word is not an empty hieroglyph, but rather a placeholder with which Maisie navigates what she is able to observe without words. Such words are pointers towards the perceptions that language cannot accommodate directly.

Because these words are full of hidden content, there is a secret strength to the vagueness with which Maisie learns to use language, allowing it to include both silence and an awareness of continuing process. Thus, when Maisie fails to understand Mrs. Wix’s moralistic but also jealous despondency over the fact that Sir Claude has been seeing Mrs. Beale, “her general consciousness of the way things could be both perpetrated and resented always eased off for her the strain of the particular mystery” (107). Without understanding the precise referent of the adult words, she is directed towards only observing their effect on others. Maisie is more than once compared to a child leaning up against a glass (101, 120) and in fact, because so little is mediated for her, she becomes almost entirely an observer of others. Her confusion also leads to a rigorous practice of attention.

As I have indicated, it is Mrs. Wix who experiences language through the more conventional, ideological form of the enigmatic signifier. Mrs. Wix’s heavy-handed

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17 The word “squared” only suggests this in the context in which the adults have used it, but Maisie has clearly grown accustomed to that context. The meaning that seems appropriate here is “To put (a matter) straight; to settle satisfactorily, to compound” (OED “square” v. 5c). That no one has been “squared” means that Claude and Ida have not balanced accounts in such a way that each can go about their business, and Claude can see Mrs. Beale.

18 Julie Rivkin notes that what Maisie really learns about language is that words mean things contextually rather than absolutely (“Undoing” 212). I note that this is especially the case with pronouns in the novel, which become shifting but emotionally loaded signifiers. Thus, “there had been years at Beale Farange’s when the monosyllable ‘he’ meant always, meant almost violently, the master; but all that was changed at a period at which Sir Claude’s merits were of themselves so much in the air that it scarce took even two letters to name him” (137).
application of a “moral sense” requires precisely that her words be given a legitimacy which she cannot account for—indeed, she cannot even explain the legitimacy her words should have, since she expects Maisie to condemn illicit sexuality but she is unwilling to explain the literal facts of sex to her in order to evince this condemnation. In one scene, Mrs. Wix pressures Maisie to “condemn” Claude’s affair calling it a “crime” because it is branded such by the Bible; Maisie can only barely stop herself from responding that Claude is allowed to behave in this way because now he is “free” (“free” being here another overfull signifier) (215). The scene is repetitive, and Maisie keeps crashing against Mrs. Wix’s use of the word “crime,” which, unlike the words Maisie uses to hold together her perceptions, is designed to foreclose further inquiry. This mainstream hieroglyph is nearly incomprehensible to Maisie because it is not the language to which she has been exposed. But she has heard the adults say that Claude is “free,” and understands the relief and pleasure invested in the term. Her education has proceeded by enigmatic words so over-loaded with adult meaning that the problem of interpretation has been foregrounded in her life, to the point that the moralistic terms barely ruffle her.

If Mrs. Wix is representative of conventional morality, she is also representative, then, of the conventional, empty hieroglyph, directing desire towards an abstract ideal. James wants us to see the cost involved in her denial of excess psychological vitality. Whereas most critics recognize how negatively the moralistic perspective is portrayed in the novel through the figure of Mrs. Wix with her “deep, narrow passion” (163) for conventional morality, it strikes me that rarely do critics consider the importance of Mrs. Wix’s own sexuality. James makes it entirely clear that she also desires Claude in a way that her own moralizing cannot confront; she admits to being jealous and wants Maisie to
share in her jealousy (216). This puts her whole mission to save Claude from Mrs. Beale in a different light. Mrs. Wix’s plan to save Claude from the “horrors” of Mrs. Beale is ultimately a plan that uses moralizing to excuse what is simultaneously a mission of envy (though this is not to say that James does not represent Mrs. Beale as a genuine danger to Sir Claude as well). When Claude points out an inconsistency in Mrs. Wix’s moral reasoning, asking why she is so pleased to say he is “free” but will not say the same of Mrs. Beale, she reacts thusly: “Maisie could scarcely believe her eyes as she saw the good lady, with whom she had associated no faintest shade of any art of provocation, actually, after an upward grimace, give Sir Claude a great giggling insinuating naughty slap” (197). Maisie’s surprise is also the reader’s—it is highly uncharacteristic for a person of Mrs. Wix’s demeanor to give a “giggling insinuating naughty” slap. Losing control for just a moment, Mrs. Wix flashes into the flirtatious gesture of a little girl. The excess force of Mrs. Wix’s psyche, immobilized by conventional hieroglyphs, expresses itself in a sloppy, childish and uncharacteristic manner. This undermines her moral position, and betrays the effort that James wants us to understand goes into manufacturing her moments of high dignity. It is a critical commonplace to note that as the wearer of “straighteners,” Mrs. Wix is a representative of the straight and narrow path. But I would argue that the straighteners are an emblem of Mrs. Wix in a more precise sense, as their actual function is to make what is a crooked, perhaps illicit glance appear straight to other people: they are “put on for the sake of others, whom, as she believed, they helped to recognize the bearing, otherwise doubtful, of her regard” (49).

The fact that Mrs. Wix can let loose such “giggling” insinuations is highly significant, for by the end of the novel we cannot picture Maisie herself doing anything
like this; Maisie’s odd and dark maturity is a counterpoint to the repressed childishness of her governess. James thereby refiges maturity—for it is not the person who displays a showy, moralizing seriousness who is mature in this novel, but the person who can see clearly. James’s attention to the overfull signifiers which Maisie negotiates allows him to code into the novel a complex engagement with extra-linguistic perception. James emphasizes that Maisie’s education prepares her, above all, to “read the unspoken into the spoken” (205). The Jamesian veneration for perception amounts to the assertion of a sub-language—a language of observation relating to and subtending the use of words. James is simultaneously concerned with the wealth of perceptions that escape language and with the incorporation of them into language in such a way that their silence, their extra-linguistic nature, is preserved. 19 Silence and language are placed in dialogue. If the narrator’s intrusions late in the novel—wherein the narrator fears that his protagonist is now “arriving at divinations so ample” that he will have no time to show us all the stages (162)—read to some critics as reassurances of James’s mastery, they are also gaps left in the text where James is true to his scenic method, restricting himself to including only what he can describe happening before Maisie’s eyes. James thereby implicitly allows, I would argue, that Maisie may know things the narrator does not know, that her education proceeds by gaps and that in those gaps may appear things that only direct perception could confront.

19 In arguing that James is leaving room for silence, I contradict some influential views of the relationship between James and the unconscious. Leo Bersani argues that James’s writing aims to create a full surface in which the forces of the unspoken would never rupture the spoken; James works towards a “richly superficial art in which hidden depths would never ironically undermine the life inspired by his own and his characters ‘mere’ ingenuities of design” (132). On my reading, however, while the Jamesian sentence may aim to be all-encompassing, this is because it includes a desire to confront the unconscious. Przybylowicz offers a slightly different reading, arguing that the later Henry James turns towards accepting the forces of the unconscious but only after What Maisie Knew (24-38).
The Sheen of Perception

What emerges when we stress the sexualized, jealous elements of Mrs. Wix’s characterization is a fuller picture of the economy of egotism in *What Maisie Knew*. In contrast to the older, moralistic critics of the novel, I would argue that James reveals Mrs. Wix’s moralism to be itself an aspect of egotism, paralleling it with the competitive behaviour of the other characters. Mrs. Beale apparently cannot feel love apart from jealousy, as we are told she seeks out an object of jealousy when none is apparent, and finds Mrs. Wix (“as her stepmother had no one else to be jealous of, she had made up for so gross a privation by directing the sentiment to a moral influence” (165)). As I have demonstrated, Mrs. Wix’s mission to “save” Claude from what is essentially a rival puts her in the same territory, despite the fact that she may not understand this herself.

James wrote in an essay on Emerson that “egotism is the strongest of the passions” (*Portraits* 17). Many critics have claimed that egotism is a pervasive concern of his middle period; Muriel Shine notes that almost all James’s writing about children involves the sacrifice of children to adult egotism, of which Maisie is the most successful escapee (Shine 110). In *What Maisie Knew*, we certainly find that the dignity Maisie lends to the story comes from the fact that while everyone else is rapaciously egotistical, she is the mature watcher, the person who seems best able to navigate the unconscious cathexes of the other characters that render their egotism narrow and deadening. Only through this transcendence of egotism, it seems, can one understand clearly the investments of others; when Maisie makes her proposal to Claude in the final scene, pledging that she will stay with Claude only if he will leave Mrs. Beale, she shows a
survivalist’s understanding that his weakness will lead Mrs. Beale to always get her way, and that Mrs. Beale’s interest in control will never have Maisie’s own interests at heart. But while she is protecting herself, she is able to see the others clearly because her own interests are perfectly conscious, unmuddled by the misunderstood unconscious excess that shapes the others.

When Maisie makes this final proposal, Sir Claude is awed by its beauty. With a directness and intensity not common for Sir Claude, he remarks “whatever it is, it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever met—it’s exquisite, it’s sacred” (260). He likens her decision to a work of art (262). In what sense is this arrangement beautiful? Are we meant to agree with Claude that it is? I believe so—because James tends to oppose beauty to competitive egotism. We are meant to see this proposal not only as an example of a pleasing formal symmetry, but a bodying forth of the beauty of perception. Maisie is too aware of the concrete consequences of her choice for it to be merely an aesthetic decision on her part. Her proposition is primarily a moment of psychological astuteness.

James’s novel *The Spoils of Poynton*, written contemporaneously with *What Maisie Knew*, elaborates the tension between beauty and egotistical competition. While *The Spoils of Poynton* engages primarily with the beauty of objects rather than perceptions, it is notable for the dualistic clarity with which it demarcates the line between the two regions—the sphere of beauty and the sphere of competitive

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20 Given its emphases on material objects, the novel more clearly lends itself to Marxist readings than *Maisie* does. Raymond Williams praises it for its clear evocation of the commodity fetish, claiming that, “One might even say that after the first chapter of *Capital*, people should be sent to read *The Spoils of Poynton*” (*Politics and Letters* 258). Paul B. Armstrong argues that the novel does not precisely replicate Marx’s thinking on the fetish, but that it is an example of James’s ability, despite his professed conservatism, to intuitively access many of the same problems Marx accessed (191).
In that novel, Mrs. Gareth, owner of the fantastic objects of Poynton, has lived “for a quarter of a century in such warm closeness with the beautiful,” and so is now unfit to go anywhere else. She is, “thanks to the rare perfection of Poynton, condemned to wince wherever she turned” (7). That is to say, Mrs. Gareth’s sense of beauty is deeply entwined with her sense of owning the finest and most rare collection, making all other houses unbearable to her. And now she must compete fiercely for that collection with a young woman named Mona, who forces her way into becoming the new resident of the house. Monomaniacal, Mona is described by James in the Preface as being “all will” (L). The competition for Poynton, however, is entirely distasteful to the protagonist Fleda, who feels it would be awful to compete either for the beautiful things or for Owen, the man who will inherit them; Fleda believes that defeating Mona by charming Owen would be “intolerably vulgar” (72). Fleda cannot appreciate the beauty either of the objects or of Owen when it is tainted by contact with competition. When some spoils are stolen back from the house by Mrs. Gareth, Fleda “couldn’t care for such things when they came to her in such ways; there was something wrong about them all that turned them to ugliness” (53).

21 Many critics have ascribed a kind of dualism to James; Peter Brooks ascribes to him a “moral Manichaeism” (5). Porter and Kaston also read James as dualistic, using James’s views on Emerson to explain his dyadic view of the inside and outside of desiring selfhood.

22 Some critics have seen in Mona a representation of James’s anxieties about audience—his fear of the philistine to whom he also secretly wanted to appeal (Foote 43). But I am not sure how deeply fearful one can be of a person one feels so comfortable dismissing. On my reading, James is actually much more anxious about someone like Mrs. Gareth, who mixes genuine appreciation with a desire that her ego be placated. Fleda eventually comes to see that Mrs. Gareth lacks imagination, and so has no ability to see from another side anyone who she has bumped up against (94), which sounds like precisely the sort of person who would read Henry James poorly.

23 It is also certainly possible to read Fleda’s renunciation in terms of James’s struggle with homosexual desire because it includes giving up Owen. The novel abounds in descriptions of Owen Gareth’s beauty, which Fleda seems to feel disproportionately reluctant about touching or “possessing,” even when all obstacles seem to be removed.
Fleda’s desire to stay pure is a desire to keep the sphere of beauty entirely separate from the sphere of ownership and competition. It would be ideal for the two to be separate, but in this novel it is impossible. This is what complicates the dualism of the book: it is impossible to keep egotism and beauty completely apart. That beautiful things must also be owned, and that the people who own them therefore must feel themselves flattered by that beauty, generates an anxiety for James. Human beings too are both sources of beauty and commodities of a sort in the novel; it seems that no form of beauty can be permanently separated from the sphere of competition and egotism. Fleda only feels comfortable as an “owner” of the spoils when she has lost them, and contemplates their ghosts, as she also only feels comfortable thinking about her attraction to Owen as something that might have happened. Once Fleda has lost the spoils, she contemplates them freely, as something whose beauty she can enjoy because she no longer claims to have a right to it (162).

James’s dualistic sense of egotism and beauty unfolds very differently in What Maisie Knew, where the beauty in question is not the beauty of things, but the beauty of perceptions. In Maisie, we find jealousy and comparativity depicted on all sides, and also beauty inextricably connected with the world of corrupt interests. But in stressing the light Maisie sheds on the egotistical adults, James depicts what I call the sheen of perception (I use sheen in the sense of “shining” or “shimmering”). I mean nothing mystical by this term; my claim is simply that James believes the moment of perceiving instantiates a basic pleasure, located in the interaction between the mind and the world.  

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24 My reading of James therefore has much in common with phenomenological interpretations of his work, as I am arguing that the language of perception arises between the subject and the object. Several critics
The moment of perception and pleasure escapes the egological because it does not belong to the subject, but rather happens between the subject and object. The language of the excessive, enigmatic signifiers through which Maisie is educated allows for the rich Jamesian perception of what hides beneath the surface, and that in and of itself is a source of beauty. The proper perception of ugly behaviours, in this novel, is beautiful; this is the “second wind” of the imagination which James describes in “The Future of the Novel.” Even the perception of the ugly, decayed, and egotistical is pleasing to the mind when it is performed accurately, by an agent who can see the unconscious desires of others rather than being trapped in the net of their own needs (for as I noted already, the other to whom I am responsible has an unconscious). In contrast to Mrs. Gareth, we must see more than only the side of someone that matters for our own schemes. Astute perception may redeem ugly behaviour, but not by generating a world of apolitical aesthetic withdrawal; rather, it is the ethical practice of understanding others which generates the sphere of beauty and pleasure. The excess energy of unconscious desire is thereby absorbed into the excess of perception.25

These are large claims for perception, especially as we shall see that it is not at all clear that James believes there is any such thing as a “pure” perception, separate from the workings of the conscious mind and the imagination. The first thing to acknowledge is

have read James phenomenologically, especially when following through the link between Henry and William James. See Armstrong, Williams for book length treatments.

25 The idea of perception as an “excess” resembles William James’s discussion of the contrast between the perceptual and conceptual order. For W. James, conceptual thinking and sensual perception interpenetrate each other fully, and we need both “as we need both our legs to walk with” (Problems 53). But the thrust of his argument is against an over-emphasis on the conceptual; he argues perception is the more original and vital activity, and can never be superseded because “conceptual knowledge is forever inadequate to the fullness of the reality to be known” (78). Furthermore, he describes the flux of perception as an “aboriginal” phenomenon of which we constantly thirst for more: “There is always much-at-once of it, but there is never enough, and we desiderate the rest” (95). This brings perception close to the way Henry James conceives of consciousness, as an inexhaustible thing of which we always want more.
that even if the moment of perception occurs between the subject and the object and so outside of the egological sphere of identity, it is inevitably the case that perceptions do not remain on the “outside;” they are domesticated as they are registered by the subject and ultimately become part of the subject’s self-construction. The cultivation of perceptions, therefore, can tend toward the cultivation of that creature so attacked by postmodern critics—James’s “mastery.” Indeed, it is not clear to me how one could exist without the other. Just as the spoils of Poynton cannot exist without someone owning them, fine perceptions cannot exist without someone potentially being proud of herself for seeing. If one tries to become a person on whom nothing is lost, one will still have to live with the pride of being that person, and struggle with the tendency of that pride to undermine the enterprise of perception that grounds it. But fortunately, I believe that the reverse is also true—egotism must struggle constantly against the power of perception to introduce new possibilities. Henry James may be proud of himself for his “masterful” perceptions—but is the alternative not willing oneself blind?

**Silence and Loss**

In discussing the “beautifying light” Maisie sheds on the adult characters, James writes in the preface that the scene between Maisie and the “Captain” in the park is one of the two scenes which achieve “the maximum effect of associational magic” (29), the other being the scene between Maisie and her father. In these two scenes we find depicted two different ways in which the excess vitality of the psyche re-appears in the social realm, transformed by Maisie’s unusual socialization. The first scene is focused on Maisie’s precocious experiences of loss, and the second on the way that those losses are
transformed, inverting themselves into the beauty of perception. Because her education in the enigmatic signifier has opened her up to the excess forces of the unconscious, these moments of revelation involve a non-linguistic understanding—Maisie understands things she could not articulate in words, often through insight into gesture and body.

In the first scene, when Maisie meets the Captain in the park, she is playing at being a lady, addressing him as she thinks a lady would, and laughing, in imitation of an absent role model (128). We see here another experience of more or less normal socialization, though perhaps Maisie’s direct and somewhat inept imitation of an adult is a sign of having lived in an unmediated way among adults (James presumably thinks it a bleak sign of cultural decay that, at the age of eleven or twelve, she is attempting to imitate a flirtatious young lady.) This role-playing sets the stage for what is essentially an imitative interaction; Maisie is so excited that the Captain might love her mother that she says she will also love her if he does (131). This moment is a revelation because, “so far as she knew, her mother, apart from this, had only been disliked” (130). Maisie is surprised to notice that she has only ever heard negative things of her mother and is moved to recover the possibility of another view of her. She needs a model for her appreciation. At one level, Maisie still identifies with Ida as her mother, wants to think well of her as an extension of herself. In an earlier scene, James portrayed Maisie as having matured to the point of feeling shame in the fact that her father was placed “in an inferior light” (109); this feeling is rooted in a similar identification, for the experience of shame suggests that Maisie experiences part of her own identity through her father despite his frequent absence. Both these moments combine ego-identification with an
element of beauty—Maisie wants to be involved in a set of relations that have something about them worth appreciating.

The scene in the park also depicts the excess vitality of the psyche that in Maisie’s life up until this point has found nowhere else to invest itself. The intensity of Maisie’s reaction is related to loss; just as the “images and echoes” of Maisie’s childhood at some point began to take on meaning, the sheen of perception here responds to a backlog of unspoken absence. To receive back an image of the absence of her mother as something entirely full is to have her mother before her as an external thing, worthy of appreciation, that cannot really be owned by Maisie any more. (Indeed, during the scene she does contemplate what a household would be like with the Captain and her mother, even while simultaneously giving no ground on her claim that her mother does not want to live with her—she is rubbing up against the loss of her mother the entire time she is contemplating her.) Maisie’s mother has become, in short, much like the lost spoils of Poynton, something only fully beautiful when abandoned. In part, Maisie still identifies with her mother and can even imagine hoping to live with her. But in part her mother is a thing now appreciable in its absence and no longer required as an object of identification. Maisie shocks the captain by telling him to love her mother “always” rather than briefly like “all the others,” but she then gets up and leaves, dropping entirely the thought that she might make a household with them. While for the Captain, this comment undermines his affair, it is important to see that from Maisie’s perspective she is wishing well on her mother even as she abandons any hope of living in a stable household with her again. This scene foregrounds the element of loss and abandonment in Maisie’s life, transforming her mother into a recovered melancholic object in an explicit way; as in
Kristeva’s theory of melancholy, Maisie’s mother here becomes a source of plenitude based in loss.  

The second scene, between Maisie and her father, builds on this dynamic, shifting the focus towards perception. In this startling scene, Maisie’s father silently asks him to repudiate him so that he can abandon her with a clean conscience. And yet Maisie also feels a certain plenitude in the presence of her father, despite the fact that no one is praising him. James parallels the two moments explicitly, not only in the preface but in the text itself:

She must have been sorry for him, she afterwards knew, so well could she privately follow his difficulty in being specific to her about anything. She had such possibilities of vibration, of response, that it needed nothing more than this to make up to her for omissions. The tears came into her eyes again as they had done when in the Park that day when the Captain told her so ‘splendidly’ that her mother was good. What was this but splendid too—this still directer goodness of her father and this unexampled shining solitude with him, out of which everything had dropped but that he was papa and that he was magnificent? (148-49)

The word “splendidly” in quotation marks is curious here; this word does not actually appear as an adverb in the scene in the park. The Captain does tell Maisie that her mother is a “splendid woman” (129). But the transfer from adjective to adverb here, and the

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26 Kristeva elaborates this theory in *Black Sun*, arguing that all subjectivity struggles to overcome a process of mourning for the Thing, “the real that does not lend itself to signification” (13). What this mourning process accomplishes, however, is ultimately the creation of a surplus and plenitude of meaning out of loss: Kristeva thus speaks of “the imaginary experience not as theological symbolism or secular commitment but as flaring-up of dead meaning with a surplus of meaning” (102).
insertion of the word in quotation marks, signals that the word is Maisie’s retrospective
term for her experience. In other words, it is not only James that is constructing the two
scenes as parallel; to some extent it is also Maisie’s own consciousness that seeks to have
the same experience again (“What was this but splendid too”?) Maisie’s desire here
structures her perception; she conceives of a parallel and reads it into her father’s pitiable
attempt to pretend he knows her.

As the scene continues what emerges is a connection between consciousnesses,
conducted in silence. Maisie comes to realize that her father wants her to repudiate him:

Then she understood as well as if he had spoken it what he wanted, hang it, was
that she should let him off with all the appearance of virtue and sacrifice on his
side. It was exactly as if he had broken out to her: ‘I say, you little booby, help
me to be irreproachable, to be noble, and yet to have none of the beastly bore of
it. There’s only impropriety enough for one of us; so you must take it all.

Repudiate your dear old daddy—in the face, mind you, of his tender
supplications. He can’t be rough with you—it isn’t in his nature: therefore you’ll
have successfully chucked him because he was too generous to be as firm with
you, poor man, as was, after all, his duty.’ This was what he communicated in a
series of tremendous pats on the back. (153)

While this passage is not technically free indirect discourse, it retains many aspects of
FID since it is fundamentally from Maisie’s point of view (and the phrase “hang it,”
appearing before the quotation mark, is FID). Furthermore, as improbable as it may
seem that a series of pats on the back could communicate such a detailed message, part

27 I say the passage is not quite FID because it is an imagined quotation in the first person, and most
definitions of FID restrict it to the third person (Rimmon-Kenan 112).
of what makes the passage sound like FID is that Maisie is clearly embellishing in her father’s voice; phrases like “it isn’t in his nature,” or “your dear old daddy,” are extensions, cast in her father’s voice, of the literal message she receives.

Maisie’s imagining of her father’s words is not ironized; James seems to want us to understand that her perception here is more or less accurate. At the same time, this is not simply a moment in which perception registers what is objectively there; rather, Maisie’s active participation is required to elucidate what her father is thinking. That is, this moment depicts a thoroughly intersubjective experience, in which the subject is active but permeated by the voice of the Other. Some have argued that FID is itself an intersubjective phenomenon, and here a technique resembling FID steps in to articulate a state of intersubjectivity.\(^{28}\) It is also important to note that what Maisie understands her father to say is articulated in a fuller way than he could manage at this moment—for I believe we are to take Beale as being only half-conscious of his strategy. If Maisie didn’t understand what was happening, no one would understand it, including Beale.

Assuming Maisie understands accurately what is happening her imagination is still actively involved in her perception. Imagination has been conceived since its beginning as a relationship to thing in its absence (\textit{OED} “imagination” n. 1a).\(^{29}\) Just as earlier, Maisie’s desire structured her perception of the moment, here we see that even the perception conducted in silence requires the imagination to buttress it. In this scene,

\(^{28}\) Rimmon-Kennan notes that one of the effects of FID is to enhance “the bivocality or polyvocality of speakers and attitudes” (113). Bakhtin makes a similar claim in his discussion of “double-voiced discourse,” though he uses this term to denote a wider field than just FID. Bakhtin outlines a typology of types of several types of such discourse, but all of them contain “an orientation towards someone else’s discourse” (199). Kathy Mezei has argued that FID can be used to break down the patriarchal authority of narrators (83).

\(^{29}\) Perception and imagination are often cast as related phenomena; philosopher John Sallis notes that, “in any case imagination would be, like perception, a way in which consciousness relates to an object. If a sense is still to be given to image, the word can signify nothing but this mode of relation” (9).
imagination and perception work together, imagination providing the absent words that are implied by a present body. But because imagination is situated at a farther remove from the object than perception, it is also more pliable, more susceptible to be shaped by the desires and needs of the subject, and hence, also more likely to be distorted by ideological forces. John Carlos Rowe has argued that there is no such thing as a moment of “pure” perception in James, but that the wishes and imagination of the perceiving subject are always involved in constructing the perception. For Rowe, it is part of James’s strength as a writer with a historical consciousness that he realizes that perception is always governed by a “will to meaning,” and so James frequently depicts characters who “confuse perception and imagination,” thereby smuggling ideology into their sensory experiences (*Theoretical* 201). I find this argument persuasive to a significant extent, but I also think it speaks to some moments in James’s writing more than to others; this is an excellent gloss on the scene I already discussed, where Maisie gives herself up to being “abroad.” Rowe stresses that imagination is susceptible to manipulation by norms, but we must also remember what I noted above—that Mrs. Gareth’s lack of imagination keeps her from envisioning anything about people that doesn’t relate to herself. If imagination can be for James a thing hoodwinked by expectations and social norms, it can also be a form of proximity to other people, when guided by perception. Maisie’s imagined FID here puts the intersubjective closeness to the other into words.

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30 Rowe’s objection is against a claim to immediate, objective perception, which would deny “the human and living activity of interpretation” (*Theoretical* 204). Rowe seems to think dichotomously about perception here, as either purely objective or shaped by the subject. But it is not simply that we either see the world objectively or see only what we put there; perception, I argue, is in between these poles.
I emphasize that without this passage wherein Maisie “hears” her father’s silent voice, the scene would be highly confusing. It is difficult for the reader to infer what Beale is up to until Maisie figures it out, so in a sense she is out ahead of us. As earlier in the book Mrs. Wix’s idea to “save” Claude leaps ahead of Maisie’s understanding like a kangaroo (95)—here Maisie leaps ahead of the reader. But whereas Mrs. Wix’s leap was based on the legitimacy of a hieroglyphic signifier, this leap is entirely concrete, based in the perception of Beale’s presence and so also of his bodily gesture. Beale’s gesture here functions as an overfull signifier. To allow such a gesture to unfold itself into words is perhaps to produce the full surface of a Jamesian sentence. The cultivation of perception, conducted in silence, here rises into language. And yet, that language cannot actually justify itself without the reader’s imagining of the scene and her trust in the collapsing of a complex intention into facial expressions and gestures. James’s discourse, in order to display intersubjectivity, must produce a gap; what Maisie shares with her father leaps across a silence of bodies and gestures and reappears as words on the other side of it. We are to understand that only a highly sensitive person actually present in the room with Beale could have inferred his intention. True to his insistence that the novel is dependent on the scenic method, James places Maisie out ahead of the reader because she is there to perceive the scene bodily.

James claims in the preface that Maisie’s glance “lends to poorer persons and things, by the mere fact of their being involved with her and by the special scale she creates for them, a precious element of dignity” (29). To quibble with this a little, I do not think dignity is actually what Maisie lends to the adults, and especially not in this scene. Dignity is a way of rising above—either above others or at least above the most
direct and transparent forms of egotism; Mrs. Wix is thus often described as achieving moments of high dignity. Dignity is ultimately a certain indirect disposition within the sphere of egotism and competition. To be dignified is to seek what one wants indirectly, and with high purpose—ultimately, to mediate one’s desire (this is why Mrs. Wix loses it in her moment of direct sexual expression). On these terms, Maisie’s perceptions do not lend the adults dignity. Rather, the opposite happens; Beale comes out of this scene even worse than he went into it, for his behaviour would arguably be more dignified if we didn’t understand his motives. So the beautifying light shed in this scene is not dignity, but the appreciation of insight into motive. It is, in Heidegger’s terms, the pleasure of dis-concealment—an elaboration of the unspoken.

We can now turn to Maisie’s climactic proposition to Sir Claude, when she announces that she will give up Mrs. Wix if he gives up Mrs. Beale. I have been arguing throughout that we should not read this proposition in terms of aesthetic formalism; I believe instead that what is at stake here is Maisie’s understanding of Sir Claude, and his understanding that he is understood. In the scenes leading up to the novel’s climax, Maisie and Claude share an awareness that they are both afraid of themselves. For Maisie to understand Claude here is for her to understand the forces of psychic excess through which he is invested in his relationship with Mrs. Beale, rendering him too weak to leave. Maisie and Claude are able to share an understanding about this weakness in silence—“it was Sir Claude who cultivated the supreme stillness by which she knew best what he meant. He simply meant that he knew all she herself meant” (255). Again, “they exchanged silences . . . but only exchanged silences” (255). James refers to a silence
which suggests a form of intersubjective connection, (though not, of course, a mystical complete union of minds), which the reader must use her imagination to fill and interpret.

When Maisie’s proposal is revealed to Mrs. Wix and Mrs. Beale, we have a scene in which the psychic excess and the egological needs of both of these women are brought into direct conflict (we might remember here Harris Wilson’s assertion that there could be “no other explanation” for the intensity of this scene other than Maisie’s offering of her virginity—in fact everyone’s self-image is at stake). Mrs. Wix returns to the metaphors of classical cultivation; she insists that Maisie was developing a moral sense but that this proposition proves it has been “nipped . . . in the bud” (260). Claude counters with an enthusiasm for the beautiful thing which apparently has been cultivated: “‘What do you call that but exquisite?’ Sir Claude demanded of all of them, and the lady mentioned included, speaking with a relish as intense now as if some lovely work of art or nature had been set down around them” (262). What is crucial here is that Claude knows he has been understood; he knows that he will say no to Maisie’s proposal, and he knows that Maisie knows this. Sir Claude sees reflected in Maisie’s authoritative stance a circumscribing of his weakness and an understanding that living with Mrs. Beale would likely lead Maisie to be abandoned again.31

What Claude so appreciates in Maisie’s decision is her accurate witnessing of the dynamics of adult power. Despite Mrs. Wix’s fear that Maisie may understand the facts of illicit sex without condemning them, it is actually unclear in this scene whether she does know how children are made; no one has ever told her, after all. Claude says with the “oddest quietness” that Maisie “hates” Mrs. Beale (264)—suggesting thereby that he

31 Mrs. Beale’s recurrent reference to the legitimacy of the original legal arrangement wherein Maisie was divided also helps drive home her resemblance to Maisie’s neglectful parents here (226).
believes that Maisie knows Mrs. Beale might abandon her. Claude’s amazement at
Maisie’s gambit is an appreciation of his own weakness, handed back to him as an image
he can recognize. We might say he is humbled. When he admits his weakness, he repeats
Mrs. Wix’s exclamation that “he can’t” give up Mrs. Beale: “’He can’t, he can’t, he
can’t!’—Sir Claude’s gay emphasis wonderfully carried it off” (266). Claude’s
description of himself repeats the others but retains the third person, as if he is seeing
himself from the outside, hearing his own surplus unconscious desire as Maisie earlier
heard her father’s.32

In the final lines of What Maisie Knew, Maisie looks back to see that Sir Claude
is not watching them sail away, having gone inside instead to Mrs. Beale; presumably he
must now ingratiate himself to her after the climatic scene. Mrs. Wix judges that “he
went to her,” but only when Maisie tells her Claude is not there; Mrs. Wix lacks the
curiosity to have looked back for herself. When Maisie says “Oh, I know,” her governess
gives her a sidelong glance, estimating perhaps that what Maisie “knows” concerns
sexual activity. Whatever Maisie’s literal understanding of sex, what is being contrasted
in this final passage are two types of knowing. As representative of moral sense, Mrs.
Wix does not have the curiosity to look back; she makes the same mistake James
cautions novelists against in “The Future of the Novel,” for she is too delicate to look to
“the immense variety of life” that “will stretch away to right and to left.” Maisie is by

32 The climatic scene is also paralleled with the scene between Maisie and her father by the use of a
gesture. Whereas Beale gives Maisie “tremendous” pats on the back (153), Sir Claude pats her softly: “His
hands went up and down gently on her shoulders” (263). When Maisie says she loves Claude, a gesture
again generates language, as her words are “really an answer to his pats” (264). In both cases speech is in
dialogue with gesture and the body, but Beale’s gesture communicates a desire for distance, and Claude’s
for closeness.
contrast the representative of an unending process of learning through perception; she knows in general that Mrs. Beale has power over Sir Claude, but has to check for herself.

**Conclusion**

In both *Jude the Obscure* and *What Maisie Knew*, we see critiques of the prospects of conventional models of education. But Hardy, believing in the classical potentiality of his protagonist but despairing of the possibility of any social institution to allow him to actualize it, brings that potentiality to a self-annihilating conclusion. He furthermore depicts his characters as isolated egos with no historical inheritance. James, writing nearly simultaneously, moves in the opposite direction. Maisie is surrounded by egotism and given no chance at conventional self-cultivation. But James uses this situation to re-invent his concern with the growth of the mind, developing the ambiguous and charged approach to individual words that I have explored with the vocabulary of the enigmatic signifier. Perceptions and silence offer a fullness to words that transcends their conventional content; cultivated in a way that sub-tends language, perception is the blood that, like the blood of sacrifice in the *Odyssey*, feeds the ghosts of the symbolic order, allowing them to speak anew.

Through her perverse education in the unarticulated realities of adult desire, Maisie develops the only real psychological adulthood in the novel. Maisie is a prototype of modernist maturity. Her education happens entirely outside the bounds of conventional norms; she is educated primarily in the very material that Victorian expectations were designed to disavow. Henry James, no doubt, has mixed feelings about the adult realities Maisie learns to navigate, but the development of her perceptive
powers creates a newly Jamesian hero, whose perceptions of even a decaying reality
generate a beautiful “second wind” in the world of unending consciousness. If the novel
is older now and so are the young, only such perceptions can help generate a subject
mature enough to navigate the very adult world of the modern age. The moralism of Mrs.
Wix, by contrast, proposes a false maturity that only succeeds in repressing desire such
that it returns in impulsive and childish forms.

Potentiality does not appear as a major theme of *What Maisie Knew*—in the
structure of my larger argument, potentiality experienced a latency period. But we shall
see the importance of potentiality and impotentiality return in *The Ambassadors* in the
next chapter, along with the themes of experience and inheritance, when James brings his
thinking about the growth of the mind to its fullest form.
Chapter Three: Experience in The Ambassadors

“What people ‘could have done’ is mainly what they’ve in fact done.”

—“The Middle Years” (Selected Tales 253).

Henry James is deeply concerned at all points in his career with the cultivation of the mind. We saw that at the end of What Maisie Knew, Maisie and her governess stage the contrast between two types of self-cultivation; Mrs. Wix, concerned throughout with the nurturing of a moral sense, lacks the curiosity to turn around and look, while Maisie looks for herself and learns inductively, unconcerned with whether what she sees will be conventionally moral. This distinction runs throughout James’s work. In an 1885 essay on “The Life of George Eliot,” he distinguishes two types of self-cultivation. James has great respect for Eliot, but he does note, in a tone of mounting regret, that her desire to demonstrate that her controversial personal life has not marred her seriousness led her to “cultivate a kind of compensatory earnestness”—so that her later work suffers from “an excess of reflection” (LCI 1000). James charges Eliot with something that sounds like a failure of perceptive hedonism, claiming that her later figures and situations “are deeply studied and massively supported, but they are not seen, in the irresponsible plastic way” (LCI 1003). In Eliot’s later novels, one finds “the coldness that results from most of one’s opinions being formed, one’s mind made up, on many great subjects; from the degree, in a word, to which “culture” had taken the place of the more primitive process of experience” (LCI 1008). These primitive processes are necessary, James argues, in order to get at “the fresh perception”—without this immediacy, second-hand impressions built from one’s reading will take over (LCI 1009).
The call for “irresponsible plastic” perception is surprising; there are few who would expect James to take the side of irresponsibility in any context. More than twenty years later, when he comes to write the Prefaces to the New York Edition, we will find him describing a vivid protagonist in terms that suggest an ethical mission of perception, claiming that such protagonists have “the power to be finely aware and richly responsible” (LCII 1088). But at another level there is a consistency to his claims: however much James might give himself to rumination, in both his earlier and later work he supports the inductive, ground-up vitality of experience, against a second-hand reflection that derives from reading or rumor. James holds fast to the import of the “fresh perception”—what his older self has added is a more portentous sense of the ethical weight of the act of perceiving.¹ There is perhaps an irony in the fact that James’s criticism of Eliot anticipates the charges of over-intellectualism and passionlessness that many will make of his own later style. But his point is nonetheless clear: whereas Eliot was at one point a middle-aged woman who, rather like Lambert Strether, came suddenly upon “the overflow of perception,” she later fell into the trap of aging into rigidity, and began to approach her situations in a deductive, top-down manner. She let maturity rob her of experience (LCI 998).

*Experience* is a key term for James, but decoding what he means by it can be difficult. Earlier critics, such as Philip Weinstein, tended to take the meaning of “experience” as obvious, in part because “experience” in itself is very difficult to theorize. In the 20th-century lexicon, experience tends to be associated with practice and

¹ James’s self-presentations in his New York Edition prefaces, of course, cannot always be taken as accurate representations of his earlier intentions, especially not with works he wrote many years previously. For an overview of the complications involved in assessing James’s Prefaces, see Armstrong (“Reading”).
solidity—sometimes simply with “what happens.” Experience is precisely what is resistant to theory. But this opposition elides the fact that during James’s lifetime, as now, experience was a theoretically loaded word.² By aligning oneself with experience, one could claim to toss off theological speculation, or the abstract systematizing of Hegel, or Victorian moralism, and assert instead a vitality and a solidity to one’s thinking; there was a premium on ideas arising “from the ground up.” To some extent, James uses this strategy in his essay on Eliot, where a claim to be in touch with the “primitive processes of experience” legitimates one form of mimesis over another.

Walter Pater’s influential Conclusion to The Renaissance uses a similar strategy; Pater writes that “Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end” (152); this statement is repeated exactly in Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray as a defense of Lord Henry’s hedonistic beliefs (Wilde 126). In another quarter, Henry’s brother William James unveiled his philosophy of radical empiricism in a 1904 article called “A World of Pure Experience.” William’s fellow-traveler Henri Bergson also stressed the radically empiricist, “ground-up” nature of his thinking. And in Germany in the first decades of the 20th century (where Bergson was also an important influence), “experience” was one of the central terms of philosophical debate. There, a relatively new word for experience, Erlebnis, was popularized by thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey and Georg Simmel as a clarion call for those who wanted a less abstract and more immediate philosophy.

² Suspicion about taking “experience” at face value is one of the lessons of postmodern thought, which seeks the historical conditions that allow something to appear rather than assuming that we have access to a pure “given.” Joan Scott argues that there is a substantial risk of essentializing whenever the word experience is used, because it appears to establish “the prior existence of individuals” before historical conditions shape them (27). The counter to this assumption is already latent, however, in the fact that we tend to see any “experience” that really counts as effecting a change in the person undergoing it, which means that it is precisely not happening to a fully-formed person, outside of history. The key is to conceive experience not on the model of classical empiricism, which emphasizes the autonomy of the subject who chooses how to react to experience, but on the model of a situated subject.
Excitement about *Erlebnis*—a word related to *Leben* (life) and connoting the immediacy of inner experience—took diverse shapes, involving all sides of the political spectrum. It is this celebration of *Erlebnis* experience which operates in the background of the now better-known philosophy of Walter Benjamin, who criticizes it to assert instead the importance of experience as figured by the older German word, *Erfahrung*.

In the modernist period, the valorization of experience also had a way of pushing at least some thinkers towards valorizing youth. The connection is not automatic, since in the most basic definition “experience” is simply what never stops happening to someone. But one would only generate a philosophy of “experience” if one believed there was something in experience that was really worth grasping—some kind of experience that really counted. For many of the followers of Pater (though not for Pater himself) the experience that counts is sensuous and intense, which suggests that it is proper to youth. This tendency is also evident in the best-known representative of *Erlebnis* life-philosophy, Georg Simmel. For Simmel, *Erlebnis* experience involves a concern with oneself, an attempt to carve out materials of culture as really “one’s own,” that belongs above all to the earnestness of youth. This habit of mind is understandable: when we speak of the experiences that really matter, we tend to think of them as the “formative” experiences, by which we mean the ones that shaped us in youth, when we were more changeable. Much depends on whether we are valorizing experience as something one undergoes, or as something one possesses—do we value the process of experience, or its result, the position of being “experienced?” Since it’s impossible to have one without the

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3 As Gadamer notes, though Dilthey had a more elaborate philosophy of *Erlebnis*, it was Simmel who was largely responsible for the word becoming so popular (*TM* 69). Gadamer’s analysis of the *Erlebnis* philosophy, though it forms largely a critique, is still strikingly illuminating.
other, it would seem to be foolish to pick sides. And yet Pater feels he has to do exactly this in the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*: “not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end (152).” The aestheticism of Wilde’s Lord Henry Wotton takes this considerably further, suggesting that the need to toss off Victorian moralism in favour of “experience” becomes a process of throwing oneself at the objects of the senses, a pursuit which in its intensity and immoderation certainly seems to be the province of youth.

Henry James appears as a complex figure in this terrain, avoiding the hedonism of Wilde, but coming close to Pater in his assertions about the near-religious value of perception. James avoids altogether the celebration of youth as such, which is unsurprising given his configuration of the nature of “experience.” James continually defines experience in terms of attention and judgment rather than worldly action, and is set apart by the fact that images he uses to represent “experience” do not stress the momentary, and the instant of contact with the object. Whereas Pater advocates that one pack in the sharp impressions of intense moments for the subject buried behind the “thick wall” of her own subjectivity, James tends to view the subject of experience as something more like an expanding cloud, always taking on more (*Renaissance* 151). In “The Art of Fiction,” James defines experience as an ever widening web: “Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility . . . it is the very atmosphere of the mind, when the mind is imaginative” (*LCI* 52). James was virtually obsessed with the possibility of expansion that this passage suggests—with the growing network of experience residing in the mind, never limited and therefore also never

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4 Freedman analyzes the complexity of James’s response to Pater, noting that while both assign a near-religious importance to perception, James often wants to distance himself from Pater’s work. Freedman ultimately sees the two authors as slightly closer together than I do (133-166).
complete. In the preface to the New York Edition of *The Princess Casamassima*, James defines experience as “our apprehension and our measure of what happens to us as social beings” (*LCII* 1091); accordingly, only a protagonist with a consciousness “subject to fine intensification and wide enlargement” is of interest to him (*LCII* 1092). Throughout his career he figures experience as an act of apprehension and judgment—a taking of the measure—rather than a matter of concrete “doing,” and pursues its expansion both for his authorial persona and his characters. F. O. Matthiessen famously described this stance as a “religion of consciousness” (131-151).

James’s approach to consciousness has always divided critics, particularly as it is often seen as the corollary of his plots of renunciation. The intense Jamesian attention to consciousness is now generally held in more positive critical regard than it was a few years ago, as projects of high theory have gone on the wane and at least some of the new ethical critics have taken up James as their central author. Before that advent of high theory, the common critical understanding was that the Jamesian renunciation plot casts experience and knowledge as opponents: in order to have clear vision of the world, his heroes and heroines must give up anything recognizable as experience. According to such a model, the Jamesian fixation on consciousness can appear as a meager compensation. For Philip Weinstein, this view of the world is a mixed blessing at best—

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5 In this preface James also reverses his position on Eliot and defends her against the charge of being over-reflective (*LCI* 42). Given that this preface is a retroactive manifesto of James’s intentions, it is not surprising that he wants to defend Eliot as a way to shield himself from the same accusation.

6 Philosophers such as Nussbaum and Pippin have recently been drawn to James’s fine attention to moral questions. As championed by Martha Nussbaum, the ethical approach to James is largely an elaboration of the ethical validity of the program of being “finely aware and richly responsible.”

7 The major proponents of this view in criticism of the 1960s and 1970s are Weinstein, Dorothea Krook, and Laurence Holland. Holland sees Jamesian renunciations as less narrow and negative than Weinstein, claiming that they are in their own way a form of engagement with the world (118). Krook goes further and argues that Jamesian renunciations are redemptive in their possibilities of offering vision, while Peter Brooks is more negative and sees Jamesian renunciation as the fruit of a moral Manicheanism (5).
*The Ambassadors* emerges for him as James’s masterpiece because its hero, Strether, “indicates most clearly the narrow beauty of his creator’s vision of life” (164). But the understanding of “experience” suggested by this claim—as action, as pursuit of goals and as commitment to relationship—is precisely not James’s. Later, theoretically-informed approaches have often recast the renunciations in different terms, and found them less absolute in their division of action and vision; many theoretically-motivated critics have seen Jamesian renunciations as sites for the examination of the ideological constraints that shape experience. Similarly, phenomenological readings tend to reverse the classic distinction between experience and vision, and claim that what James is ultimately attentive to is nothing so much as the conditions in which experience happens; Paul Armstrong concludes that to read James phenomenologically is ultimately to read him as a “novelist of experience” (*Phenomenology* 205).

I acknowledge that sequestering experience to the sphere of consciousness can seem to be a limitation, cutting James’s characters off from real possibilities in favor of imaginary ones. But it is also, and especially in the later James, an opening of its own kind of possibilities, presenting a complex response to the problems of potentiality I described in my first chapter. Millicent Bell has argued that the Jamesian renunciation

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8 Marxists tend to see the renunciations as symptoms; Porter reads the renunciation plots in terms of the need to escape the reifications of the market, so that Jamesian perceivers such as Strether only see so much because seeing is a “pure” alternative to taking action in a commodified world (126). Kastón’s psychological approach is hard on the renunciations, and sees James struggling to create desiring selves that can actually avow their desires rather than retreat into the imagination; for Kastón *The Ambassadors* is thus one of James’s failures (10-11). More generally, the Jamesian centre of consciousness, though not always tied to a plot of renunciation, has been a considerable target of suspicion from Foucauldian approaches; Seltzer and Teahan are the major representatives of this approach. But many other theoretical angles have found a positive value for the renunciation plots as interruptions of conventional expectations about the subject. Queer approaches to the text have been perhaps the most fruitful recent theoretical avenue along these lines; Eric Haralson’s reading of Strether as a figure of an alternative masculinity is a good example (Haralson 102-133). Kelly Cannon makes a similar argument about marginal masculinities, and David McWhirter offers a related reading of *The Ambassadors* in terms of preserving the open-endedness of desire, though it does not stress the queer angle (8).
plot is above all an attempt to preserve potentiality, and that James resists marriage endings because they foreclose the potential of the characters (Bell 42). We can interrogate Bell’s claim from the vantage point of Agamben’s discussion of potentiality: what kind of potential is preserved by James’s renunciation plots, and what kind is sacrificed? And in what way is the avoidance of the marriage ending, (an ending so important to the 19th-century novel and especially the Bildungsroman) a response to the potentials of the age?

Jed Esty’s recent argument about the sudden death of youth in the Modernist Bildungsroman, recounted in my first chapter, explores one way authors configured the potentiality of youth in the context of an increased cynicism about the actualization and social integration sought by the 19th-century Bildungsroman. This model preserves what I called the “holding bay” model of potentiality, but resists the act of delivery: waiting indefinitely for their possibilities to be actualized, the young protagonists must eventually die. This resistance to actuality is, in its own way, a renunciation plot. But Jamesian renunciations are different; they entail not the perishing of youth but the introduction and loss of specific desired lives for adult protagonists.9 Jamesian characters often come very close to a specific erotic actuality only to lose or renounce it, as Fleda Vetch loses Owen, as Isabel loses Caspar, and as Strether loses Maria Gostrey (though quite different reasons can be adduced for each of these renunciations—they are not precisely the same). The Jamesian renunciation plot brings something into actuality and

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9 Jamesian characters rarely linger with a sense of youthful potentiality; one interesting exception to this is John Marcher in the story “The Beast in the Jungle.” Though not particularly young, Marcher sides with potential and futurity, hoping vaguely for a great destiny, and misses altogether the possibilities of his relationship with May Bartram. The oddity of the story is that the great possibility Marcher was waiting for seems to have been the person with whom he shared this hope of something to come, and yet whom he completely missed. Had he simply realized that the potentiality was simply an actuality before him, it would have become actualized; and yet the investment in potentiality made this impossible.
then decides that the loss of that thing would in fact be more real and vital than its gain. The Jamesian plot, then, is a plot of impotentiality, where a fullness of possibility, including the inevitable “possibility” of loss, is brought into the sunlight. And much like Agamben, James often (and especially in his later career) finds an afterlife of richness and ethical possibility in this impotentiality. The Jamesian renunciation gives up conventional possibilities, but introduces further growth and expansion. New possibilities are often discovered in abandoning the objects of desire to which a character was most attached, meaning that inescapable failure is a part of the new experiences. This is Jamesian maturity at its fullest: if Maisie’s early experiences of abandonment provide her with a considerable experience of loss, a fuller sense of impotentiality and a fuller ethical commitment only emerge after more substantial failures and with a more pressing sense of mortality.

In part, the condition of maturity is necessitated by the later James’s interest in the unconscious. As we saw in What Maisie Knew, a considerable portion of what the Jamesian consciousness must come to learn about is unconscious investments, and the excessive desires and attachments of oneself and others. For James, these unconscious investments seem to be something one can learn to neighbour with a degree of detachment, but only when they appear within the penumbra of loss. The forward momentum so important to the plot of the 19th-century Bildungsroman, then, must not only be humbled, but actually countered and reversed, foiled so that the real expansion of the mind, in contact with its hidden portions, can begin. The unconscious, we might imagine, is like a shadowy figure standing behind us all the time; we cannot see it, but as we fail and grind to a halt, we may make contract with it as it crashes into us from
behind. And it seems to be possible for James that the relationship ensuing from such a moment of contact will lead to a form of growth—particularly for older characters. In valuing the growth that ensues from renunciation, James opens up one possible answer to the question of the age of the modern age. The later James, increasingly concerned with the power of modern forces such as advertising, explores the possibilities of aging characters learning to understand their own unconscious investments. So while persons of all age may survive the modern age, it appears that the hope of understanding it belongs to the older person.

Experience is a key term in James’s engagement with age, as the construction of what counts as a “real experience” opens up the issue of when and how characters grow and change. If Jamesian experience is the atmosphere of the mind, it appears that the atmosphere of the mind often expands in a condition of impotentiality and loss. Such a model is obviously opposed to the figuring of experience in terms of vitality and youth that we find in authors such as Wilde. And it is to explore this opposition that I turn to *The Ambassadors*, which exemplifies the power of renunciation and reversal to allow an older figure the possibility of expansion and contact with his unconscious. James thought *The Ambassadors* to be his best novel, and it is often at the centre of debates about the value of his approach to consciousness, for it offers the most direct depiction of the growth of a “passive” man. Despite its many obvious differences from a conventional Bildungsroman, the novel offers us perhaps the most successful Bildungsheld, or hero of *Bildung*, in James’s work. James charts a complex but, I believe, successful arc of self-cultivation and for a middle aged man, who begins integrated into the society of Woollett Massachusetts, with a marriage arranged, and a fortune thereby won, and must abandon
those things. In this sense James might be said to be plotting a Bildungsroman in reverse—a story that undoes the very process that a 19th-century Bildungsroman might have tried to secure. The Ambassadors is a novel whose seemingly happy comic ending leaves its protagonist alone and isolated, as if in a tragedy, sailing back to Woollett without any of his allies, leaving his love interest Maria Gostrey to sigh the adventure “all comically, all tragically, away” (347). Strether also reverses the promises of potentiality I have explored in the Bildungsroman. Arriving at the start of the novel in a state of exhaustion, he is a figure of impotentiality, living an afterlife of sorts. He has previously committed himself to the idea that he is “finished” in order to simplify his life and commit himself to “the common unattainable art of taking things as they come” (61). If a rich sense of one’s potential can be a danger in James’s fiction (as it is for John Marcher and Isabel Archer), the exhausted potentiality of Strether (like that of Spencer Brydon in “The Jolly Corner,” who learns he can only be what he is) is the launching point for more fruitful experiences. Strether gives himself up to the “rush of experience” (198), and the novel is dominated by the question of the shape experience might take in a situation such as his. Nothing is stressed so much as Strether’s age, his status as a latecomer. Belatedness is an enabling condition for the specific type of experience the text values. I read The Ambassadors for the response it offers both to Simmel’s model of Erlebnis (which James did not know) and to the aestheticism of Pater and especially of Wilde (a response which he was consciously mounting). The necessary belatedness of experience in The Ambassadors leads me to a further consideration of the way James configures the possibilities of the growth of the subject, and the role played in that growth by the unconscious mind.
Youth and Age

Lambert Strether is emphatically not young. James notes in his preface to *The Ambassadors* that he “rejoiced in the promise of a hero so mature, who would give me thereby more to bite into—since it’s only into thickened motive and accumulated character, I think, that the painter of life bites more than a little” (3). Strether’s trip to Europe sets him immediately in the theatre of his losses; he visited Paris once in youth, promised himself to intermittently return, and never has (62). As the climax of the novel approaches, Strether wanders around in a haze of aesthetic experience, and seeks reparation for those losses, recalling the un-purchased Lambinet painting that always stayed in his mind as “the picture he would have bought” (303). He lives vicariously through Chad’s relationship to Mme de Vionnet, switching sides and betraying Mrs. Newsome in order to defend Chad’s Parisian dalliance, because Chad and his circle somehow are his youth, “since somehow at the right time nothing else ever was” (199). Strether makes the sacrifice of a “tribute” to youth, having missed his own (199).

In my superficial summary, Strether appears to be infatuated with youth in a pathetically vicarious way—and this is traditionally the way many critics have approached him. ¹⁰ And yet the novel is founded on the possibility of a reversal of the expected associations between age and experience. When Strether first meets Maria Gostrey, she strikes him as “almost insolently young” and yet possessed of “full experience” (21); between them, “the relation of age, or at least of experience . . . affected him as incurring a readjustment” (27). Time is out of joint, but Strether seems to

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¹⁰ Haralson offers an excellent summary of the history of claims that Strether is pathetic and unmasculine (108). He reads Strether’s quiet demeanour as a figure for an alternative masculinity, and his renunciation, while not directly homosexual, as a figure for escape from mandatory heterosexuality.
have the possibility of catching up, as it is no secret to him that “a man might have—at all events such a man as he—an amount of experience out of any proportion to his adventures” (137). Strether is the very figure of experience as James defines it in “The Art of Fiction,” as the atmosphere of the imaginative mind, for he is charged by Maria with having a monstrous quantity of imagination—“no one has ever has so much” (301).

In the most famous scene in the novel, Strether enjoins a young man, little Bilham, to enjoy his life and live all he can:

All the same don’t forget that you’re young—blessedly young; be glad of it on the contrary and live up to it. It doesn’t so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven’t had that what have you had? . . . I haven’t done enough before—and now I’m old; too old at any rate for what I see. Oh I do see, at least; and more than you’d believe or I can express. (131-32)

While this monologue seems to warn the young man against going down the same road, it actually hides a powerful contradiction: if Strether claims that he now sees more than Bilham would believe, this is because the experience Strether is undergoing is necessarily belated. Strether’s experience is carried on in the shadow cast by the losses he has undergone. His losses return now as sensory experience:

The main truth of the actual appeal of everything was none the less that everything represented the substance of his loss, put it within reach, within touch, made it, to a degree it had never been an affair of the senses. That was what it became for him at this singular time, the youth he had long ago missed—a queer concrete presence, full of mystery, yet full of reality, which he could handle, taste, smell, the deep breathing of which he could positively hear. (283-4)
So if Strether is burying his nose in the “growing rose of observation . . . even to wantonness” (264), his indulgence is apparently only possible building on the shoulders of the loss of his wife, child, and his youth. Like Maisie’s contact with her mother or Fleda’s experiences of the lost spoils of Poynton, Strether’s sensory life is melancholic; he can only experience the sheen of perception once he has lost everything.

In shifting this lush, sensuous experience from youth to age, James offers a response to the aesthetic movement. Strether is a superannuated Paterian figure. James’s relationship with aestheticism was fraught and complex, involving both critique and appropriation. Jonathan Freedman’s *Professions of Taste* surveys this relationship, arguing that James took up aestheticism’s sensuous indulgence but moved it away from dandyism, casting himself as a determined professional and a real writer—and in doing so, Freedman argues, James paved the way for the modernists to appropriate aspects of aestheticism by claiming they were building on Jamesian perception rather than on Wilde and Pater.11 Freedman reads Strether as a Paterian figure, throwing himself at the “jewel brilliant and hard” (*Ambassadors* 64) that is Paris life, just as Pater advises the pursuit of the hard gem-like flame. He notes that while James may be outdoing Wilde by portraying a more serious and professional version of aestheticism, he is also simultaneously returning from Wilde to Pater, as Pater’s injunction to live experience to the fullest is carried on against the backdrop of the fleetingness of life (Freedman 198-201).

But in fact, the position of death in *The Ambassadors*—in Chad’s odd phrase, “the point where death comes in,” (342)—is not at all like the position of death in Pater’s

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11 Pittock notes a similar shift, from dandyism to seriousness, within the career of Symonds himself; Symonds did not so much shift his actual thinking in the 1890s as shift his terminology, moving from the celebration of decadence to that of Symbolism (70-77).
Conclusion to *The Renaissance*. Part of the excitement of that notorious text is the pressure and intensity with which finitude appears. Pater challenges the reader to develop his or her moments to arrive at the highest quality and intensity, in such a way that the text was taken, at least by some, as resembling a modern carpe diem conceit, wherein death figures as something like a winged chariot at my back. But for James, death has been moved into the foreground; it is not a spur but rather a precondition to any experience at all. This is part of the shift in the locus of experience from youth to age. In advising people to charge towards perceptions and “burn always with this hard, gem-like flame,” Pater offered something enticing to youth, and accordingly he faced the Socratic charge of corrupting them (*The Renaissance* 152). Accordingly, the writers of what Yeats called the “tragic generation” of the 1890s, for which Aubrey Beardsley is the most representative byword, figured itself as a generation who sucked so hard at the straw of experience that they burst before maturity could arrive. This urgency is humorously reflected Max Beerbohm’s first published book. In 1896 (at the age of 24), Beerbohm published *The Works of Max Beerbohm*, a collection of essays whose terminal-sounding title suggested early exhaustion. The work concludes with the essay “Diminuendo,” which suggests that the vitality and creativity of youth occupies at most a season:

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12 The belief that the Conclusion to *The Renaissance* advocates a program of amoral, sensual indulgence is largely a misreading. But it was certainly influential at the time, as for example in John Wordsworth’s well-known response (Seiler 61-3). Pater himself emphasizes the sensuous, but the cultivation of sensuousness he proposes takes on more sombre and religious overtones; often Pater advocates a love of the non-corporeal on the model of sensuous love, as in his essay on “The Genius of Plato” (*SW* 224-240). His claims for the spiritual interconnectedness arising from perception make it clear that this, and not indulgence, is to be the comfort for mortality; these claims are explored in “A Child in the House” and in the epiphany chapter of *Marius the Epicurean* (205-213).

13 My attention was drawn to Beerbohm’s book, and its concluding passage, by Vincent Sherry, whose work on modernism and decadence is forthcoming.
Once, in the delusion that Art, loving the recluse, would make his life happy, I wrote a little for a yellow quarterly and had that *succès de fiasco* which is always given to a young writer of talent. But the stress of creation soon overwhelmed me. . . . And I, who crave no knighthood, shall write no more. I shall write no more. Already I feel myself to be a trifle outmoded. Younger men, with months of activity before them, with fresher schemes and notions, with newer enthusiasm, have pressed forward since then. (138)

Even the younger men have only “months” of activity before them. As we saw in *Jude the Obscure* (published only one year before Beerbohm’s book) the investment in the potential of youth leads dialectically to a fear of exhaustion. Youth, associated here with creativity and novelty, takes on such a value that it exhausts itself instantly as soon as it actually compromises with actuality and creates any specific thing.14

If youth has all the energy but lasts only briefly, then perhaps what is left to the old is to live off the young. Accordingly, the decadent movement’s engagement with youth also led to a fascination with parasitism, most famously in Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray*. Here, the pairing of an older man as advice giver, and a younger man as keen listener, provides the catalyst for the greatest unmitigated catastrophe of the life aesthetic. Lord Henry’s advice to Dorian bears a striking resemblance to Strether’s advice to Bilham in *The Ambassadors*. In each case, an older man—walking in a garden—tells a younger man to live and embrace life while he can.15 But Lord Henry’s

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14 Beerbohm’s intent here, however, seems to be have been largely the taking of a comic pose; he went on to publish many more books.

15 Freedman, situating the scene in a long and subtle exchange between Wilde and James, claims that “everyone knows” Strether is virtually quoting Wilde (168). But indeed everyone does not know it, and James’s biographers do not even seem to think he necessarily read Wilde’s novel (Kaplan 333; Edel 409).
hymn to youth is more simplistic than Strether’s. Henry tells Dorian that he has “only a few years in which to live really, perfectly and fully. When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will discover that there are no triumphs left for you” (24). Accordingly, Dorian should:

   Live! Live the wonderful live that is in you. Let nothing be lost upon you . . . We degenerate into hideous puppets, haunted by the memory of the passions of which we were too much afraid. . . . Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth! (25)

   The impasse into which the novel is driven by Dorian’s downward spiral has left generations of critics unsure where the text stands on the value of Henry’s advice to live passionately. I will not enter into this debate here. I mean only to stress that youth is unequivocally described as the locus of experience, and this by a character who simultaneously claims that the goal of life is self-development (Wilde 20). A curious Wildean paradox ensues, for self-development must offer a diminishing return if vital experience is the province of youth. Henry claims that when Dorian is older he will have to “fight for” his victories, where now they are brought to him because of his beauty (101). Dorian, beautiful in his appearance to the gazer, is advised to pursue beauty actively. The advice thereby reflects a mixing of subject and object: the beautiful thing should engage primarily with the beautiful things. This doubling is in part a kind of

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Aside from Freedman’s very thorough job of discussing the dialogue between the two writers, I have found that these two very similar, very famous scenes are not commonly discussed together; other recent studies of James’s relationship to the aesthetic movement (Mendelssohn, Kvestel) do not deal with the resemblance.
fallacy. But the effect is also sexually suggestive; the pairing of beautiful objects and beautiful subjects reinforces the resemblance between this advice and the (traditionally sexual) carpe diem conceit. Indeed, Henry’s mindset comes close to taking sexual experience as the model for experience as a whole. (While there are a variety of sensations one can better pursue in one’s youth, the passion behind Henry’s speech makes it doubtful he is encouraging Dorian to eat red meat before gout sets in.) If sensual or sexual experience is the model for experience as a whole, then one’s green time is certainly the time of experience; the afterlife of this is to be a “hideous puppet.”

As Mendelssohn notes, James’s rivalry with Oscar Wilde often involved each accusing the other of being childish (240-78). The Ambassadors is the crowning moment of this contest, replying to Wilde’s lament for lost youth with a more complex lament that opens the door for age to become a source of value. Strether’s advice seems similar, but mixes youth and age vertiginously. Whereas Lord Henry proclaims that “There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth,” Strether’s lament asks: “If you haven’t had your life, what have you had?”—a phrase that, in its use of the perfect tense, makes sense only from the perspective of age. Little Bilham responds that “I don’t know that I want to be, at your age, too different from you!” While Strether’s speech may be better known, I

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16 I describe this as a fallacy because it confuses an anthropological with an ontological claim. Wilde is far from the only person to think this way in the period. Italian Futurism advocates that particles move fast, and so people should also move fast; Wilde advocates that the objects of perception are, at their best, beautiful, so beautiful people should engage with them. It may be more accurate to describe this gesture as a strategy rather than a fallacy, as those making such arguments are often making polemically aesthetic, and not strictly philosophical, claims.

17 Whether or not it is James’s conscious intention to respond to Wilde in this scene is uncertain. The texts are not frequently compared because of the solid evidence from James’s notebooks that he was inspired to write this central “germ” scene, not by Wilde’s novel, but by an anecdote related to him in 1895 about a speech Howells made in Whistler’s garden. The notebook entry written in 1895 already contains most of the elements of the speech that echo Lord Henry, though it does not contain the question “If you haven’t had your life, what have you had?” (Notebooks 141). The wording is adjusted and the reflections on free will added by the time James writes the plan for the novel in 1900, which means it is possible James added those words to respond to Wilde’s similar question.
believe that in fact Bilham’s answer better carries the momentum of the novel, in which all the real experience seems to happen to Strether. Aesthetic experience is replaced by a kind of aesthetic maturity; sensuous perception is positioned in an afterlife of loss—not in the wild abandon of youth but in the more mediated, contextualized garden of age.

The History of Flux

In arguing for a mediated and contextual version of experience, rather than an immediate one, James aligns himself with *Erfahrung* over *Erlebnis*. The distinction is known to all German speakers, but is philosophically elaborated by Benjamin, who describes *Erfahrung* experience in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” as an experience which brings about continuity between the experiencing subject and history, rather than just remaining within the passing moment (185). A similar argument is made, independently, by Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (1960), who also advocates for *Erfahrung* and associates *Erlebnis* experience with the modeling of life experience on the “aesthetic” understanding of the artwork. *Erlebnis* is related to “life” (*Leben*), whereas the older word *Erfahrung* is related to “journey” (*Fahrt*). *Erlebnis* has connotations of

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18 Though Gadamer takes note of Benjamin in a later edition, there is no engagement with Benjamin’s work during the preparation of *Truth and Method*. The distinction between the two kinds of experience is not in and of itself any kind of coincidence, as it is known to all German speakers, but there are striking similarities in how the two thinkers conceive of the distinction. Both value *Erfahrung* for its connection of the individual with history, with tradition, and with finitude, all at once. For Gadamer, *Erfahrung* always involves a kind of liberation, as one sees that one has been wrong and escapes something that has held one prisoner; and yet of course such a progress also involves a heightened grasp of one’s limitations (*TM* 346-362). As Gadamer tersely puts it, “experience is experience of human finitude” (*TM* 357). Benjamin also points out that *Erlebnis* experience as Bergson imagines it seems to eliminate death (185).

19 Aesthetic here carries rather different connotations than it does in my previous discussion of the aesthetic movement. Gadamer takes over from his teacher, Heidegger, a belief that the “aesthetic” model of art that dominates modern philosophy after Kant is based in a metaphysical viewpoint that divides the subject and the object and then models art on the subject-object encounter. While this is arguably an aspect of Pater’s aestheticism, it is still important to note the terminological difference: for Gadamer the term “aesthetic” is wholly negative.
subjective or emotional experience, of what in English is called “personal” experience; *Erfahrung* is associated rather with exterior, objective experience. Accordingly, which word a thinker prefers depends on whether he wants to assert subjectivism (against the impersonality of science or professionalism) or repudiate it (in an attempt to escape either bourgeois individualism (Benjamin), or the subject-object distinction (Gadamer)).

Colin Meissner, in *Henry James and the Language of Experience*, reads three of James’s novels—most centrally *The Ambassadors*—through the lens of Gadamer’s model of *Erfahrung*; Meissner sees Strether’s Parisian journey as a liberation from error through historical experience. While I agree with Meissner’s position, he offers no discussion of the countervailing stream of thought to which both Gadamer and Benjamin respond—*Erlebnis* life-philosophy—which was actually contemporaneous with James’s later writing. On the liberal side, the primary figures of *Erlebnis* philosophy were Wilhelm Dilthey and Georg Simmel—though these two men were not allies and didn’t get along. There were also conservative uses of this word: Ernst Junger’s book on his war experience as *Erlebnis* (*Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*, 1922), was a great success in the right wing youth movements of Weimar Germany. When Max Weber, in his “Science as a Vocation” lecture (1917), criticizes German youth for torturing themselves in the attempt to really “experience” things, he is reproaching the cult of *Erlebnis* (Weber 10).

On the youth movements and the demographic shift of Weimar Germany generally, see Peukert (86-95). Youth (*Jugend*) was itself something of a keyword in Weimar Germany, as the population of young adults soared. Parts of this movement would eventually lend support to the Nazi party, but in Weimar Germany the influence of thinkers like Simmel and Dilthey competed with more conservative elements. Weber’s caution to his listeners to avoid becoming captivated with *Erlebnis* and instead develop a professional dedication is paralleled by his later lecture, *Politics as a Vocation* (1919), where he counsels an attitude of political maturity (Weber 92). On maturity as a philosophical theme in Weber and throughout modern philosophy, see Owen.
For Simmel and Dilthey, *Erlebnis* is a way to recover experience in an age of positive science. In this, they belong in roughly the same camp as Henri Bergson and William James (and later James’s student, Dewey). All these thinkers defend a vital, primary source of concepts and intentions in experience, which they believe the excessively abstract and conceptual modern age threatens to engulf.\(^{21}\) Bergson’s fluctuating primary experience of *durée*, William James’s perceptual order and his world of “pure experience,” (*ERE* 21-44) and Dilthey’s and Simmel’s *Erlebnis*, are all original modes in which the subject is gathered together with his or her perceptions of the world; and for all of these thinkers, something of the solidity and life of this primary order is imperiled by the more abstract conditions of life of the early 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century.\(^{22}\) The primary rival to the base reality of experience, at least for Bergson, Simmel, and Dilthey,\(^{23}\) is

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\(^{21}\) Calinescu claims that this opposition, between exterior “bourgeois” facts and measurement and the inner life of *durée* and experience is actually the central opposition of “modernity” in the post-Romantic sense (5). This is perhaps too broad, but it does remind us that the Bergsonians and *Erlebnis* thinkers are to some extent located in a tradition stretching from the Romantics forward that responds to modern objectivity with an emphasis on “depth” subjectivity and rich interiority. The thinkers of the modernist period I investigate bring to this, however, a new emphasis on the immediacy of the pre-conceptual flux and a heightened distrust of the possibility of the absolute.

\(^{22}\) I will not have space here to elaborate any further on William James’s work; the importance of his connection to Bergson is well known. He had also met Dilthey (De Mul 18-19), and read a little bit of Simmel’s early work (Perry 2, 469-70). Simmel, for his part, misunderstood American pragmatism as a version of Nietzschean thought and rejected it (Joas 101-2). James is often criticized, as Bergson is, for reifying or even deifying the flux of perception. Posnock claims as much, and sides instead with a historically situated understanding of “experience” drawn from Dewey and Adorno (105-138); Posnock thereby draws from those thinkers much the same critical gesture I draw from Benjamin and Gadamer. But James does not simply reify flux; his balanced evaluation of the mutual interdependence of percept and concept, while it lacks the postmodern emphasis on inescapable historicity, is also not a simplistic celebration of the “given” of fluctuating perception (*SPP* 31-60). Henry respected William’s work when he finally read it, but he had not done so at the time of *The Ambassadors*, so none of these thinkers can be claimed as a direct influence on the novel. Hocks offers an excellent reconstruction of the influence William and Henry eventually did have on each other, noting that while they first criticized each other, William stopped criticizing Henry’s late style after Henry began to praise his work (15-26).

\(^{23}\) It is worth noting that Dilthey popularized the term Bildungsroman, which ties the genre to *Erlebnis*. For many years it was believed Dilthey had coined the term in this work, until it was revealed that Karl Morgenstern, an obscure figure in 18\(^{\text{th}}\) Century Germany, had used it in 1774 (see Morgenstern). Though Gadamer sides with *Erfahrung*, Gadamer’s hermeneutic philosophy is largely an attempt to criticize and build on Dilthey’s. For Gadamer’s response to Dilthey, see *TM* (218-242).
positivistic science, whose abstractions divide up the primary reality that is experience—leaving the vitality of experience and humanistic understanding in jeopardy.\(^24\)

Bergson’s statement of this position is the best known. Bergson explains in his “Essay on Metaphysics” that what he is seeking in his theory of *durée* is precisely a grounding for experience as a whole: “l’expérience intégrale” (Bergson 282). The abstractions of philosophy, reinforced by those of modern science, have expropriated experience; metaphysics must be re-grounded in the native flux that is our minds:

If metaphysics claims to be made up of concepts we possessed prior to it, if it consists in an ingenious arrangement of pre-existing ideas which we utilize like the material of construction for a building, in short, if it is something other than the constant dilation of our mind, the constantly renewed effort to go beyond our actual ideas and perhaps our simple logic as well, it is too evident that it becomes artificial like all works of pure understanding. And if science is wholly the work of analysis or of conceptual representation, if experience is only to serve as the verification of ‘clear ideas,’ if instead of starting from multiple and varied intuitions inserted into the movement proper to each reality but not always fitting into one another, it claims to be an immense mathematics, a single system of relations which imprisons the totality of the real in a mesh prepared for it, it becomes a knowledge purely relative to the human understanding. (Bergson 279)

Bergson’s complaint against the use of experience to verify ‘clear ideas,’ is an objection to the expropriation of experience by modern science.\(^25\) There is too much abstraction

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\(^24\) It is also important to the phenomenological movement—Husserl is clearly concerned with many of the same things as Bergson in his later “Origin of Geometry” essay, where he attempts to re-ground observational science in the moment of perception (Husserl).
eviscerating the vitality of philosophy, and a re-grounding of thought in experience is needed. Experience as *durée* may be “integrated” by its happening within one consciousness, but this holistic integration is a contrast to the systematic and forcible unification of experience by science.

There is no evidence Henry James read Simmel, Dilthey, or Bergson; when he finally read William’s *Pragmatism*, however, it resounded with him, and he claimed to have all his life “unconsciously pragmatised” (*Letters* 2:83). In itself, this comment may only confirm that like all these thinkers, Henry James values the induction of knowledge from a rich thing he calls “experience.” But Henry James’s attention to the growth of the mind brings him a little bit closer to Georg Simmel, for it is Simmel who developed this trajectory in the direction of a philosophy of self-cultivation. Simmel re-interprets classical *Bildung* in terms of the inductive vitality of a philosophy of “experience,” allying him with James’s emphasis on the primitive processes of experience as the grounding factor of real growth. But Simmel simultaneously diverges from James in his tendency to locate this experience in youth, and so he helps illuminate what places James closer to *Erfahrung* than *Erlebnis*. Simmel seems to be led down the path of locating experience in youth by the same unconscious bias towards vitality and immediacy which we also find among followers of Pater. If what one wants is really to experience “the things themselves” rather than some abstracted image of them, then the association of experience with youth is a tempting one. And it is this temptation, shared by Simmel and Wilde, to which *The Ambassadors* responds, and helps us respond.

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25 Agamben makes a parallel critique, drawing primarily on Benjamin, in *Infancy and History* (97-116).
Simmel takes up the emphasis on wholeness and integration of selfhood that was found in classical German philosophies of *Bildung*, but does so in the early 20th-century context, where the increased power of modern science and the increased specialization of disciplines have made the issue of personal integration more urgent. As articulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Bildung* was an ideal that claimed that “The true end of Man, of that which is prescribed by the eternal and immutable dictates of reason . . . is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole” (Humboldt 16). Simmel endorses Humboldt’s ideal of inner harmony and wholeness, but he laments that this is no longer possible. Simmel turns to *Erlebnis*, as Bergson turns to *durée*, to find an immediacy and unity prior to the abstract reflections cultivated by positivistic science and other specialized disciplines. In his essay “On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture,” Simmel claims that over time the separate spheres of objective culture which are originally designed to cope with actual human needs take on a life of their own and become ends in themselves. In their specialization, they do still serve a purpose, but it becomes impossible for any one individual to internalize the action of

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26 On the development of hard sciences and the German University system, see Schnädelbach (66-108). When Humboldt wrote, the sciences and the humanities were not yet clearly distinguished. Goethe could be both a poet and an experimental scientist and Hegel could still include a philosophy of Nature as a part of his systematic philosophy of history. But the situation of the sciences and the role of the university changed considerably in Germany during the 19th Century. We can see a rather striking emblem of the intellectual shift from the period of Classical *Bildung* to Simmel’s time in the fact that Simmel is rejecting the over-specialization of the German university system, which had been designed by Wilhelm von Humboldt.

27 The idea of an original unity to experience is problematic, since experience is so obviously a plural thing. What makes the concept of such a unity possible is the shifting of the site of “unity” from the “harmonious whole” of Humboldt, which is something attained, to the origin of all experience in a pre-reflective contact with objects. For Simmel, modern culture deepens the rift between subject and object, and *Erlebnis* can repair this rift. In *The Philosophy of Money* Simmel claims that “mental life begins in an undifferentiated state in which the Ego and its objects are not yet distinguished” (*Money* 63). The act of representation gives birth to the subject and object at once by dividing the subject from the object it contemplates (*Money* 65). This is a basically phenomenological stance. But this separation between subject and object is a greater force in contemporary life than it has been in previous ages of humanity; Simmel argues that antiquity was much closer to this subject-object unity and that this is why the Greeks do not struggle so much as the moderns with the issue of freedom (*Money* 64).
more than one of these spheres of life. Cultivation requires the objects of culture of course—one cannot become a well-developed person without such material as the arts and sciences—but those arts and sciences run rampant with specialized energy; specialists do accomplish more, but at the cost of wholeness. Simmel writes that “we become learned, more efficient, richer in enjoyment, perhaps even more cultured, but our cultivation cannot keep in step” (On Culture 66). So the tragedy of culture is that the things we design to meet our own deepest needs turn against us: “the annihilating forces aimed against an entity stem from the deepest layers of this very entity” (On Culture 72). Into this breach comes *Erlebnis*, which restores some of this unity. The problem with the specialized products of modern culture is after all that we cannot really experience them as a part of our vital selves, as following the lines set by our own inner processes. To experience a thing in the sense of *Erlebnis* is to assimilate its objectivity into the processes of life (‘Fate’ 79). *Erlebnis* is both a fresh and individual assimilation, and a recovery, on a higher level, of the initial unity of subject and object.

But whereas Humboldt stressed the value of *Bildung* throughout an individual’s lifetime, Simmel aligns *Erlebnis* with youth. Simmel praises Goethe, the idealized figure of classical *Bildung*, for his wholeness and inner harmony, but casts this praise in terms of perennial youth: at an age where most people stop worrying about the continuity of their inner life and let themselves rest in the specialized spheres of life they have learned to navigate, Goethe still wants to swallow the world. He thus blends the objectivity of old age and the subjective energy of youth—and such perennial youth is his genius (“Goethe” 85-90). In his essay “The Adventure” (*Das Abenteuer*) Simmel argues that

28 Such praise was common in the early 20th century; it is Simmel’s rhetoric of age that is curious. Dilthey offers such praise without mentioning youthfulness (Dilthey 52-67).
young people are more involved in their own inner processes—older people are more likely to be absorbed into the objective artifacts of culture and move within them, without worrying whether or not their interaction with those artifacts reconnects with the vital processes of experience. Young people want to make sure they really understand the meaning of what they’re doing: older professionals of the middle class are more likely to interact with the specialized spheres of their profession, developing their abilities without experiencing much angst about whether their new skills are deeply lived, integrated parts of their selfhood. As Simmel writes, “old age is ‘objective’” (On Culture 230). An adventure, Simmel argues, is a heightening of *Erlebnis* and therefore even more proper to youth—it is an experience cut off from the rest of life by its seeming to have a beginning and an end—and yet at the same time it seems to have a relationship to the whole of one’s experience. An adventure is a segment of life that nonetheless provides an image of the flux of life as a whole; it is a foreign body of experience, connected to the very centre (222). An adventure is therefore an apotheosis of *Erlebnis*—it is an *Erlebnis* par excellence, revealing the potential of all experiences to carry their meaning teleologically contained in themselves. It is an integrated whole cut off from history, containing a rounded wholeness which resembles a work of art. And so proper is this experience to youth that an old adventurer is “an obnoxious or tasteless phenomenon” (230).

Lambert Strether, however, is an old adventurer neither obnoxious nor tasteless; at worst he is perhaps a little awkward. *The Ambassadors* fits neatly in the blind spot in Simmel’s argument, presenting an older adventurer who is in fact the only character in the novel who seems genuinely concerned with making his experiences part of a real trajectory of the inner life. James was not criticizing Simmel as he was Wilde—*The
Ambassadors predates “The Adventurer” by a decade. But at the age of 55, Lambert Strether undergoes precisely an adventurous narrative that, while separated off from the other events of his life, nonetheless seems connected to the very centre. Simmel’s ideal of Erlebnis as integration is in some ways also reflected in James’s novel, but it is age rather than youth that makes this integration possible. Strether, like Simmel’s Goethe, preserves the desire to make meaning and find the necessity of his experiences even as he ages. But unlike Simmel’s Goethe, Strether is not perennially youthful but emphatically belated.

In other important ways, however, the alignment of experience with age in The Ambassadors also entails a shift from Erlebnis to Erfahrung. The novel is interested in inner integration, but only a broader contact with history allows it. Strether’s particular adventure is grounded in his combination of the desire for a meaningful individual narrative and his profoundly public, historical imagination. His acts of appropriation are oddly impersonal, and highly mediated. And his historical sense has the habit of fusing his personal losses with the broader, public sense of “history.” When he first attempts to reconnect with Paris, Strether wanders and gazes at Bohemian figures; he finds his guesses about who they are prepared for him by the literary representations of Parisians he has read, and he worries Chad will have decayed like a Gautier character. He looks at an array of books, but keeps his hands behind him:

He wasn’t there for his own profit—not, that is, the direct; he was there on some chance of feeling the brush of the wing of the stray spirit of youth. He felt it in fact, he had it beside him; the old arcade indeed, as his inner sense listened, gave out the faint sound, as from far off, of the wild waving of wings. They were folded now
over the breasts of buried generations; but a flutter or two lived again in the turned page of shock-headed slouch hatted loiterers whose young intensity of type, in the direction of pale acuteness, deepened his vision, even his appreciation, of racial differences, and whose manipulation of the uncut volume was too often, however, but a listening at closed doors. (67-68)

This complex passage provides an especially strong example of what the vague referents of James’s later style can accomplish. On one level, Strether feels the wing of the “stray spirit” of his own youth, which comes to him over the breasts of the “dead generations” that are both his wife and his son. On another level, the plural buried “generations” are the past of Paris; the arcade is “old,” older historically but also older than it was when Strether first visited in his own youth. The sound of youth comes to him from the youths he sees, but simultaneously from what he has read, and thus through the “wings” that are the turning of book pages. The actual youths of Paris are listening at the closed doors of the uncut volumes, taking little interest in the literature Strether has clearly read; and yet they echo Strether himself, who is now turning over a new page in what is paradoxically also the uncot, never opened book of his life—indeed, Strether’s adventure is well described as nothing other than the turning of pages in an uncut book. (The image of the closed book also echoes the folded wings.) Personal and historical pasts overlap in the “old” arcade, as one’s own life and one’s reading of books do; Strether’s sense of what “youth” means in Paris is doubly mediated; first by his own sense of loss, but second by the histories and genres that lead him to anticipate the characters of Chad and these other youths. The buried generations of the personal and the historical work together to turn the pages in what had appeared to be a permanently closed book.
Strether often seems to approach Paris as if he can visit the past as a whole. He takes a trip out to Chartres specifically to “cultivate” the “general easy beatitude” (202) of living briefly amongst the medieval. He compares new persons he meets to historical figures—he tries to discern the differences between Mrs. Newsome and Maria Gostrey through comparisons to various past queens: Mrs. Newsome as Elizabeth; Maria as Mary Stuart (43). He humorously takes up Bilham’s suggestion in Gloriani’s garden that he belongs to the 18th century, and might be an example of the rococo (123); as this example demonstrates, the text constantly wants to draw our attention to the way artistic genres and styles condition his expectations. This aspect of Strether’s character is intensified in the presence of Madame de Vionnet, who seems to be a magnet for historical and generic expectations. His impression of her is described from early in the novel as profiting from “things that were not strictly in it or of it; by the very air in which they sat, by the high cold delicate room, by the world outside and the little plash in the court, by the First Empire and the relics of the stiff cabinets” (148). In meeting her, Strether seems to believe he is meeting Paris itself. His historical imagination is explicitly at issue in his final meeting with her, as he actively reinforces the past of Paris out of his own sense that this moment is a great, urgent event:

The windows were all open, their redundant hangings swaying a little, and he heard once more, from the empty court, the small plash of the fountain. From beyond this, and as from a great distance . . . came, as if excited and exciting, the vague voice of Paris. Strether had all along been subject to sudden gusts of fancy in connexion with such matter as these—odd starts of the historic sense, suppositions and divinations with no warrant but their intensity. Thus and so, on the eve of the great
recorded dates, the days and nights of revolution, the sounds had come in, the
omens, the beginnings broken out. They were the smell of revolution, the smell of
public temper—or perhaps simply the smell of blood. (319) 29

This historical sense in turn participates in adding to Mme de Vionnet’s grace and
appeal. Strether first imagines her as Madame Roland, executed during the revolution,
and then goes on to reflect that the huge collection of old objects in the apartment, and
the historical sense of “the old” in general—“old, old, old, the oldest thing he had ever
personally touched,” all paradoxically combine to make Mme de Vionnet seem “natural
and simple” (320). That is, it takes a lot of culture to make a little bit of “nature.” But the
active role Strether’s imagination plays in this scene demonstrates that James is in no
way asserting that Strether’s perception is actually apprehending something “natural.”
What the reader is left to observe is something much more like the history of grace and
charm, and the role that our imagination of the “old, old, old” things plays in our
experience of them. This passage could be read cynically: Strether’s own climactic sense
that this is the last time he will see a woman he finds compelling is buttressed, in his own
imagination, by dramatic historical parallels. Some of these parallels may seem
outlandish, just as Mme de Vionnet’s immanent loss of Chad is mild in comparison to
the executions of the Reign of Terror. But I believe James is insightful here about how
we experience history in the present, through imaginative parallelism and vague
evocation. James is ever aware that our imagination often makes the past appear as
exaggeration or stereotype.

29 The occurrence of the “plash” of the fountain in each of these two related passages perhaps confirms that
James was thinking along the same trajectories as he dictated them.
Critics who have tried to stress the theoretical acuity of Henry James, his ability to anticipate the insights of post-structuralism and to depict the historically situated nature of the self, have focused on his sense of mediation: his ability to note that the imaginative activities of his characters are historically shaped and never autonomous and pure. In this general sense of the word “historical,” in which genres are clearly artifacts of history, Strether’s imagination is definitely historical—though at times naively so. But his naïveté is not James’s. Indeed, the way genres and token historical images inform Strether’s imagination frequently falls apart, as in the famous scene in which he perceives the landscape through the lens of the Lambinet painting until he recognizes Chad. Strether’s tendency to see the landscape as a Romantic painting is something of a limitation on his imagination; but this image is shattered by new experience and fails to give the self-contained pleasure of an autonomous work of art. And this failure of self-contained, immediate experience spins Strether’s experience out over the past, opening him up to James’s form of experience as described in “The Art of Fiction”: something never limited and never complete.

In replacing the immediacy of Erlebnis experience with experiences that include a sense of loss, James brings us away from Erlebnis and closer to Erfahrung, in Benjamin’s specific sense in which death is also the grounding for historicity. Benjamin objects that Bergson “suppresses” death: “The fact that death is eliminated from Bergson’s durée isolates it effectively from a historical (as well as prehistorical) order” (185). This link between death and history runs throughout Benjamin’s work; the experience of historical time, which is also the realm of experience, is constituted by the fact that people die in it. In “The Storyteller,” Benjamin evokes the sense that the
authority of storytelling and experience come from death: “Death is the sanction of
everything the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death” (94). The
cyclical and living authority that comes from the dying is also the authority of tradition:
the knowledge passed down in the realm of experience.

In keeping experience close to mortality James moves it away from the realm of
private sensuousness and makes it instead a matter of a continuity that goes beyond the
self. Strether’s experience, carried on over buried generations, in some measure takes the
side of Erfahrung—though it might be more accurate to say that James combines in
Strether these two kinds of experience. Strether definitely experiences both Paterian
sensuous lushness and Simmel’s sense of adventure, but it would seem that these things
now only happen when one is also experiencing Erfahrung. In order to get what Simmel
wants out of Erlebnis—a sense of continuity that makes the objects of culture a part of
one’s own inner processes and narrative—one must also be undergoing a historical
experience that rubs one’s face in mortality. The richness of one’s own inner adventure is
the sense of historical mediation and finitude. And this fusion is to a significant extent
accomplished by the Jamesian imagination. In the scene I quoted above in Mme de
Vionnet’s apartment, it is Strether’s imagination which casts him out and back in again,
appropriating the historical past for his current sense of revolutionary urgency, as his stay
in Paris with the “old” things is brought to an end. His narrative sense of his own inner
trajectory cannot be created without the influx of the historical imagination. Strether’s
images of the historical past are not always critically informed (and we may even want to
ask whether there is an elitism implied in James’s proclivity for images of upper class
ladies torn down by the revolution)—but what we are nonetheless shown is the activity
of a socially situated imagination that cannot appropriate the objects of culture into its “adventure” without negotiating a broader position in history.

The poverty of pursuing immediacy—whether we call it Wildean sensuousness or whether we call it Erlebnis—is explored through the figure of Chad. If Strether has great imagination, Chad, like his other Woollett compatriots, is said to have none (292). There is no form of past—personal or historical—that bursts into his enjoyment of his Parisian journey. Chad is most definitely a young adventurer. He is also the person who seems to have lived up to the advice to live all he can, going off to Paris and engaging in an affair with a married woman; Chad is accordingly the young man Strether wants to be like. But though he arrives with grey hair, Chad speaks at the end of the novel in a way Strether finds astonishing in its youthfulness, saying that he is “not a bit tired of” Mme de Vionnet, in a tone “almost as he might have spoken of being tired of roast mutton for dinner” (339). Chad intimates in this scene that he probably will go home after all, to become a business magnate and implement the modern art of advertising. In this, he is aggressively modern, asserting that he has just discovered advertising works “extraordinarily; really beyond what one had supposed. I mean of course when it’s done as one makes out that, in our roaring age, it can be done” (341). Freedman notes that aestheticism shares something with commodification; in elevating the aesthetic object above the sphere of use, aestheticism also foregrounds its capacity to become commodity, as art is always ready for “the eager, appropriative gaze of the spectator” (Freedman 59). And as a young aesthete, Chad has primarily consumed. His interest in advertising is only the inverse of his own consumer’s enjoyment of the pleasures of Paris. The immediacy of virile youth lends itself, it would appear, to love affairs enjoyed
like roast mutton. If what Simmel wants out of *Erlebnis* is that the artifacts of culture are incorporated into the inner trajectory of the individual’s processes, this is precisely what Chad dodges, graying his hair but ultimately changing little. Chad’s experience, ahistorical, sensory, and individual, actually brings about hardly any real development; the integration of *Erlebnis* is impossible without the mediation of *Erfahrung*, which means that real adventures belong to those with a mature sense of history and a long memory.

**The Latency of Belatedness**

If Strether is a *Bildungsheld*, what is it, exactly, that he learns? For most of the novel he is in fact deceived about the central fact: he does not realize that Chad and Mme de Vionnet are having a sexual relationship. He pushes this possibility to the side of his mind, at times nearly willfully. When Chad praises Mme de Vionnet, agreeing that she’s wonderful but asserting “You don’t begin to know how wonderful!” Strether reacts thusly: “There was a depth in it, to Strether’s ear, of confirmed luxury—almost a kind of unconscious insolence of proprietorship; but the effect of the glimpse was not at this moment to foster speculation” (207). The curious thing about this passage is that the reader is better able to hear the lewdness of Chad’s tone because of the way it sounds to Strether—the “confirmed luxury” he hears suggests a level of indulgence that makes Chad’s comment crassly suggestive. But Strether’s mind turns away from this, even as he helps the reader see it. When Strether finally learns the truth, putting together the affair from the sartorial details of Chad and Mme de Vionnet when he encounters them, he realizes that he has been avoiding thinking about how they spend their time. He imagines
Maria asking him “what on Earth” he can have been supposing, and sees that “he had really been trying all along to suppose nothing” (315); he “had dressed the possibility in vagueness, as a little girl might have dressed her doll” (315).

But Strether’s ignorance on this central matter does not mean he has not learned a great deal; like Maisie, what Strether seems to gain is insight into motive. He is able to run circles around the second group of ambassadors, because he, in alliance with his Parisian friends, sees the motives and details behind each maneuver made by the representatives of Woollett. He can tell, for example, that Waymarsh has been secretly in touch with Mrs. Newsome, and is able to sense the trajectory of Waymarsh’s comments enough to punish him by making him tell a “second fib” (274). He intuits—and nothing in the text that I can find ever ironizes this intuition—that Sarah will be taking the other Americans to the circus, because the demonstration that she is capable of some Parisian entertainments is an element of strengthening her opposition (243). He is able to recognize from Mamie’s demeanour, instantly, that she can see Chad’s transformation, as the other Americans cannot (252). The fact that the other Parisian characters seem to treat him as the one who sees the most (see 262) is of course partially ironized by the fact that he misses the central detail of Chad’s affair. But there is also a truth to it. Like Maisie understanding the message of her father’s silence, Strether also sees things that he would not have before. So if Strether has dressed the possibility of the affair up in vagueness, this vagueness has also had its boon, its secret strength—as indeed, the style of the novel also utilizes what might be called the secret strength of vagueness. Strether

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30 When he meets Mamie, she also seems to have suddenly aged, and this is the “mark” that she has also switched sides; so central is the dynamic of youth and age to the novel that, by aging, one takes sides with Strether (252).
has pushed sexuality to the side until he was ready for it; that is, at the age of 55, he has experienced a latency period.\footnote{Strether also experiences a latency period as regards his own desires and the desires of others towards him. He seems, by the final scene, able to negotiate tacitly the fact that he loves Mme de Vionnet but that Maria loves him; as Robert Pippin writes in his account of the last scene, it is precisely the unfairness of Strether’s remaining with Maria when he loves someone else that would make it wrong for him to stay in Paris (Modern 167-8).}

Strether does not emerge precisely as a libertine nor precisely as a prude when he learns the truth of the affair (he counsels Chad to stay, but by that point this is as much a counsel of monogamy as libertinism). Strether sees that Chad is indebted for the benefit Mme de Vionnet has done him, and perhaps he also sees Chad still has much to learn. Strether demonstrates, in subtle ways, both an understanding of the situation and desires of his own, which suggests something has flourished underneath the guise of his psychological avoidance of the facts of the affair. He is able to relate sympathetically to the depth of Mme de Vionnet’s desire, realizing in what is called his “sharpest perception yet” that she is “afraid for her life” with fear of losing Chad (324). There are also suggestions of a certain luxuriating in the sexuality of the situation that explode any sense of prudery. After Strether realizes he has been trying to “suppose nothing” about how Chad and Mme de Vionnet spend their time, James ends book 11 with two short, incredible sentences: “Verily, verily, his labour had been lost. He found himself supposing innumerable and wonderful things” (315). The longer one considers these sentences, the more lurid they become. Strether is being more than a little indulgent in his thoughts if he surrenders himself (as the shrugging joyousness of the double “verily” suggests) to thinking about the sexuality of the affair, until the images in his mind become “innumerable.”
If Strether’s belated latency period has been productive, by protecting him from certain kinds of knowledge, this introduces a double sense of belatedness into the text: knowledge, it seems, must come late in life and also must happen in the shadow of a latency that keeps some kinds of knowledge from arriving at the wrong time. Strether’s naïve idealization of the subject has also had a salubrious effect on those around him.

Mme de Vionnet confesses that she liked seeing herself through Strether’s eyes—that he has not been disabused for simply calculating reasons (nor out of pure charity to him) but because she liked the light he reflected and wanted to consider her affair as wonderful as he saw it—a common experience he has “transcendentally prized” (324). Like Maisie, Strether lends a certain dignity and even glory to scandalous events nearby. Strether’s effect provides a curious contrast to some of James’s other stories, such as “The Beast in the Jungle”—or the much earlier “The Diary of the Man of Fifty.” In both these stories, men who over-focus on some matter of principle affect the situation negatively without realizing it. The American protagonist of “The Diary of the Man of Fifty” has condemned a woman for marrying the man who killed her husband in a duel, without ever realizing she did it in part because of her despair that the American himself did not love her. John Marcher, in “The Beast in the Jungle,” misses his own life by not seeing the woman in front of him clearly. James is frequently compelled in his stories to recount male characters who, like bad scientists, do not realize that their own dirty hands are affecting the outcome of the experiment. But in *The Ambassadors*, what Strether has missed is that he was affecting things *positively*; his attempts to see shone a light of their own, and his abstract take on the situation gave something back to it. Of course, unlike John Marcher, Strether is in no way invested in an image of his own future greatness. If
Marcher is a figure of a self-invented potentiality, Strether’s impotentiality does much less harm.

The novel suggests other fruits to vagueness as well; Strether’s tendency to dress possibilities up in vagueness is matched by a general sense that there is something positive in vagueness and something hard and threatening in precision. Waymarsh is precise and seeks to be definite; he is forced to cover up his uncertainty in order to hold to his definitive tone, so that Strether finds him:

... carrying himself in a manner in which Strether was now expert enough to recognize [Waymarsh’s] uncertainty, in the premises, as to the best tone. The only tone he aimed at with confidence was a full tone—which was necessarily difficult, in the absence of full knowledge. (204)

Waymarsh tries to be firm to avoid giving away the fact that he actually feels “vague” (204)—and Strether can see through this false certainty. This dynamic carries over into the scene of their final meeting, where Waymarsh tries to be grave, firm, and manful, but Strether can also see a certain flatness in Waymarsh’s condemnation of him—that is, he can see that Waymarsh is embarrassed to be caught having a good time in Paris (273). Waymarsh is left to state the conscience of Milrose in a voice “feeble and flat” (275).

Firmness in *The Ambassadors* has a tendency to weaken pathetically in front of vagueness, which is paradoxically much stronger.

Vagueness also appears in wondrous modes, conveying intimacy and positivity. In the passage I quoted already, the voice of Paris is “vague” (319). When Mme de Vionnet and Strether meet in the Cathedral, he observes her for some time and feels a “vague tenderness” (174). This is echoed by her own vagueness when she, without
asking him what he likes about the Cathedral, states “Oh, I like so much your also being fond—” In response, Strether “confessed the extent of his feeling, though she left the object vague; and he was struck with the tact, the taste of her vagueness, which simply took for granted in him a sense of beautiful things” (175). The vagueness of Mme de Vionnet here has a secret strength to it. There is something positive about the intimacy that results from her vagueness, which takes things for granted without bothering about too many particulars. (The comparison to the judgmental and precise taste of Mrs. Gareth in The Spoils of Poynton is illuminating here.) Mme de Vionnet is continually described as someone one feels like one knows, and mostly through her tactful generosity, her seeming absence of a need to position herself competitively or to judge those to whom she is speaking. The precision of Waymarsh is counterbalanced by the sense of accommodation that comes from leaving things vague, and the conspiracy of the Parisian characters to negotiate the situation sensitively, set against the hard cold thinking of Woollett, is largely a battle of the vague against the concrete. The style of the novel, with its rarefied sentences that attempt to place everything in the context of everything else, tells us which side the text has taken.

This positive vagueness is amplified by the way that much seems to be able to be taken for granted and understood in silence. Strether and Mme de Vionnet share an especially silent bond: “It ended in fact being quite beautiful between them, the number

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32 Delusion is an element of this scene: Strether’s historical-generic imagination has led him to picture Mme de Vionnet as a heroine, and he decides she is “unassailably innocent” (176). That is, by a transparently faulty logic, Strether tricks himself into believing that this woman must be innocent because she seems to be at church seeking absolution with some intensity. This active self-deceit is another example of the latency period; Strether’s need to find new proof of the purity of the relationship leads him to shove to the side the obvious possibility that Mme de Vionnet is praying because she feels guilty.

33 Mary Cross notes this aspect of the late-Jamesian style of the novel: the vague referents remove words from their immediate context, to “disperse and expand the reach of signifiers” (117).
of things they had a manifest consciousness of not saying” (232). This type of silence is a counterpoint to another type—the silence associated with Woollett, which is oppressive and over-determined in its meaning. Waymarsh generates such silences, and so do communications (or the terminations thereof) from Mrs. Newsome. The silences that come from her lack of telegrams are a burden; her silence is a “sacred hush” that makes Strether live with her more intensely than ever, walking around Paris with her imagined company (197). Similarly, Sarah Pocock’s “calculated omissions of reference” generate anxiety (231). The silence of Woollett is over-determined, since it can communicate only Woollett opinions (of which we have been told there are few, and only on three or four matters to begin with—109). Such silence generates anxiety by enforcing even more firmly by implication the “thou shalt not” of its message. It is only “Parisian” silences that are vague and accommodating, not proscribing but rather leaving room for where conversation will emerge.34 Like the silent gestures through which Maisie learns in What Maisie Knew, these silences mark the overfull ambiguity of multiple meanings.

These roomy silences are the syntactic corollary of the way the novel represents change and growth. In The Ambassadors, the changes that happen to a person seem to be precisely what is unrepresentable, what no name can be found for. Strether has no name for Chad’s transformation, and can only hope that the second round of ambassadors will see it for themselves (206). Mamie’s change is described with a similar dodging of the representational specificity: “deep still things had come to pass within her” (252).

34 John Auchard reads James’s interest in silence as an inheritance of Symbolist poetry’s tendency to withdraw from the world, but also as an element of his fiction that resists the “noise” of a modern capitalist world. For Auchard, silence in James is “a stopping point where either/or assertions of plenum and void meet and flicker on to the other, now voicing the claims of belief and now those of nihilism” (3). The idea that silence represents a flicker between dialectical opposites is illuminating when applied to The Ambassadors, where silence seems to border curiously on assertion and passivity.
Strether’s development is beyond names: “He couldn’t even formulate to himself his being changed and queer; it had taken place, the process, somewhere deep down; Maria Gostrey caught glimpses of it; but how were he to fish it up, even if he desired, for Mrs. Pocock?” (211). One’s growth is not here made to sound sublime, as if it were entirely beyond words because of its participation in some infinite thing; it is simply something hard to grasp, something that one doesn’t have a good name for, a half-seen object that can’t be “fished up.” This is where, I believe, the post-structuralist or “high theory” readings of the novel need to be supplemented. For it is not simply that Strether must recognize the instability of all signifiers and the inadequacy of all names—though he must certainly unlearn the over-stability of the signifiers of Woollett’s Puritan morality, as these leave him at the start of the novel only in the rather embarrassingly childish position of having to ask if Mme de Vionnet is a “bad” woman (144). But rather, what everyone in the novel, including the Jamesian narrator, seems to lack words for, is emphatically processes of change and growth. If the enjoyment of conversation in The Ambassadors needs to contain a stiff dose of silence, it seems that growth must also go on behind the back of language, when the words aren’t looking. The silence of Strether’s latency matches the silence, the vagueness, of growth. If he were able to name Chad’s development (which actually might be namable in terms of sexual experience, if Strether only realized it) he would lose the model that inspires his own, completely different trajectory of growth.

35 The major readings of the novel in terms of a Derridean logic of signification are Cross, Rivkin, and Teahan. Cross and Rivkin both celebrate the novel for its demonstration of the logic of supplementarity by which signifiers fail to arrive at their meanings and must produce ever more signifiers. For Cross and Rivkin, it is Strether’s notion, not James’s, that Paris embodies “experience” in an unmediated way, and the text’s production of signifiers continually interrupts his direct access to that experience (Rivkin 75).
The vagueness that does not determine one meaning for each signifier is matched by the unrepresentable growths that go on under Strether’s conscious mind, without the permission of Woollett’s over-determined terms. Whereas post-structuralist discourse predisposes critics to look for ways that a text opens a never-ending chain of supplements, what is opened when signifiers are destabilized in *The Ambassadors* is not a never-ending chain, but an open-ended process of growth. For James, what goes on beyond stable signification can actually be the enriching process of perceiving the world, but without being misled by words into making quick judgments. Through Strether’s belated latency period, James charts the growth curve of someone who has the patience of vagueness, and the ability to leave space for forms of personal growth that are difficult to describe precisely. The willingness to dwell comfortably with the uncertainty of modern life is figured in the vagueness of spacious silences.

**Conclusion: The Organic in Excess**

I want to conclude by considering some of the psychological ramifications of Strether’s belated latency and its relationship to silence. The fact that Strether’s growth is described as something he must fish for beneath the surface suggests that his growth is rooted in the unconscious; the fact that he actively pushes many perceptions out of his mind, making for himself a kind of latency period, confirms this suggestion. But what kind of unconscious activity is this? Some theoretically-inspired attacks on James have claimed that his writing executes a massive denial of the unconscious, while other critics
have praised him for evoking a sense of the excessive forces of the unconscious.\textsuperscript{36} The latency of Strether is a clear indication that there is something excessive to what is going on with him—that is to say, that the rupture created in his moral sense by Chad’s affair represents an excessive, unconscious emotional investment.\textsuperscript{37}

Most of the discourses about the unconscious that circulated in the English-speaking world before James wrote \textit{The Ambassadors}, however, were not concerned with its excessive libidinal force.\textsuperscript{38} Rather, the majority of Victorian accounts of the unconscious mind tend towards envisioning it as a helpful tool. As Jonathan Miller puts it, the Victorians seem to favour not the psychoanalytic, withholding view of the unconscious, but rather an “enabling” view of the unconscious (28). Jill Matus objects to this argument, drawing attention to the anxiety in Victorian discourse about the unconscious mind (35). I agree entirely that this anxiety is there (and the uncanniness of the unconscious certainly appears in Victorian texts like Charlotte Brontë’s \textit{Villette}). But most of the major discourses of the unconscious that were available do fit Miller’s

\textsuperscript{36}Leo Bersani made the famous argument that James was trying to produce “full surface” that would never be ruptured by the “hidden depths” of the unconscious (132). Przybylowicz offers a slightly different reading, seeing the later Henry James as turning toward the forces of the unconscious and psychic excess. A number of scholars who are not working in an explicitly psychoanalytic frame nonetheless praise James for his engagement with some form of “excess” of subjectivity; Mckee argues that for James, fiction is generated by life’s excesses (278-9). Posnock argues that the excesses assigned by William James to perception and “nature” are transferred by Henry into the conceptual and the cultural (136).

\textsuperscript{37}Part of this is best understandable as the excessive libidinal energy of repressed queer desire. In this sense it is important to conceive of the character, though he is literally a straight man and seems to be in love with Mme de Vionnet, simultaneously in terms of James’s queerness. The excessive force stems on one level from his literal losses and on another, textual level from the loss that attends on repressing his desire. I would argue that Strether behaves not like a man who misses his lost family but like a man who has never had a sexual relationship. A man who lost his family would think on the details of the lost people; Strether only mourns the loss of his own youth.

\textsuperscript{38}One of the most salient aspects of the Freudian unconscious is that repression and distortion give an excessive character to unconscious cathexes. Furthermore, several recent, post-Laplanche psychoanalytic thinkers (Lear, Santner, Philips) treat the unconscious as if it were primarily describable simply as excess. See my discussion of Freud in chapter 5.
William B. Carpenter coined the term “unconscious cerebration” in his *Principles of Mental Physiology* (1869), to describe the latent activity of the mind as it attempts to solve problems. His views were spread by articles on unconscious cerebration in *Macmillan’s* by Francis Power Cobbe. Both these authors tend to find their examples of unconscious mental activity in non-threatening phenomena. Carpenter uses examples like suddenly remembering a forgotten name when one stops trying, or returning to a subject with a new insight, as evidence that the unconscious mind makes progress on our behalf without our deliberate effort (530-31). Miller praises these authors for being closer to the contemporary unconscious of scientific psychology than Freud was; though it is also important to see that in Freud’s terms, they seem to be discussing something that conflates a portion of the unconscious mind with what is more accurately termed the preconscious mind (the reservoir of things that in principle available to consciousness, and not repressed).  

Henry James frequently uses organic metaphors to describe the unconscious power of his own mind, particularly when he comes to write the prefaces to the New York Edition. Metaphors for the organic activity of his mind are an element of his strategy of legitimating himself as a genius. But it is also curious how much his use of these metaphors resembles an account of the enabling unconscious, giving away control

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39 Another popular book at the time was Hartmann’s *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, translated into English in 1884. For Hartmann, writing more in the tradition of German Idealism than psychological research, the unconscious solves a great number of philosophical problems and resolves all antinomies; he claims in the introduction that he will reveal the “Absolutes” of all previous philosophers to really be the universal unconscious (5). Hartmann’s philosophy forms a bridge between the German Idealists and Jung.  

40 Both Cobbe and Carpenter, however, discuss some material Freud would place in the unconscious, such as dreams. Cobbe describes the unconscious mind as inventing dreams much like the heart continues to beat, without fresh instruction from the “I” (331). Their arguments also have very different stakes from Freud’s. For Cobbe, the stakes are religious, and have less to do with the exploration of the mind than the preserving of free will; if our brains sometimes think without us, Cobbe reasons, then our immortal souls may still be a possibility since we are not identical to our physical brain (333-4).
to some unseen principle. Of course, this too is to some extent a strategy, in the Romantic vein that a real genius is in touch with nature. James has frequently been seen as the inheritor of the organic aesthetics of the Romantic era. When Coleridge first defines the organic against the mechanical, he also connects the organic to the unconscious activity of the mind: in the famous fragment on Shakespeare where he makes the distinction between organic and mechanical form, he calls Shakespeare “a nature humanized, a genial understanding directing self-consciously a power and implicit wisdom deeper than consciousness” (Coleridge 224). The tradition of Romantic genius involves celebrating the unconscious nature of organic forms. In the Victorian period, this Romantic discourse was well known, and ran alongside the ideas of unconscious cerebration which are viewed now as the precursors to modern psychology and psychoanalysis.

James’s use of organic metaphors seems to exaggerate the “unconscious” aspect of the organic. Virtually all his books are described in their prefaces as rising from “germs” which they then grow beyond with a pace and scale that seem to shock their author. Their organic growth seems to contain both the wholeness of a finished organism and the excess force of a tropical plant that never stops growing. In his preface to The Awkward Age, James notes the “quite incalculable tendency of a mere grain of subject-matter to expand and develop and over the ground when conditions happen to favour it”

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41 Percy Lubbock saw James as an organicist, and most mid-century critics followed him; for a criticism of Lubbock’s approach, see Posnock (132). René Wellek, in an important article that established the seriousness of James’s literary criticism, claimed that James is the only thinker of his time who “holds fast to the insights of organic aesthetics” (321). In this Wellek connects James to Goethe, whom James had praised highly. Ward claims that James mixes the organic with the scientific to get a notion of stable but vital form, for which his metaphor is often architectural (Ward 10). Fogel reads James as an inheritor of Romanticism through his dialectical, “spiral” approach to contraries—a reading that approaches James more as a Hegelian than as inheritor of English Romanticism.

42 The importance of unconscious mental activity to the Romantic strand of thinking is summarized by Abrams, who focuses on the importance of Carlyle in disseminating such ideas (213-17).
He describes the novel as one of his many books which, guided by “an unforeseen principle of growth” have become “comparative monsters” (AA 3). The writer who finds such a germ is “terribly at the mercy of his mind. That organ has only to exhale, in its degree, a fostering tropic air in order to produce complications beyond reckoning” (AA 5). There is certainly a boast in this claim to a tropical mind, a boast which is pushed further when James claims at the end of the preface that the rounded synthesis he has made of this unwieldy beast is such that the reader is “lost in the tangle of the forest” (AA 16)—which is nearly to say that James’s mind is so encouraging to growth that the novel has expanded beyond the reader’s fathoming. Yet the metaphor combines two trajectories in a striking way: while the growth is organically synthesized, it is also excessive and beyond the power of the conscious. James is at the mercy of his mind; he can only hold on tight and make discriminations later.

This situates James just on the fringe of the “enabling” view of the unconscious. He is certainly boasting about the enabling powers of his own mind, but he is also gesturing to their hidden excesses. That James describes himself as author in control of this excess, while he often describes his characters at their mercy, is an egotistic fault on his part: nonetheless the excess is there. On the same fringe we can situate Strether’s tendency to push thoughts out of his mind, all the while cultivating his perceptions. Growth seems to happen in the midst of the excess. So if the unconscious is an organic power working without the control of the conscious mind, it also seems able to contain the dodges and evasions we associate with the libidinal, repression-based Freudian view of the unconscious. The Jamesian unconscious, at least in *The Ambassadors*, is thus a
kind of hinge between the two concepts: it is repressive, but also enabling in that it allows for a kind of organic growth that escapes the “mechanism” of words.

Bergson, in “The Idea of Durée,” argues that the social order, paired with the homogeneity of language, causes us to lose sense of Durée:

Consciousness, goaded by an insatiable desire to separate, substitutes the symbol for the reality, or perceives the reality only through the symbol. As the self thus refracted, and thereby broken to pieces, is much better adapted to the requirements of social life in general and language in particular, consciousness prefers it, and gradually loses sight of the fundamental self. (Bergson 72)

Bergson’s sense of a fundamental self is quite clearly an organicism of its own. The common enemy of both Romantic organicism and modernist vitalism—the mechanistic—is here described as a characteristic of language. And while James does not long nostalgically for the unitary “fundamental self” of Bergson’s durée, his depiction of growth as beyond representation is marked by the same suspicion of the straightforward homogeneity of labels. As I demonstrated in my last chapter, in What Maisie Knew the most important signifiers shift their meanings; this is less a celebration of the permanent formal indeterminacy of words Derrida would call différence than it is a strategy allowing the signifiers to contain multitudes. Self-development in The Ambassadors operates in the same territory. Silence may very well be a position in language, as Derridean thought would have it, rather than a gesture to a mystical “beyond” of language. But silences for Henry James are also a dwelling place for what is in excess of any one label. What happens in Jamesian silences is excessive and also “Freudian,” inasmuch as those silences contain excess energies that are not safe in the social world.
The Ambassadors, published near the opening of the 20th century, should perhaps be seen as a fusion or bridge between the 19th- and 20th-century models of the unconscious. The bonus of seeing the novel this way would be this: that by combining the enabling organic unconscious with the excessive Freudian one, James provides an avenue towards the possibility of cultivating a relationship with that excess, and becoming the neighbor of our unconscious investments. Henry James describes a position of maturity that allows the possibility of an enabling excess. His emphatically belated hero, marked by loss and estranged from immediate sensuous enjoyment, is positioned to gain the greatest benefit from his scrupulously delayed contact with the excess forces of the mind.
Chapter Four: Aging and Inheritance in the 1930s: Older Women in Woolf, Sackville-West, and Holtby

“The perennial topic of the modern girl”

What role does gender play in the question of how we imagine the “age” of the Modern age? A connection between gender and narratives of progress was forged during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as the suffrage movement claimed gender equality as the vital, even inevitable next step in the forward march of history.¹ Many women in Woolf’s circle felt the claims of the women’s movement were profoundly generational; as Hermione Lee notes, Woolf’s mother opposed the idea of women voting, which meant that campaigning for women’s rights was a part of killing the angel in the house, and thereby taking distance from the hoary, elderly face of the Victorian parents (Lee 85; 279-80). In the context of Woolf’s childhood, authority figures were coded as “old.”² And while women and men of various ages participated in the suffrage campaign and other related political movements, it is also true that the historically new “New Woman” was generally not imagined as an old woman. And so the feminist movements of the modernist period involved themselves in a complex set of ways with the imagination of age.

Generational conflict had been an element of the suffrage movement and the discourse of the “New Woman” as early as the 1890s, when friction developed between different generations of women who understood the movement differently (Caine 132).

¹ Rita Felski discusses the centrality of a model of linear progressive time by the suffrage movement, but also notes the complexities latent in the use of such a model (145-155).
² Alex Zwerdling notes the extent to which the contexts of Woolf’s childhood combined to create an atmosphere of reverence for old age: Queen Victoria seemed to have been in power forever, and Woolf’s father was old enough that she felt he was more accurately described as her grandfather (Zwerdling 150).
The much-discussed debate between B.A. Crackenthorpe and Alys Pearsall Smith concerning the “Revolt of the Daughters” in the journal *Nineteenth Century* in 1894 cast the new possibilities for women in terms of the rebellion of the young, whom their attackers imagined as selfish (Crackenthorpe). This generational imaginary lasted well into the twentieth century, though many layers were also added to it; Woolf’s tributes to Ethel Smyth in *The Pargiters* provide an example of the way an older generation of feminists could be lauded as the veterans of the suffrage movement in the 1930s: “She is of the race of pioneers, of pathmakers. She has gone before and felled trees and blasted rocks and built bridges” (*Pargiters* xxvii-xxviii). But after 1928, when women were granted the vote on the same terms as men in England, the terms of discussion and debate often did seem to be about the coming young generation—what Winifred Holtby in *South Riding* calls “the perennial topic of the modern girl”—the topic which Holtby claims inevitably led to a discussion about lipstick (*SR* 183). Holtby offers a thoughtful and complex response to the charges against the “Modern Girl” in *Women and a Changing Civilization* (1935); the fact that the charges she feels bound to repel are charges of egotism and self-absorption indicate that the discourse about young women had not changed much since the 1890s. One widespread response to the granting of new freedoms and permissions to women was a concern that the next generation would grow up selfish—a discourse that has never gone away.

The discussions of “The New Woman” and “The Modern Girl” return us to the issue of the metaphorical overlapping of historical time and individual aging—the question of the age of the modern age. As women won new freedoms, one understandable habit of mind was to focus on the future of the young women who would
enjoy those freedoms. But this habit of mind had its negative side; Margaret Morganroth Gullette has written about the backlash against older women in early 20th-century Britain, pointing out that a combination of factors, including a dropping birth rate but also “the feminist idealization of the advanced young woman of the era,” contributed to a certain hostility towards the postmaternal woman (Gullette 222). The postmaternal woman was imagined as declining, leisured, and—via birth control—as having given up on the duties of mothering too early. Gullette notes the popularity of novels representing middle age as a state of decline for women, such as American writer Ellen Glasgow’s *Virginia* (1913). She also claims that feminists unwittingly participated in this narrative:

As moderns and self-identified ‘daughters,’ writers of all ages who envisioned young (often college-going) readers as their ideal audience represented the young as a progressive category; they locked themselves into contrasting the not-young of the same class as inhibited and unchangeable. (Gullette 236)

Of course not all feminist writers did this, and Winifred Holtby’s passionate defense of the vitality of spinsters in both *Women and a Changing Civilization* and *South Riding* is a good example of a response to the image of older women as wasted and unchanging.²

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1 The dropping birth rate and concomitant fears about the eugenic health of the nation were certainly at the centre of the heightened anxiety about post-maternal mothers and spinsters in the interwar period, though the attack on spinsters, in particular, was also given added ire by pseudo-Freudian discourse. On the link between discussions of aging and eugenics, Susan Squier notes that eugenic discourse of the 1920s and 30s included discussion of aging and the appropriate length of a life (“Incubabies” 91). On the Freudian attack on spinsters and the feminist reactions of the time, see Oram.

² Of course, the fact that the Modern Girl was a “perennial topic” was rarely tied, in popular discourse, to positive discourses about young women, who were viewed with considerable suspicion as well. Billie Melman offers an excellent overview of the discussion of the younger woman in the first decade of the interwar period as an object of fantasy and suspicion. Melman notes that younger women were a hot topic in the 1920s, when millions of women between 21 and 30 did not yet have the vote but might soon get it; the Equal Franchise Bill of 1928 was referred to as the “Flapper Vote” (Melman 1).
Indeed, several important women writers in the 1930s turned to narratives of old age, and did so not only in response to this new hostility towards older women and spinsters, but also as a part of their representations of women’s history. Diana Wallace notes the popularity of the genre of women’s histories (written by women, finally) after the Franchise Act: “It was a moment that seemed to call for a kind of stock-taking, looking back at the past in order to measure the distance come, and to assess the distance still to travel” (220). I argue that a similar stock-taking is performed by several novels about aging women of the 1930s: Holtby’s *South Riding*, Woolf’s *The Years*, and Vita Sackville-West’s *All Passion Spent*. In writing about the progress of women and the historical configurations under which women had operated and did operate, a glance towards the past was an important portion of clarifying what had been and might be. Looking forward was intertwined with a taking account of what had been lost or repressed in the past. Writing about older women in the present could act as a way of assessing the legacy of the especially strict gender norms of the Victorian period, and so a natural part of trying to imagine a more promising future. Also, as Cynthia Port has recently argued, writing about older women was an important strategy in the 1930s because it allowed one to escape the marriage plot and resist the market value of female youth.³ Writing about an older, single woman offers the possibility of writing about a woman’s subjectivity on its own, apart from married life. A young woman of the period offers fewer avenues for the exploration of women’s minds and the possibilities of female autonomy, as it is still expected she will be interested mainly in marriage. Woolf,

³ Cynthia Port discusses Rose Macaulay in particular attempting to resist what she calls the “trafficking” in women’s ages, as the youth of women came to be emphasized even more strongly as a commodity against the background of declining and possibly barren older women (Port).
with irony but not without a note of hopefulness, begins *Three Guineas* with the observation that a man has probably never sought help from a woman before with the question of how to prevent war (*TG* 3). If more women are gaining access to the independence of mind and income that Woolf claims are intertwined, older women become characters of special relevance. Like Lady Slane at the start of Vita Sackville-West’s *All Passion Spent*, who suddenly must be consulted about everything after the death of her husband, an older woman of the 1930s might actually experience the curious sensation of being asked her opinion on an important matter for the first time; thus, as women without men, widows and spinsters could become a kind of metonym for the present age.

In the context of my theme of the age of the modern age, there are other important benefits to writing about aging women. Both younger women and older women may, in different senses, be representatively modern: the younger woman may embody new possibilities for opportunity, but the older woman may embody the awareness of a long historical past that is also so much a part of being modern and modernist. Youth remains important in the novels I am examining; in *South Riding* and *All Passion Spent*, figures of the pure potentiality of youth return in a less desperate and less egotistic vein than we saw in Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*. Building on the optimism that attends the franchise and the opening of the professions to women, the potential of the young girl figures in these books more as a sign of communal hope and less as a sign of rapacious individualism. (The matter is more complex for Woolf, who does articulate in *Three Guineas* the fear that aggression and possessiveness may infect women as they enter the professions.) But conversely, in each of the three novels, older women also
appear as a key element of the progressive movement. It appears that older women have something specific and specifically modern to add to the march of women’s history in the 1930s. Their function is not elegiac; the older women characters are not represented merely as cautionary tales about the evils of past oppressions. Rather, the older female characters are active participants. The possibilities that were repressed or scorned in the past have, in these novels, also accumulated and stored up—the rejected possibilities have still had their effect, and this has produced, in silence and under the radar, a much-needed perspective in older women. If the young persons of the 1930s inherit a long cultural tradition, including both great works of art and a considerable legacy of oppression, older men and women can present themselves either as the overbearing enforcers of that tradition, or—as in these works—as the critical sifters who have lived with that tradition for a long time and separated wheat from chaff. Active and vital older characters can negotiate and re-inherit their past. For these three writers, older women function as sites where traditions can be re-examined and refashioned. While the progress of women may harbor hopes for the young, it occurs in a decisively old modern age which is re-awakening from a long past of patriarchy—and older female characters prove a valuable site for the re-imagining of the hinge between the past and the future. These writers reflect that hinge not only in their positive representations of older women, but also in consistently imagining the “present” in terms of alliances between older and younger women.

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4 Gullette notes that this is one way that some feminists depicted older women at the time, with a sympathy for those who suffered the strictures of the past that also restricted agency (235).
Tradition is not always Conservative

As I noted in my introduction, “tradition” is a complex term for modernist writers, who write knowing they have a long history of literature behind them; it is a core concern of modernist writing, embodied in famous titles like T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” The association of Eliot, especially, with the celebration of tradition has tended to mean that the meaning of “tradition” becomes over-determined in modernist studies, linked to an arch-conservative valorization of the past. As I discuss at more length in my next chapter, the later Eliot is essentially a Christian Burkean, and his celebrations of tradition are tied to his distrust of the thinking ability of the average person and his desire for the constraints of tradition to keep the masses within an established course; for Eliot, tradition is something like a set of sandbags on a river. But to state the obvious, this is not the only meaning of “tradition,” and there is no reason that a detailed engagement with the past need be a conservative enterprise (anyone who claims otherwise has presumably never heard of “the Marxist tradition”). To have a tradition behind one is, quite simply, the de facto situation for any cognitive enterprise.

In my previous chapter I explored some of the meanings of tradition in the context of theories of Erfahrung-experience drawn from Benjamin and Gadamer, demonstrating that an emphasis on experiencing the outside of the self (rather than on inner experience) also puts the subject into contact with history. Gadamer’s hermeneutic philosophy, in particular, situates all interpretation and thinking in the historical unfolding of tradition. But this is not because Gadamer’s theories aim to celebrate a
retreat into the past or a lionization of fixed “traditional” methods.” Rather, the claim that our thoughts and actions are situated in a tradition is an account of the situated nature of thinking, which both allows and requires us to negotiate with the ideas of the past. Gadamer critiques the Enlightenment “prejudice against prejudice” on these grounds (TM 271-77). If all thinking is historically situated, then entering into inquiry without biases is both impossible and undesirable, since it is only in fact our initial biases—what Gadamer’s teacher Heidegger calls our “fore-havings” about a subject—that allow us to begin our inquiries. I can only think critically about “the unconscious mind,” for example, because there is a tradition of speaking about the topic which simultaneously ensures I am never coming to the topic as a blank slate, and also informs me that the topic exists and provides me with initial questions about it—a situation that is both a sort of limit (because we all come with the questions we have been conditioned to ask) and the path to a freer encounter with the topic (because my questions need not lead to the same perspectives they have led to in the past). In the process of interpretation, Gadamer claims, my questions and attitudes will change and improve, though there will be no final interpretation of the matter. That is why for Gadamer the hermeneutic circle is by no means a vicious circle, but rather the foundation of all knowledge. Gadamer’s aim is to re-situate knowledge as an historical product that builds on the unfolding event that is

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5 I emphasize this because Gadamer is often misunderstood as a conservative. John D. Caputo, for example, reads his reification of the “maternal” language of tradition as “a matriarchal ontology that usually ends up saying father knows best” (Captuo 263). Tellingly, Caputo offers no footnote here to an actual example of Gadamer drawing patriarchal conclusions. Gadamer does not reify tradition; rather, he thinks tradition is an open-ended process of unfolding. Admittedly, Gadamer is not a Marxist thinker, and the section of Truth and Method I discuss here—particularly the discussion of the rehabilitation of authority—is clearly not the product of a mind that believes that class ideologies are the central spur for the generation of cultural artefacts (which might make them less worth inheriting) (See TM 277-285).

6 See Being and Time (188-195). Gadamer’s explication of this section in Truth and Method (265-71) is clearer and more helpful than Heidegger’s comments alone, and is probably the best introduction to the hermeneutic way of thinking.
tradition, rather than as an act of the solitary critical subject of the Enlightenment (See
*TM* 265-307).

If one’s “fore-havings”—one’s biases and prior ideas about a subject matter—are
historical, that also means they may be called “traditional.” Though the connotations of
the adjective “traditional” may seem inappropriate for many of a person’s opinions
(which may, after all, be contrarian, or idiosyncratic, or datable only to a very recent
intellectual trend), ultimately interpretation happens in negotiation not only with social
and ideological forces, but with social and ideological forces that are themselves
negotiations with the past. Marxist thinkers have tended to draw attention to this aspect
of thought with their lionizing of the term “historical” as a synonym for “politically
engaged.” But whether or not one believes in the specific understanding of history as
“class struggle” that motivates Marxists to connect these terms so strongly, it is
nonetheless clear that all thinking works with ideas that have a history. There is therefore
nothing particularly conservative if I argue that all thinking happens within a tradition.
We can always rebel if we wish—and when we do so, we will look to models from the
long tradition of rebellion.

If all experience happens in negotiation with the past, what a *transformative*
experience allows for is the possibility of re-inheriting.\(^7\) If we are always in a state of
having inherited the past, we are also always potentially prepared to critically sift it. In
Gadamer’s definition of an *Erfahrung* experience, this is precisely the type of
transformation that occurs: we see the limitations of our prior viewpoint; the horizon of

\(^7\) A more sustained analysis of action and thought as products of inheritance is developed by Paul Ricoeur,
a thinker deeply indebted to Gadamer. In the final chapter of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur proposes a
“hermeneutics of historical consciousness” wherein all action is described as a “trans-mission” of the past,
a carrying forward and revision of past possibilities into the future (Ricoeur 207-40; see especially 219-21).
our perspective moves. This, too, however, is a dialogue with the past rather than a radical break; in other words it is a re-inheriting. And following the model of *Erfahrung* I have laid out in my analysis of Lambert Strether, this critical re-inheriting is associated with age rather than youth for precisely this reason: re-inheriting offers an increased level of mediation and consideration. One has to have inherited the first time, and developed a “fore-having,” before one can inherit again.

What we see in Woolf, Sackville-West, and Holtby is precisely an interest in the older person’s ability to inherit again. Older female characters in these books seem to have gathered a sort of store-house of individual experience, a back-log of it, which they have not had the opportunity to discuss or work through. Nonetheless, in many cases a critical perspective has been growing subconsciously along with that experience. Older female characters undergo a gendered form of *Erfahrung* in these novels. The rush of fresh experience and intense questioning we commonly associate with youth often happens to these protagonists in old age, as the aspects of experience distorted by patriarchy surface to be critically sifted and re-inherited, much as feminism itself would critically sift its cultural inheritance and find a backlog of suppressed possibilities. The backlog of individual past brings with it questions about the broader communal past, so that the re-interpretation of one’s own experience includes a sifting of inheritances from the much more distant past that gave shape to one’s early experiences. The clearest example of the negotiation with inheritance comes from Vita Sackville-West’s *All Passion Spent*, a novel about resisting inheritances by an author who wasn’t allowed to inherit what she most wanted to possess.
Sackville-West and the Vicissitudes of Inheritance

The majority of the scholarly interest in Vita Sackville-West since the 1970s has stemmed from her relationship with Woolf, and its importance for the development of Woolf’s creativity and identity. It is often claimed that some of Woolf’s creative energies were liberated by her relationship with Sackville-West;\(^8\) conversely, the majority of scholars seem to feel that the best of Sackville-West’s works are those she wrote after being influenced by Woolf’s style and political ideas (\textit{All Passion Spent, The Edwardians, Seducers in Ecuador}).\(^9\) The influence of Woolf upon \textit{All Passion Spent} is palpable, and the novel is accordingly regarded as one of Sackville-West’s best novels, and certainly as her most feminist and politically liberal one.\(^10\)

But the signs of Woolf’s influence do not mean that the novel is derivative. One of the compelling things about \textit{All Passion Spent} is that it repurposes several of Sackville-West’s signal themes—including the theme of inheritance—from a different political angle. Vita Sackville-West has frequently been critiqued for her elitist political views; as Suzanne Raitt notes, she is a much less comfortable figure for feminist literary critics than Woolf. Raitt reads Sackville-West’s first two novels as “eugenic” fantasies, written explicitly as condemnations of the working class (41-61). As an elitist aristocrat

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\(^8\) See De Salvo 199, Lee 499.
\(^9\) Sproles, however, argues that the influence goes both ways; she demonstrates persuasively that Vita’s attitude to biography and life-writing, developed in her biography \textit{Aphra Behn}, is an influence on \textit{Orlando} (Sproles 111-121).
\(^10\) Raitt notes, for example, that the novel echoes the important passage in \textit{Orlando} about having “many selves” as well as the signal image of \textit{A Room of One’s Own} (Raitt 107; See \textit{APS} 161; 174). I would add that several of Woolf’s stylistic choices are echoed as well; in the portion of the novel that follows Lady Slane’s thoughts while she takes a train into the country, the names of the stations appear in brackets between the paragraphs, drawing on Woolf’s tendency (particularly in \textit{To the Lighthouse}) to bracket objective reality while following a character’s consciousness (\textit{APS} 79-87). Some other echoes are at least arguable; when Sackville-West describes Lord Slane as being “one of those rare Englishmen whose fortune it is to be born equipped with a truly adult mind” (\textit{APS} 15-16), is she echoing Woolf’s description of \textit{Middlemarch} in \textit{The Common Reader} as “one of the few English novels written for grown up people”? (\textit{CEI} 201). Sackville-West had read \textit{The Common Reader} in 1927 (see \textit{SW} 95).
who grew up in the largest house in England, but who, as a woman, could not inherit it, Sackville-West occupies a complex position in the political landscape. Haunted by the loss of Knole, Sackville-West returned repeatedly to the theme of inheritance; she was also heavily invested in a pastoral treatment of the landscape and of traditional agricultural landholding.\(^\text{11}\) It is these themes which appear in *All Passion Spent* in a transmuted vein, in a narrative about a rebellious old woman who discovers a resistance to the mainstream of British culture. While the narrative may not be “radical” from the perspective of the political spectrum, it is invested in feminist rebellion. In its relative simplicity, the novel reveals clearly the activist potential of writing about an older female protagonist in the political climate of the 1930s.\(^\text{12}\)

Published when Vita Sackville-West was herself only 39, *All Passion Spent* tells the story of an octogenarian upper-class woman, Lady Slane, who finds a brief second life after the death of her husband. The very public life of Lord Slane, an important political figure (he had been viceroy of India) has forced Lady Slane to live a life of conformity and falsehood. In this somewhat romantic narrative, Lady Slane refuses the trappings of public life in her old age and decides instead to “wither into the truth.”\(^\text{13}\)

When her husband dies, her children (themselves by no means young) rush in to manage the situation on the assumption that, having been ruled by her husband for so long, Lady

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\(^{11}\) Sophie Blanch notes the inheritance is central to Sackville-West’s imagination and reads her best-selling novel, *The Edwardians*, in terms of a complex fantasy re-negotiating inheritance to create a “feminine inheritance” which allows women to interact without the mediation of patriarchal laws (77).

\(^{12}\) The particular dynamic I am focusing on, the alliance between an old woman and a younger woman, seems to become prominent primarily in the 1930s, though there are elements of it in Woolf’s early fiction as well. By the time Sackville-West wrote *All Passion Spent*, Woolf had already written quite widely about middle-aged women (in the figures of Mrs. Dalloway and Lily Briscoe, for example) though she had not yet focused on old age, as she would in *The Years* and *Between the Acts*. It is unlikely she was motivated to do so by *All Passion Spent*, for though the Hogarth Press published the novel, Woolf did not like it very much (Lee 615).

\(^{13}\) Yeats, “The Coming of Wisdom with Time.”
Slane has no willpower and no preferences of her own. During the initial mourning period, however, Lady Slane, as the widow, must be consulted on everything: “Nobody could have foreseen that Father, so dominant always, would by the mere act of dying turn Mother into the most prominent figure” (52). The plot of the novel is essentially a protraction of this brief period of authority and prominence, as Lady Slane asserts that she does in fact have preferences and retires to a country house, barring anyone young from visiting. Bothered by the restlessness of youth, she insists that she wants “no one about [her] except those who are nearer to their death than their birth” (68).

What Lady Slane is above all retreating from, however, does not seem to be youth but rather the striving of the middle of life. While a few passages in the novel do deride youth, the novel as a whole stresses that the potentiality and dreams of youth are not so problematic as the prudent and calculated trundling of everyday middle age. Lady Slane values the ambitions of her youth which she had to set aside in order to be married—specifically, that she wanted to be a painter but could not be one while also being the wife of a Viceroy. She revisits those dreams now and forms a kind of imaginative link between her old and young selves. Youth and old age conspire in this novel, for they value the same things:

The coldness with which she was now able to estimate [her marriage] frightened her a little, yet it took her back in some curious way to the days when she had plotted to elude her parents and consecrate herself to an existence [as an artist] which, although conventionally reprehensible, should, essentially, be dedicated to the most severe and difficult integrity. Then, she had been face to face with life; and that had seemed a reason for a necessity for the clearest thinking; now, she was
face to face with death, and that again seemed a reason for the truest possible
estimate of values, without evasion. The middle period alone had been confused.
(166-67)\(^1\)

This confusion is recreated in the satirized conventionality of Lady Slane’s children, who
consistently fail to understand her and concern themselves primarily with the small
politics of who shall inherit her jewels. The one daughter who does understand her,
Edith, has difficulty communicating and is usually silenced by the others in her attempts
at honesty, though her efforts inspire many of the novel’s more Woolfian passages on the
difficulty of speaking the truth (\textit{APS} 32; 57). Edith alone notices the “storehouse” quality
of her mother: “It now dawned upon Edith that her mother might have lived a full private
life, all these years, behind the shelter of her affectionate watchfulness. How much had
she observed? noted? criticised? stored up?” (69). In this important passage, Sackville-
West suggests one aspect of the importance of the old woman for 1930s feminism, as her
perspective represents the accumulated backlog of what has gone on in the private sphere
of the past.

The alliance between youth and old age is solidified by the ending of the novel,
where Lady Slane meets with her great-granddaughter, Deborah. Deborah is also Lady
Slane’s name, though her position as Lord Slane’s wife has so determined her she feels
that it only “once was” her name (280). Young Deborah expresses her desire to be a
musician, despite the conventional expectation that she marry; she appears to Lady Slane
as an “other self” and the two women are united in a near-visionary passage, though
Deborah, in her “young egoism” does not note the significance of what is happening to

\(^1\) The criticism of the “middle period” of life recurs throughout the novel (\textit{APS} 209; 266).
her great-grandmother (282). Young Deborah receives support from the encounter and Lady Slane dies nearly immediately. The conspiratorial alliance between youth and old age is emphasized, perhaps beyond the point of subtlety, by the two women’s matched names. Middle age, burdened with the duties of running the world, is thoroughly conventional in *All Passion Spent*, which also means patriarchal. But youth and old age together have an outside perspective in that they aren’t given to the falseness of gain and the aggression of competition, and this perspective also allows women to pursue their desires and interests. By contrast, Lady Slane’s oldest son Herbert, the most pragmatic and authoritative of her children, never permits his wife, Mabel, to finish a sentence.

This alliance between old and young women allows Sackville-West to write back to the genre that feminist critics have dubbed the “novel of awakening.” While Sackville-West would not have known this term, which is a later scholarly coinage, its most famous examples come from the late 19th or early 20th centuries (including *Madame Bovary* and *The Awakening*). As Susan Rosowski describes this variant of the Bildungsroman, the female protagonist of the novel of awakening awakens not to possibilities but to an awareness of limitations; often the novel focuses on a potential female artist who is destroyed by this new awareness (Rosowski 49-68). *All Passion Spent*, provocatively though perhaps unintentionally, varies this genre by having Lady Slane awaken to the limitations that kept her from being an artist, but only once she has also arrived at a tranquil old age. She is therefore able to pass her awakening on by supporting a younger woman who plans to be an artist, and who does have time and opportunity to pursue this goal. The awakening—now successful—simultaneously appears as individual and historical because it operates intergenerationally.
The position of old age is also a position of impotentiality in the novel, which is part of why Lady Slane’s awakening doesn’t lead to any personal crisis or self-destruction; she no longer has any goals for herself. Lady Slane and her contemporaries, Mr. Bucktrout and Mr. Gosheron, are all equally unconventional and unhurried, and all are perfectly frank about death throughout the novel. The older characters dwell in a valley of impotentiality where there are no worries over possible outcomes. This is admittedly a romantic depiction of old age: the nearness of death eliminates, in Sackville-West’s vision, all forms of small-mindedness and competition, as well as all worry, even on behalf of other people. In some passages one can feel Sackville-West, herself relatively young, projecting on to old age a fantasy of calm tragic wisdom. But the combination of this serenity with a keen feminist awareness is what allows Sackville-West to refigure her major themes of inheritance and the pastoral. In Lady Slane’s retreat to the simplicity of a rural life (she mostly gardens) and her escape from the striving of the everyday, Sackville-West repurposes her interest in pastoral simplicity.

Sackville-West’s most elaborate pastoral work is *The Land*, the long poem for which she won the Hawthornden Prize in 1927. But pastoral retreat runs throughout her work. The political shift becomes clear if we look at the contrast between *All Passion*...
Spent and the novella The Heir, which Sackville-West published in 1922. The Heir is a fantasy of re-inheritance for Sackville-West; it tells the story of Chase, a city man who inherits a country estate from an aunt he has never met. Chase plans to sell the estate but he becomes increasingly attached to it, and eventually buys it back himself at the auction. The charm of the English country house defeats the sophistication of the urban man—for Chase thinks himself a socialist but discovers that his instinctive “sense of veneration” for old and settled things is deeper than his “fashionable” political views (17). Sackville-West’s conservative politics are on display in this and other passages in the novel, such as the episode where Chase surveys his cottagers and discovers the natural harmony in being entertained in their cottages. Chase sees these farmers rather homogenously, as yeomen whom “he could distinguish by their appearance perhaps, but certainly not by their opinions, their preoccupations, or their gestures” (45). It is apparently very charming to spend time with the poor, even if one cannot tell them apart from one another.

Sackville-West’s conservatism in The Heir goes hand in hand with her pastoral suspicion of striving and worldliness. In and of itself, this suspicion does not imply an alternate political view: aristocrats have often taken the position that a settled pastoral peace is better than the restless bustle of the middle classes, and the pastoral has always allowed for this combination. The accountant who manages the estate in The Heir, Nutley, is not only restless but actively hates and scorns the tradition the house represents.

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16 De Salvo also notes that the change in Sackville-West’s political attitude can be made clear by comparing The Heir with All Passion Spent (De Salvo 208). De Salvo regards All Passion Spent as an “outgrowth” of Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own (211).

17 Sproles offers one way of seeing The Heir in a more positive light, noting that, though Chase is male, the passages about his enjoyment of the house contain some lesbian codes, and that the pleasure the novella takes in the estate seems to anticipate écriture féminine (Sproles 43-46).
He is rapacious and conniving, associated with the precise measurement of property rather than with the actual life of the house. Through Nutley, Sackville-West sets the organic life of tradition against striving, money-making, and calculation. Even if one is not its proper heir, English landholding tradition makes a claim through its appeal to the organic and its opposition to number-crunching; it can become one’s proper inheritance, as the house becomes for Chase at the end of the novella.

In *All Passion Spent*, much of the same imagery of striving and rapacity (associated with middle age) appears as the contrast to the wisdom and repose associated with rural simplicity (associated with old age.) But significantly, the polarities are reversed, because now inheritance appears as something that must be resisted. Young Deborah is only able to break off her marriage engagement and pursue an artistic career because she is no longer an heiress. This change has in turn come about because of Lady Slane’s own resistance to inheritance. An old admirer, Mr. FitzGeorge, having met Lady Slane again in old age, leaves her his invaluable fortune of collectibles, but Lady Slane donates the artifacts to a museum and the money to hospitals, noting with joy how much the relinquishing of a fortune will annoy her pragmatic children. In its material form, inheritance is villainized. In one passage, Lady Slane even justifies her donation through a critique of private property in general, which she believes seems “wrong” for the “exaggerated wealth” it bestows on the few. In this novel, the shift in Sackville-West’s politics is dependent on the positioning of old age: having shucked off the legacy of conventional patriarchy Lady Slane must logically also resist the fabulous wealth that is offered by a male admirer—even one who seems, throughout the novel, to respect her and recognize the hidden aspects of her selfhood. FitzGeorge may
recognize that Lady Slane’s husband has repressed her (he says “killed her”—221), but he fails to recognize that his own gift will also be repressive, leaving the elderly woman with a fabulous collection to manage. This episode thereby critiques the patriarchal elevation of women as idols, even when performed by a seemingly sensitive man. And that idolization comes in the form of a belated inheritance; material inheritance, celebrated for its preservation of aristocratic privilege in *The Heir*, has now become an emblem of patriarchy. While there are suggestions in the novel that the cultural inheritance of the past should be preserved—Lady Slane in her old age seems to finally have time to take note of the wisdom in the books on her mantle—what has come from the past in the public form of recognized goods is corrupt and must be abandoned. Woolf will of course see patriarchal forces as operating on several levels beneath the material—though its face as material wealth is also important to her. But in this simpler novel, with its twinned rejection of wealth and male control, Sackville-West finds a position of resistance to associate with old age—with a subjectivity that has had time to sift its inheritance, and to see that one can be buried beneath it.

**Virginia Woolf’s Senses of Time**

In Virginia Woolf’s later work—primarily *The Years*—we find a considerably more complex engagement with the twin themes of aging and inheritance, connecting Woolf’s interest in feminism, the unconscious, and the movement of time and history. Woolf’s concern with time has often been simplified down to her interest in the “moment” as something that stops time and presents an image of unity—the epiphany that reveals that “behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern” (*MB* 81). The over-
emphasis on Woolf’s revelatory “moment” is often linked to the image of her as a nostalgic elitist who retreated from political engagement. But Woolf’s approaches to time are plural and complex. She took an interest in several different scales of time throughout her career, dwelling on geological time and prehistory, the evolution of genres over time, the accumulation of the past in the unconscious and in the life of words, and the differences between the centuries of modern history. These analyses of various scales of historical time were accompanied by a continual concern with the aging individual—something which seems to have caused Woolf anxiety at times, but which she wrote about perceptibly and sensitively. If Vita Sackville-West tends to romanticize old age in All Passion Spent, Woolf continually allows the possibility of aging as perpetual growth and aging as atrophy or decline to run parallel to one another. Lily Briscoe in To the Lighthouse must wait to middle age to have her vision, and Eleanor Pargiter in The Years has one in her seventies; but Woolf also writes in her diary about “Old Mrs. Grey” who is kept alive well beyond her own desire by the questionable charity of others (WD 181; see also CE IV 149-50). For the most part, however, Woolf saw aging positively; she wrote in her diary, “I don’t believe in aging. I believe in forever altering one’s aspect to the sun” (WD 181).

Woolf valued maturity, both as an aesthetic principle and in her personal life, and was prone to accuse others of failing to be adult. She consistently equated immaturity

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18 This figure clearly bothered Woolf; nearly identical older women are described in Woolf’s Diary in 1932 (WD 181) and then in The Years, where Eleanor asks of old Mrs. Potter “why do we force her to live?” (72).
19 It has been argued that Woolf reinvented herself as a writer in her fifties, though this argument is sometimes made by overlooking the more socially and politically engaged elements of her writing before The Years (See Heilbrun 236-253).
20 Lee records several incidents in Woolf’s relative youth where she tried to cast herself as mature in order to wield a certain authority (Lee 234, 385). When Vita Sackville-West was given the Hawthornden prize,
with egotism, and conversely associated maturity with an impersonal perspective—imagined in some of her texts as androgynous. She suggests in *A Room of One’s Own* that the “fully developed mind” is androgynous (99). While Woolf’s idea of the androgynous mind is largely a claim about gender, it is important to see that she also thinks it is maturation that helps overcome the partiality of a mind that holds strongly to one gender or the other: for “as people mature, they cease to believe in sides” (106). As Jane Marcus notes, Woolf equates the over-differentiation of one’s identity with the masculine, and especially the hyper-masculine (Marcus 37). Woolf stressed the egotistical immaturity of Joyce’s distinctively masculine writing, for example, equating his showing-off with the tricks of a “callow schoolboy”—“one hopes he’ll grow out of it; but as Joyce is 40 this scarcely seems likely” (*WD* 48). Too much masculinity could be a failure of maturity; Joyce’s playfulness, for Woolf, seemed masculine in the sense that it prized self-assertion over relationship. By contrast, feminist critics such as Patricia Waugh have argued that Woolf develops a more “relational” model of the self, whose identity is not “dependent axiomatically upon the maintenance of boundaries and distance, nor upon the subjugation of the other” (Waugh 22).

The age of the individual and the motion of history—elements of what I have called the question of “the age of the modern age”—are connected in diverse and complex ways in Woolf’s work, beginning as early as *Mrs. Dalloway*, where the

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Woolf complained about the award ceremony that “there was no one full grown mind among us” (*Diary III*, 139-40).

21 Woolf’s elevation of the androgynous mind has sometimes been connected to her mental instability, and the desire to escape from gender into wholeness (Bazin 19). DiBattista counters this, arguing that the androgynous perspective was a clever strategy for Woolf, allowing her to discuss the personal and feminine but also to engage with multiple perspectives and position herself as an impersonal commentator (20-21).
description of the postwar world as “late age of the world’s experience” (201) suggests a parallel to the aging characters (on the previous page, Mrs. Dalloway “felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged”—200). In her later work, the positive value of maturity is linked in many contexts with Woolf’s thinking of what we might call “inheritance” in the broadest sense—that is, in the continuing life of the past in all its forms. One of the consistent themes of her later essays is the sense that language is an historical accumulation. In “Letter to a Young Poet” (1932), Woolf advocates patience and tells writers not to publish anything before thirty, explicitly because all the poets of the past live on in the present poet—that is, because it takes time to imbibe one’s inheritance (CE II 182-195). Gillian Beer has argued that Woolf tends to see the persistence of prehistory in the present in the form of the relatively stable elements of the natural world—such as seas, clouds, and waves—which function as an “outside” to the time of narration (Common Ground 9). Beer’s particular emphasis on “prehistory,” however, misses Woolf’s widespread interest in things that are old but precisely temporal, admitting of change, progress, or regress.22 In some of Woolf’s works, particularly The Waves, it is true that the forces of nature may persist in contrast to the linear human sense of time, offering a cyclical alternative. But Woolf tends to explain a surprising range of phenomena with reference to the distant past; most famously, Woolf’s feelings of shame and guilt when she is fondled by her half-brother are explained thusly: “It proves that Virginia Stephen was not born on the 25th of January 1882, but was born many thousands

22 This is connected to Beer’s claim that in Woolf’s work, transformation means little; great changes can always be reversed (Common Ground 13). While this is true of some transformations in Woolf’s work (Orlando’s shift in gender destabilizes gender rather than offering a final identity) it is not clear to me that this is always true. Woolf’s comments on English as an “old language,” discussed below, are an example of the kind of change that seems irreversible; Woolf is interested in sudden change but also in gradual steeping.
of years ago; had from the very first to encounter instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past” (MB 77). Using similar phrasing about a smaller scale of time, Kitty Malone’s desire to have men find her attractive is described in similar terms: “Kitty’s body had been trained to send out and receive a multitude of impressions about her body and other people’s bodies for generations” (Pargiters 129). But what these formulations in fact suggest is not the persistence of an atemporal, primordial force in the self, but rather a self that is formed out of complex set of historical processes, on a variety of scales. In these passages Woolf describes the self as a sophisticated layering of historical inheritances, some of which may go back to the beginning of human life in cities, some to a particular patriarchal tradition; the Woolfian self is an accretion of many sources, and even the most ancient of them are still “historical,” admitting of process and change.

The most striking dimension of Woolf’s interest in historical process is her assertion of an interconnection between the development of language and the unconscious mind. Woolf’s interest in the unconscious life of words and language leads her towards seeing a form of historical life going on in the unconscious mind—precisely in that sphere of the mind where Freud claims there is no time whatsoever. Woolf continually stresses in later essays the connection between the unconscious and creation, suggesting tentatively that the writer “needs to become unconscious” before he or she can create (CE II 166). In her essay “Craftsmanship,” this connection produces a

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23 Though Woolf makes no explicit mention of reading Freud until relatively late in her life, this may not mean that she read none at all before that point; Elizabeth Abel demonstrates how thoroughly Woolf must have been exposed to the tenor of Freud’s thought even before reading him (Abel Psychoanalysis 13-29). Abel argues that Woolf uncovers feminist modes of casting the narrative of psychoanalysis, and so develops an alternative to Freud’s patriarchal model. Abel’s claim that Woolf gradually abandons her earlier, feminist model to become increasingly patriarchal, however, seems to me to be strained and excessively metaphorical (Psychoanalysis 84-107).
fascinating ambivalence about the issue of progress in language and writing. Woolf describes a complex interplay of words with each other, occurring without respect to their human users: words are unruly, and “combine unconsciously together” without our permission (CE II 248). Words apparently need this freedom and privacy, for “when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die . . . our unconsciousness is their privacy” (251). This unconscious combination is cumulative, resembling the steeping of tea. Woolf draws much attention to the way poetic resonances attach to words over history, changing their natures—words today are actually more unwieldy than they were in the past, because they are “so stored with meanings, with memories . . . they have contracted so many famous marriages” (248). English is now an “old language” and one cannot easily invent a new word in it (249).\(^\text{24}\) And yet, perhaps counter-intuitively, this insight leads Woolf to claim that writing is more difficult today; the rich unconscious life of words can actually hinder creative work. She insists that if we do not write any better than the Elizabethans, this is because the life of words, being unconscious, cannot be taught; the lack of “progress” in writing, then, can actually be blamed on words themselves (249).\(^\text{25}\)

\(^{24}\) Woolf complicates this claim by noting that it does not apply to Americans—who are in fact coining many new words at present, as the Elizabethans once did (CE II 120). This contrast emphasizes that the gradual accumulation of language in the mind, for Woolf, is also connected to national literary cultures.\(^\text{25}\) More famously, Woolf claimed in “Modern Fiction” that literature should not be seen as a progressive endeavour along the lines of motor cars: “We do not come to write better; all that we can be said to do is to keep moving, now a little in this direction, now in that, but with a circular tendency should the whole course of the track be viewed from a sufficiently lofty angle” (CE II 103). Woolf does not always hold the view that genres do not make progress, however, with perfect consistency, and in some more localized contexts she takes a great interest in the historical evolution of genres. Woolf describes genres as coming of age and growing to maturity in “American Fiction,” and “Phases of Fiction,” (See CE II 121, 102). In and of itself this is not necessarily an inconsistency; it is possible to see a particular tradition of writing growing and building upon itself without arguing that writers themselves become more adept in any absolute way. Woolf’s most compelling statements about the possibility of the growth of genres seem to suggest that while writing does not make linear progress, that history is leading people in a direction where
The paradox expressed in “Craftsmanship” is that words accumulate richness over time, but that this accumulation also makes them more difficult to use. The cumulative activity of words also implies that the life of the unconscious is itself building and connecting in the hidden life of words. The unconscious is connected to language and its evolution; it is historical. This idea adds a considerable new element to Woolf’s association of maturity with impersonality and the escape from egotism. For while the opposition between maturity and egotism is hardly a new idea in itself, the impersonality of maturity is here combined with the notion that growth and development are processes going on in the unseen realm of an impersonal unconscious. Accordingly, Woolf also suggests that we might become more open to the unconscious as we grow older. In Woolf’s work we find suggestions of this motion—towards an openness to the unconscious—happening on both the individual and the generational time scale. In “The Leaning Tower” she expresses the hope that the next generation of writers, “with help from Dr. Freud . . . may inherit . . . a whole state of mind, a mind no longer evasive, crippled, divided” (*CE II* 178).

Woolf’s hope for an increasing openness to the unconscious has an important parallel in the “guess” she makes in *Three Guineas*:

Ease and freedom, the power to change and the power to grow, can only be preserved by obscurity . . . if we wish to help the human mind to create, and to prevent it from scoring the same rut repeatedly, we must do what we can to shroud it in darkness. (*TG* 114)

they might have fuller use of their minds when they create, because they are escaping forms of repression (See “Women and Fiction,” *CE II* 148).
Growth, according to this formulation, only happens in darkness; the patriarchal state, by contrast, operates in the fashion of Foucault’s panopticon, using the pressure towards mainstream acceptability to keep everyone under the searchlight. The necessity of the “Outsider’s Society” proposed in *Three Guineas* is connected to growth and development: one of the problems with the aggressive mainstream is that it stifles growth with its expectations. The plural and adventurous life of the mind occurs at the margins, where the unconscious can be experienced and neighbored.

In my examinations of Henry James I explored the possibility of personal growth towards an openness to the unconscious. In Woolf’s work, we find the same possibility. The growth arc towards engagement with the unconscious mind and the chaotic plurality of the life of the self and of language finds its clearest expression in Woolf’s *Orlando*. *Orlando* is in part a response to Vita’s *Knole and the Sackvilles*, a history of her family’s legacies, and accordingly writing the novel seems to have allowed Woolf considerable room not only for play but also for a sustained engagement with ideas of inheritance. Woolf had already written about aging, but the creation of *Orlando* encouraged her to fully, if comically, imagine both the time-scale of modern Europe that paralleled Vita’s family history, and the various meanings of inheritance.26 While *Orlando* is, understandably, most commonly investigated for its negotiation of plural identity and queer desire, it also sheds important light on Woolf’s connection of aging and inheritance. For while Vita Sackville-West’s own work may move from a celebration of the inheritance of private property to a querying of it, Woolf’s *Orlando* attempts to shift

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26 Sackville-West’s *Knole and the Sackvilles* makes the parallel between the family tradition and an individual time scale itself, utilizing Vita’s characteristic metaphors by comparing the house to the peacefulness and “deep inward gaiety” of an old woman (*SW* 187).
and loosen the relationship between individual and group, making property and national identity into impersonal inheritances that have a diffuse, approximate relationship to the individual who inherits them. This same “loosening” of the prescriptive power of the nation and group identity appears in many of Woolf’s works, but it is through Orlando that it most clearly comes to be imagined through inheritance.27

In writing Orlando, Woolf poked fun at Vita’s aristocratic ancestry in some passages, suggesting for example that the nomadic gypsies think an ancestry of only 500 years insignificant and view the landed gentry of England as robbers (142-43). But in overlaying Vita Sackville-West’s life on to the history of Knole, Woolf also wandered into a humorously literal rendition of the question of the age of the age. Orlando actually grows up with modern Europe. This parallel is perhaps part of the “caricature value” (WD 134) that Woolf wanted to locate in the novel, as the issue of the “adulthood” of the modern age is made alarming literal. The parallel enters early in the text, where Orlando as a young man is described as writing poetry with a “fluency and sweetness” that is surprising, “considering his age—he was not yet seventeen—and that the sixteenth century had still some years of its course to run” (16). Orlando’s stage of development is comically tied to that of English history: Orlando is almost done being sixteen and the century is almost done being the sixteenth, and apparently one would expect both of these conditions to inhibit poetry.

This parallel produces multifarious effects in the novel, as Woolf uses a variety of metaphors for how the age of a person and the age of the age may or may not line up, playing freely with the ramifications of her decision to allow Vita to live as long as

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27 On Woolf’s treatment of “inheritance” in terms of the canon of literature, see De Gay. Patricia Moran investigates Woolf’s thinking of inheritance in terms of the trauma of gender.
Knole. The persistence of memories and the temporality of distraction, for example, are brought to bear with the claim that only a few people actually manage to synchronize their inner and outer life so as to live for the number of years they literally live (291). The notion of the “spirit of an age,” played with throughout the novel by some of the comic exaggerations of the differences between the centuries, is marshaled to explain that even Orlando is sometimes out of step with her nation; she hates, for example, the oppressively patriarchal 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Woolf tells us at one turn that each century has its “indomitable spirit of the age”—which suggests that each subject would be formed to his or her time. But immediately this idea is twisted to suggest the opposite: “some are born of this age, some of that, and now that Orlando was grown a woman, a year or two past thirty indeed, the lines of her character were fixed” (233). This passage blurs the fixing of character as one grows with the determination of character at birth, playfully suggesting that some people don’t belong to their own century at all. The general effect of these passages is to suggest a very loose way in which the subject and the nation belong together. One is situated in the history of one’s nation, but not necessarily only in one’s century or in one’s lifetime, just as Orlando has an identity but not a unified one with a single gender or single sexual desire.

The same diffusion applies to the meaning of maturity in \textit{Orlando}; maturity also figures as a kind of loosening. Orlando eventually arrives in middle age, when “nothing is any longer one thing” (290). This plurality is linked to a long memory—nothing is any longer one thing because everything reminds Orlando of something from the past—and in this sense middle age perhaps resembles modern English as an “old language” in the
terms of “On Craftsmanship.”

But nonetheless, while the entire book describes the plurality of Orlando’s identity, the ending suggests that this plurality can be better realized in middle age, where nothing is just one thing and Orlando can lie against the oak tree and sink into the “dark pool of the mind,” which is clearer by night, and survey the past (312). This dark pool, resembling Woolf’s descriptions of the unconscious mind, is something we arrive at with maturation rather than something we begin life possessing. The movement towards disunity in Orlando suggests that heritage and inheritance can be liberating things if one has a loose, partially unconscious relationship with them. Orlando’s plurality, lodged in her unconscious mind (295-6), is allowed more space to thrive in middle age, as well as in the modern age. Given the tongue-in-cheek nature of Woolf’s parallels in Orlando, I do not want to overstress this reading of the novel, but the novel does seem to reinforce the statement I quoted from “The Leaning Tower,” suggesting that many hidden and unconscious parts of identity may be given a greater chance to be seen and understood in 20th-century life than they previously have.

One of the serious ramifications of Woolf’s playful re-imagining of Sackville-West’s inheritance is an elaboration of the possibilities of a loose relationship to inheritance that actually allows the fuller life of the past—which includes the unconscious—to be acknowledged. Orlando demonstrates that Woolf thinks it is possible to grow up with

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28 The present age in Orlando is not contemplative and middle-aged however; rather, modern London is caricatured in the opposite direction, as being a place of haste where “nothing could be seen whole or read from start to finish” (293). So while both Orlando and England have reached a state of disunity, England’s is apparently a panic of fragments rather than a middle life of memories.

29 Melba Cuddy-Keane draws attention to the connection between the pool at the end of Orlando and Woolf’s short story “The Fascination of the Pool,” which is another of Woolf’s descriptions of the unconscious mind functioning as a repository of the past (Cuddy-Keane Woolf 128-29).

30 Woolf suggests this idea in other ways as well, for example in her recurring claim that the art of letter writing is really only beginning to flourish now that there are fewer taboos about what can go into a letter (CE II 262; 182-3).
one’s inheritance, gaining a fuller sense of it over time as steeps in one’s unconscious mind. One can grow from a simple inheritance, a simple parallel structure between the self and the age, to a more complex one—so continually, in contact with words and the life of the unconscious, subjectivity can become more dynamic by re-inheriting the past.

Eleanor Pargiter’s Modernity

It is in the light of such a re-inheritance that I want to examine The Years. Just as Orlando builds, with humorous literalness, to the “present moment” (O 284), The Years finishes at the “Present Day,” Woolf will later conclude the pageant in Between the Acts at “the present moment,” as the actors hold mirrors up the audience so they can experience their presence together. In all of these later works, Woolf builds towards climactic representations of the “now,” demonstrating a proclivity for plots that sum up the past in order to deliver us back in the present equipped with it.

The Years, however, has not always been seen in such a positive light. Woolf described the novel as an attempt to bring fact and vision together, as “The Waves going on simultaneously with Night and Day” (WD 191). She also described it as a “deliberate” failure (WD 267). Early critics tended to emphasize the failure, claiming that the novel was over-burdened by this ambitious plan, ultimately unraveling into chaos in its final sequence; the disunity of the “Present Day” section was interpreted as either an aesthetic failure or a bleak portrayal of resignation (these claims were usually connected).31 With

31 Schaefer makes the argument for chaos, connecting Woolf’s failure to make the last chapter cohere with the claim that the ending of the novel is bleak (138-41). Guiget (309) and Bazin (167-191) provide other examples of earlier critics claiming the novel fails to convey its vision successfully; both critics also read the dissolution in terms of Woolf’s own psychological “decline.” The contemporary reviews of The Years were mixed, but largely positive; a surprising number of reviewers were able to see the value of presenting
the feminist interest in Woolf in the 1970s, the novel was rehabilitated as one of Woolf’s most historically and politically engaged texts, the companion piece to *Three Guineas* that Woolf claimed it was (*WD* 284). The same re-examination of the novel was able to see meaning precisely in its lack of tidiness and its resistance of any commanding authoritative perspective. *The Years* is generally valued now for its complex knitting together of historical action and psychological events; such close attention has also meant that many more forms of unification, via pattern and echo, have been located in the text.

Despite all this attention, *The Years* is rarely discussed as a text about aging. But the novel follows a generation, centered on Eleanor Pargiter, through from youth to old age in a family saga with the big events of official history on the margins. One reviewer noted that in comparison with *The Years*, most family sagas only present “history clanking its spurs and jingling its medals” (Majumdar 376). The reviewer for *Scrutiny* deployed the usual accusation associated with the Leavises, claiming that whenever she stepped out of a narrow range Woolf was “a child” (Majumdar 395).

32 There are also feminist variants, however, of the argument that the novel is a failure. Christine Froula claims that while *The Pargiters* manages to speak thoroughly to the loss and trauma associated with the inculcation of femininity, the final draft of *The Years* retreats from bearing witness to this loss adequately (213-58). Grace Radin also sees Woolf’s revisions of her draft in terms of a loss of the courage to make a political statement (35). While it is true that the political engagement of the final version of *The Years* is more subtle, it is not absent; as Anna Snaith notes, most critics who conclude the politics of the novel have been softened focus only on what has been cut and not on what has been added (Snaith 98-99).

33 The argument for an optimistic movement in *The Years* towards a less authoritative, more feminist vision of society has been made by many critics. Patricia Waugh sees the novel as moving towards a more optimistic emphasis on the fluid, relational self rather than the autonomous, egotistical self (121-3). Squier argues that the end of the novel suggests utopian possibilities in contrast to the vicious misogyny of the 1880 chapter (*London* 177-9). Caughie, in contrast, argues that the novel does not end with optimism or pessimism but with uncertainty, making the text more amenable to postmodern strategies of reading (106). DuPlessis presents the version of this argument closest to my own, as she sees the ending of the novel in terms of a movement from the growth of the individual ego to a “collective Bildung” (163).

34 Jane Marcus’s important 1977 essay on *The Years* as a *Gotterdammerung* was instrumental in locating female patterns in the novel that led feminists to its re-evaluation. Marcus reads the novel as a feminist epic that borrows many of the leitmotifs of opera and is structured around female fertility myths (*Languages* 36-56). Jane Wheare has gone furthest in the direction of finding patterns and echoes in the novel, cataloguing 30 pages worth of such patterns (140-71). Wheare demonstrates that patterns serve many different roles, establishing differences between characters as well as displaying the social nature of language and suggesting its unconscious, communal origins. The patterns these scholars uncover amount to a much more convincing treatment of the novel than Caserio’s assertion that the repetitions only prove Peggy’s cynical claim that sharing “is a bit of a farce” (Caserio 71). Too much effort has been put into the subtle patterning for its intention to be primarily ironic.
age, ruminating over age and aging constantly, considering the issue from as many angles as possible. From a passing remark about a minor character, Mrs. Chinnery, being wheeled away to “the mysterious upper chamber of extreme old age” (154), to Martin’s experience of feeling desire for young women to whom he can no longer connect (183-93), to the description of elderly Lady Warburton as “the nineteenth century going to bed” (195), to Peggy’s frustration with her aunt Eleanor’s elderly mind, the novel explores a wide spectrum of the ramifications of aging. Most important for my purposes, the novel also uses the rough parallel between the aging of Eleanor’s generation and the movement of history to structure its tentative but eventually optimistic statement about the progress of people in the modern age. The Years, like All Passion Spent, represents the need for inter-generational alliance and continuity between women, though this continuity is considerably more strained and fraught for Woolf than it was for Sackville-West. In the final sections of the novel, the possibility of connection between Eleanor Pargiter and her niece Peggy hangs on the fringes of the text, but it is never accomplished with the same clarity that we find in the conclusion of Sackville-West’s novel. Whereas Sackville-West’s more literal imagination envisions two women—both named Deborah—in perfect accord, Woolf structures the final section of The Years around a much looser sense of coordination, a sense that youth is missing the gifts age has to give it, though the gifts are nonetheless there to be picked up.

Woolf made many statements about the need for specifically feminine historical continuity; the best-known among them is her claim, in A Room of One’s Own, that we must think back through our mothers, if we are women (AROO 76). This adage simultaneously suggests a desire to recover marginalized voices and traditions and the
necessity of grounding any knowledge in a wider range of historical experience. But it also suggests the need for a difficult imaginative effort. In the first essay she drafted for *The Pargiters*, the first version of *The Years*, Woolf addresses her imaginary crowd by saying they must imagine their way back to a time before the possibility of professions for women:

> Because we cannot understand the present if we isolate it from the past. If we want to understand what it is that you are doing now, I must ask you to forget that we are in this room, this night. We must forget that we are, for the moment, ourselves. We must become the people that we were two or three generations ago. Let us be our great grandmothers. (*Pargiter* 8)

Woolf here echoes her claim that women must think back through their mothers, emphasizing again the need for present knowledge to be grounded on an understanding of historical continuity. But there is also a sense here of escaping one’s personal position by becoming old—for the image of a “great-grandmother” certainly evokes the picture of an aged person, even though the audience is meant to imagine itself back to a time where she was not yet old. Imagining the connection between past and present, Woolf also here aligns youth and age, forging a camaraderie between the tradition as represented by the aged and the new professional possibilities open to young women. And yet, imagining oneself as one’s great-grandmother can be difficult—particularly for a young person who has known her great-grandmother (if at all) only as an old person. Continuity and alliance are never simple things for Woolf, and the inter-generational alliances in *The Years* are accordingly strained, manufactured more out of echoes and near-misses than out of moments of complete union.
Despite the fact that the alliance between Eleanor and Peggy is only hinted at in the final chapter, I read *The Years* as primarily an optimistic text, not in the sense that the novel moves towards a utopian finale, but in the sense that it moves away from the tense atmosphere of lies that dominates the Victorian family of the opening chapter. In the later chapters the characters are at least attempting to tell the truth, though they still find it difficult to do so. The first chapter of the novel, by contrast, is permeated with deception. Thinking back on the Abercorn Terrace house where the Pargiters grew up, Martin reflects that it is no surprise the home will not sell, for it is polluted by the fact that they had all lived “boxed up together, telling lies” (163). The novel opens with a group of women stuck inside, warning each other not to be caught looking out the window at a gentleman lest they be thought lustful, while Rose is meanwhile accosted by a man who exposes himself to her on the street. In *The Pargiters*, Woolf describes these elements together as “street-love”—an almost systematic brutalization of desire by its confinement and misunderstanding, so that even though such incidents are very common, Rose knows her father will be angry if she tells him about the man in the street (*Pargiters* 35-38; 50). Rose must hide her victimization; her father, meanwhile, is deceiving the family by keeping a mistress named Mira.

I want to claim that this failure of truth telling is also, in Woolf’s terms, a failure of maturity. The Pargiter family venerates Abel’s aged position, but the maturity associated with his authority is ultimately a *false* maturity, precisely because it is so invested in its own authority. The fact that Abel would be angry with Rose over her own

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35 Woolf, being so deeply interested in the submerged parts of the mind, was also highly cognizant of the difficulty of truth telling, and the last chapter of *The Years* is in many ways about this difficulty. This awareness permeates the essays where Woolf deals with the unconscious, summed up in her claim that “If you do not tell the truth about yourself you cannot tell it about other people” (*CE II* 177).
victimization insinuates a desire for control over the family that Woolf describes in *Three Guineas* in terms of “infantile fixation” (*TG* 130). Continuing to write back to the infantilization of women as she did in *Orlando* (*O* 204), Woolf suggests that it is not the daughter, but the father’s desire to control his daughter, which is both prurient and puerile. Abel clearly feels himself old, and mocks himself gently by saying that there are no adventures left “for an old fogy like me” (11); but this too is a part of his deceit, as he only says this to cover up his feelings about having just had a fight with Mira. He is claiming the old have no adventures while simultaneously having an affair with a younger woman to help him feel young. Meanwhile, because their mother is dying, the older children in the house are attempting to speak in a manner that will make them sound more like adults, imitating the sound of their mother’s reproving speech (9). More remotely, this imitation of their mother is tied to another set of lies—for according to Delia, they are all merely play-acting at being sad to lose their mother when in fact they will be relieved to see the end of her long illness. In all these ways, the pieties of the family render age both authoritative and deceptive. Woolf also ties this false maturity to her own concerns, articulated in *Three Guineas*, about the deadening effect of the mainstream life of the professions; when Eleanor goes to visit her brother Morris, she notes that he is becoming professionalized, and that accordingly she finds it difficult to share anything with him. “That was the worst of growing up, she thought; they couldn’t share things as they used to share them” (25). At best, Victorian maturity figures as a loss of intimacy to professionalism; at worst it is a complete life of deceit. This false maturity is at the heart of Woolf’s critique of the Victorians: the reverence for age in patriarchal forms (the wise father, the professional “grown man”) distorts the ability to tell the truth.
This distortion does not entirely end as time passes in the novel; it continues to operate, but it does so most fiercely in the social mainstream. In accord with Woolf’s claim in *Three Guineas* that the power to grow is protected by obscurity, it is only the marginalized and unconventional characters in *The Years* who experience the possibility of managing to articulate the truth about themselves, and accordingly those characters are best able to continuously develop. As Joanna Lipking notes, as a rule of thumb, characters in *The Years* either have marriages and careers or they have thoughts (141). While there are exceptions to this rule,\(^36\) it is largely true of Eleanor’s generation, where the spinsters (Eleanor, Sara) and Martin, who has no children and limited success, stand at the centre of the story. The pressures of convention seem to force the rest of the characters into silence by forcing them entirely out of the narrative. Delia, who seems to be the most active iconoclast in the first section of the novel, marries an Irishman with whom she hopes to live a rebellious life, but he is soon revealed to be hardly rebellious at all; she nearly disappears from the novel until she appears in the last chapter, where she resents her husband for taking a spoon with his soup, because it reminds her of his conventionality (291-92).

I do not mean to suggest, however, that Woolf romanticizes the position of the “outsider” in this novel, since she represents the manipulative force of ideology operating upon all the characters, both those who live in the mainstream and those who do not. Woolf is keenly attentive to the distorting effects of not being able to speak about something—of lacking a vocabulary for one’s experience because it is not considered

\(^36\) Kitty is one exception, as she is at least granted a visionary moment, despite her marriage (203). Rose, by contrast, is a suffragist with no children but largely drops out of the narrative anyway; at the manuscript stage, she was more clearly a lesbian (Radin 55-56).
normal. And yet, while some of the characters are stifled by silence, silence also has a positive dimension in the novel, in accord with Woolf’s claim that the power to grow is protected by obscurity. As in James’s *The Ambassadors*, silence in *The Years* receives a dual treatment. On the one hand, some of the more marginal characters in the novel have near-psychic levels of communication, and can guess what others are going to say, suggesting that they are in touch with an intuitive and unconscious mode of relating to the community.\(^37\) On the other hand, the silence that is enforced by patriarchal norms distorts; the rebellious impulses of Delia’s youth remain, but her focus on small tokens, such as the way her husband uses a spoon, suggests these impulses have been distorted by their silencing.\(^38\) In *The Pargiters*, Woolf presents both sides of the silence associated with marginality in a scene describing the communication between Kitty and her mother. On the one hand the mother and daughter understand each other in their disagreement, so that “the feeling between mother and daughter was so strong about marriage and motherhood, that they seldom troubled to express themselves” (*Pargiters* 121-22). And yet, though Kitty is understood by her mother (suggesting a female intimacy), she still suffers from having to conceal her opinions from the public world: “Kitty’s opinions circulated in the privacy of her own mind, and took on from that concealment a certain degree of exaggeration” (122). The exaggeration of concealment distorts one’s mind, much like the act of repression, for Freud, grants excess energy to the repressed content.

\(^{37}\) Both Eleanor and Sara at moments seem to be able to anticipate what others say, though in some cases, as when Eleanor anticipates Celia will say that the bats “get into one’s hair,” this seems to be more a matter of Eleanor understanding the clichés of conversation than actually knowing what someone else will say (152). Eleanor seems to evoke this power more fully in anticipating a bizarre remark during the final party, where she reflects upon the possibility of a “gigantic pattern” of recurrence, echoing Woolf’s “Sketch of the Past” (*Years* 270-71).

\(^{38}\) Margaret Comstock argues that the entirety of *The Years* is patterned around the distortion of voices, and that Woolf’s hope for the present age is that people can speak to each other more honestly and intimately if they avoid the forces, from tyrants on the radio to prudish lies, that distort or silence their voices (260).
In *The Years*, silence can figure either as the result of this repression or as a refuge from the mainstream of language. And the motion from a strained, enforced silence to a more comfortable and marginal silence is one of Woolf’s ways of figuring the growth of the mind.

I want to argue that the family as a whole, with Eleanor Pargiter functioning as its central representative, makes considerable progress in the direction of this type of growth. Eleanor lives a vital, various, and busy middle age, and so participates, along with Holtby’s characters, in the feminist rehabilitation of the spinster figure. Eleanor is made to care for her father until quite late in life, as Woolf was not; in the 1908 chapter she is still minding him, thinking him very old for wanting to keep newspaper clippings (109). But Eleanor herself, by contrast, is reading Renan and wondering about the origins of Christianity. Throughout the 1891 chapter especially, when Eleanor is somewhere around thirty, she is very much the vital centre of the novel and thinks other people she sees on the tram look “settled, elderly, as if their minds were already made up. For some reason she always felt that she was the youngest person in an omnibus” (73-4). Yet immediately we learn that a man on whose toe she has stepped has sized her up as a typical spinster: “cold; her passions had never been touched” (74). This patriarchal

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39 Many critics have noted this contrast between Woolf and Eleanor. Woolf claimed that if her father had lived into her middle age “his life would have entirely ended mine . . . No writing, no books” (Lee 68). This is not quite what happens to Eleanor, but her official life is very much about caring for her father through her middle age. As Alex Zwerdling observes, *The Years* is full of characters who have wasted themselves by following the wishes of their parents and the commands of the “family system” (Zwerdling 157). Puzzlingly, Zwerdling goes on to claim that *The Years* is also nostalgic for this system (174).

40 Throughout the novel Eleanor frequently thinks on this larger historical scale, showing curiosity about the times of Jesus and the distant future. The contrast between Eleanor’s reading of Renan and her father’s newspaper clippings is illuminating: newspapers are ephemeral, releasing a new issue every day, and to keep them commemoratively is a sign of advanced age; Abel keeps the papers because he has moved outside of the temporality of the news, and his life is almost entirely retrospective. Eleanor, who lives a highly various life, is ironically on the timescale of newspapers and therefore has the energy to be curious about the origins of Christianity.
construction demonstrates that the conventional, gendered image of aging misunderstands Eleanor entirely.

One signal moment is when Eleanor meets Nicholas in the year 1917, and learns that he loves men. “For a second a sharp shiver of repugnance passed over Eleanor’s skin as if a knife had sliced it. Then she realized that it touched nothing of importance. The sharp shiver passed. Underneath was—what? She looked at Nicholas” (217). This incident occurs almost immediately after Nicholas introduces the topic of conversation that will dominate his friendship with Eleanor for the rest of their lives: the question of whether humans really are improving, and how they can make progress if they do not know themselves. Nicholas claims that the soul wants to grow, historically: “It wishes to expand; to adventure; to form—new combinations?” (216). The possibilities of historical growth cannot be entirely bleak, for the friendship between Eleanor and Nicholas is precisely one of these new combinations. Eleanor’s near-instant realization that her aversion to homosexuality touches nothing of importance is an important triumph. This moment leaves Eleanor to question what is “underneath” her momentary shiver, inviting both the character and the reader to engage with desire in a more complex way than through simple repugnance. This is the clearest and most sudden example of an Erfahrung in the novel—though in Woolfian fashion it is not a violent change so much as a kind of surfacing of something that seems potentially, if unconsciously, known already. Margaret Comstock has noted how in this chapter and thereafter, the possibility of less strained relationships between the sexes surfaces in the novel; Nicholas takes Eleanor’s mind seriously as other men in the book, including William Whatney, whom
she had once thought she might marry, fail to do (Comstock 260). In a parallel fashion, Renny and Maggie, whom we see together for the first time, seem to have a more intimate relationship than the marriages of the past; Eleanor sees this, for she recognizes in Renny the kind of man she would have actually liked to marry (219). So in the 1917 chapter, despite the air raids, some progress is occurring, and the older characters are presented as more open to the depths and complexities of desire and selfhood beneath the surface than they were in their youth, making new connections that would have been impossible on Abercorn terrace.

But after this chapter the risk of atrophy enters the novel, as Woolf orchestrates the “Present Day” section to provide considerable ambiguity about the possibilities for growth and development. The final section explores the importance of alliances between older and younger women, but under the conditions of pressure and distortion Woolf associates with the 20th century. Eleanor’s peculiar optimism and openness seem difficult to inherit under these more strained circumstances, and accordingly her niece Peggy seems to be continually missing the chance to connect with her. Eleanor and Nicholas continue to speak about progress and self-knowledge, but they have the same conversation over and over, something for which Sara mocks them (231). (This is perhaps one of Woolf’s more brilliant ambiguities: to what extent are people in a rut if they repeatedly have the same conversation about growth?) Eleanor’s generation

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41 Critics who see the novel as bleak sometimes claim Eleanor has in fact lost out in not ending up married to William Whatney, though there is virtually no evidence in the novel that she likes him. Leaska makes this claim as part of an argument that sees the novel building to a sense of futility that arises from Woolf’s own struggles to confront her traumatic experiences in it, calling the novel a “pargeted autobiography” (Leaska 185).

42 There may also be serious limitations as to how well Nicholas is actually accepted by the characters in the novel. Bradshaw draws attention to the fact that his nickname Brown, used throughout the “Present Day” chapter, is derogatory slang for a homosexual (186).
becomes elderly, and much of the narrative energy shifts to the next generation in Eleanor’s nephew North and niece Peggy, neither of whom seem particularly happy. The diminution of the aged is exploited by Woolf for its historical parallels, allowing the novel to make complex use of the limits of the metaphorical overlapping of the age of a person and the age of the age. For the aged become out of step with the times—but this sense of being out of step, of having difficulty connecting, is also represented as one of the chief characteristics of everyone’s experience in the “Present Day” chapter. The twentieth century is as disjointed, it would seem, as an elderly consciousness. In her old age, Eleanor is highly optimistic, but she has difficulty making her visions of optimism relevant to the younger generation about her. The younger characters, like the women described in *Three Guineas*, have inherited opportunities but also a cynicism and coldness; Peggy is at risk of becoming a “cripple in a cave,” as Woolf describes the over-professionalized person (*TG* 72). The serious disjoint between Eleanor’s generation and Peggy’s is at once a statement on the disconnected nature of the “present day” and a figure for the difficulty that the younger characters have in making use of their cultural inheritance. When Eleanor sees Peggy reading a book, she enthusiastically proclaims her life a miracle, but Peggy has in fact only grabbed a book to hide her loneliness (280).

The possibility of an alliance of sorts between Peggy and Eleanor, like the alliance we saw in *All Passion Spent*, hangs on the fringes of the last chapter. But whereas for Sackville-West this alliance functioned primarily as a support for the ambitions of young Deborah (whose ambitions were essentially identical to Lady Slane’s), Woolf suggests instead that a fusion of the widely differing perspectives of youth and age is politically important, despite its difficulties. The most important
moment of near-connection between the two women occurs when Peggy responds to Eleanor’s wishes to travel by abruptly asking “Was it that you were suppressed when you were young?” (245). An image of Abel Pargiter flashes through Peggy’s mind, reminding the reader that Eleanor did lose much of her life to caring for her father; Peggy’s supposition, that Eleanor wishes to travel now because she lost opportunities in the past, is certainly reasonable. But Eleanor responds: “‘Suppressed? . . . She so seldom thought of herself that she was surprised” (245). Eleanor goes on to say that though she understands what Peggy means, she does not want her past, she wants the present (245-6). Peggy feels enough distance from Eleanor’s past to describe it blankly as suppression—and while Eleanor understands the statement, she so rarely thinks of herself that she struggles to see its application. This is a complex interaction, for Woolf is positioned on both sides of it; she hates the kind of patriarchal control that has limited Eleanor’s options, but she also thinks of maturity in terms of thinking less about oneself, not remaining trapped in one’s own side. Eleanor has not so much forgiven her past as barely bothered to think of it as limiting, despite the fact that Woolf certainly believes it to have been. We might see the perspective Woolf herself would advocate as combining these two women’s positions: Eleanor wants to travel out of curiosity and concern for the world, not out of personal rebellion or retribution, and yet Peggy’s modern political consciousness of the way one’s life can be truncated by patriarchy is also essential. A fusion of these perspectives, here associated with youth and age, would combine a critical political consciousness with a generous-minded curiosity and the putting aside of grievance; it would bring critique together with dwelling.
Peggy and Eleanor are also aligned by the fact that each of them, in the last chapter, has a vision which she cannot communicate. Each of the women sees an optimistic image of the future, but neither can speak it; this struggle to speak broadens the difficulty the women have connecting, suggesting that the near misses between Peggy and Eleanor are also figures for the difficulty of articulating a new vision appropriate to the pluralistic and loosely-structured “present day.” Peggy, having expressed considerable cynicism about civilization in general, then sees suddenly “not a place, but a state of being, in which there was real laughter, real happiness, and this fractured world was whole; whole and free. But how could she say it?” (285). She stumbles through trying to describe it but cannot, and only ends up insulting her brother North, saying that he will write another “little book” rather than actually “living differently, differently” (286). Peggy’s vision almost immediately loses itself in her habitual cynicism, which she regrets. And yet her inability to speak is also to some extent the integrity of her vision—its silence suggests that it is coming from the rich and unconscious life of the margins, where the power to grow is protected by obscurity. The fact that she makes her vision into an attack on North suggests a failure of maturity, in terms of Woolf’s own belief in the importance of impersonality: “She had got it wrong. She had meant to say something impersonal, but now she was being personal” (286). And yet, this is not what Peggy intended; she is struggling towards being less personal and less self-absorbed, but has not gotten there yet. Peggy is politically conscious, but asserts herself over others too readily; Woolf thereby suggests that Peggy’s aggressive modern consciousness needs to shift closer to the position associated with Eleanor, who rarely thinks of herself any more.
Eleanor has two optimistic visions in the final chapter. The first vision is a dream which, in the final version of *The Years*, Eleanor simply forgets, though she feels wonderful when she wakes up, feeling that “they were all young, with the future before them” (280). This vision gestures towards the community: Eleanor is not young, but in a sense it is true that “they” together may have a future as a community; the humility and impotentiality of the individual can also be an attentiveness to the potential of the community. In the second vision, placed at the very ending of the novel, Eleanor sees a man and a woman getting into a taxicab, and says twice “there!” as if something has been resolved or finally seen (318). This final moment, which many have found perplexing and unsatisfactory, has also been connected by many critics to Woolf’s use of the image of a man and a woman in a taxicab in *A Room of One’s Own* (*AROO* 96-98). Given that *The Years* opens with a scene in which Eleanor warns her sisters not to be caught looking at a gentleman calling across the road, the vision does suggest a movement into a future of sexual satisfaction and less artificial division between men and women—the same things Eleanor values in Maggie and Renny’s marriage. Eleanor’s visions are just as private and inarticulate as Peggy’s; the first is forgotten; the second is hardly communicated at all (she simply points at the taxi and says “there”). This connection adumbrates a fuller alliance between the two women. While the dangerous corrosiveness

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43 In the manuscript version, Eleanor and Sara (called Elvira in the manuscript) are brought together by this moment, for Elvira, in another psychic experience, does remember Eleanor’s dream for her, and tells her that she had dreamed she was a young girl standing on a cliff above water, with her entire life ahead of her (Radin 104). Woolf cut this rather explicit image of optimism and promise, much as she cut almost anything so straightforward from the final version of the novel.

44 The claim that this vision is puzzling and unsatisfactory is made by Middleton (169). The connection to *A Room of One’s Own* is noted by Naremore, who claims Eleanor’s vision is one of sexual fulfillment (260). Bazin (176), Dowling (196) both note the connection to *A Room* but still claim the epiphany is essentially lost and made irrelevant anyway. Holtby, in her book on Woolf, makes much of the taxicab image, appreciating its dissolving of divisions but also hinting at some difficulties with it (*VW* 161-85).
of professional life may be making Peggy cynical, this connection between Peggy and her aunt suggests she may yet envision a life that combines the freedom of new possibilities with the absence of manipulative pressure her aunt experienced growing up in the Victorian age. No final statement is made concerning whether young women will succeed in finding the maturity of impersonality under the pressure of mainstream, professional life, but the alliance between the women is reinforced by these visions that simultaneously redirect them towards the silence of what is unconscious and cannot be fully stated.

These visions are difficult to communicate in part because they are impersonal, and close to the communal and the unconscious; the novel as a whole has shifted from the restrictive silence of Victorian falsehood to the comfortable silence that welcomes visions and struggles to articulate them. Positioned between articulacy and inarticulacy, the cast of the novel as a whole might be said to be in what Agamben calls a state of “infancy”—they do not yet have words for their experience, but are attempting to learn them. As I noted in my second chapter, infancy for Agamben is an early version of impotentiality. It is not just a condition of childhood; rather, we are always in a state of language acquisition, because we are always in the condition of lack where we are still finding words for our experience; infancy therefore grounds our creativity in our vulnerability.\(^{45}\) It is perhaps slightly more than a convenient pun, then, that in the final pages of the novel, Nicholas makes a toast to the human race, “which is now in its infancy, may it grow to maturity!” (312). Margaret Comstock has noted that the etymological sense of Nicholas’s toast is highly relevant, for throughout The Years

\(^{45}\) See Infancy and History (especially 50-70).
people are so unable to finish sentences and communicate that the human race might very well be said to be in a state of infancy—it cannot yet speak (Comstock 258). It is fitting that Woolf, who so connects creativity with the unconscious, would see a sense of positive potential in the approximate knitting together of a group of characters who cannot speak out loud the connections between them.

Eleanor and Peggy’s incommunicable visions hang between them rather than connecting them firmly, underscoring the general pattern of the final section of The Years, which is to emphasize the choral and communal, delineating the diffuse structure of a community which does not restrict its members. The loose manner of echo and half-memory with which the members of the family belong together—especially the older members—seems to leave room for everything, orchestrating a choral finale where no one is forced to sing in unison. Members of the family haven’t seen each other in years (or they have), but they remember things each other said or did fifty years ago (or they don’t—often they only half remember). Delia can express that growing up in the house they lived in was hell; Maggie and Renny can have a happier marriage than their parents; Eleanor can fall asleep and dream herself young in the middle of a party. This finale presents neither a form of redemption nor a utopian vision, but in significant measure it is more mature than the Victorian family that began the novel; its silences are less fraught—the characters are a little closer to telling the truth about things. I do not mean to say that the ending of the novel is unambiguously positive, for the cynicism of

46 Radin offers an excellent analysis of the choral response to Nicholas’s toast, demonstrating that instead of a speech by one character, Woolf allows each character to say or do something characteristic, emphasizing the fact that Nicholas’s hopes can only be borne out by a communal agent (Radin 108). The cockney children who enter and sing incomprehensibly are also a part of this chorus, offering a song that some characters find bleak but that Eleanor finds beautiful, though she has difficulty communicating that beauty (315).
North and Peggy also has its insights—particularly as North criticizes the possessiveness of several of the other characters along lines that echo *Three Guineas*. But on the whole, the novel traces a motion towards uncertainty and disunity which is also an historical loosening into maturity.

**Holtby’s Appropriation of Tragic Wisdom**

Winifred Holtby’s *South Riding*, like *The Years*, rehabilitates the spinster figure, suggesting that older women who stand alone also have vital things to offer the community; it also demonstrates the necessity of combining the perspectives of older and younger women. In some important ways, however, it constructs youth and age in ways diametrically opposed to *The Years*; for Sarah Burton, the younger woman, is a feminist and idealist rather than a cynic like Peggy; meanwhile the older woman, Mrs. Beddows, is a resigned, conservative stoic, rather than an enthusiast like Eleanor. It is the younger, rather than the older woman, who seems closer to the author’s own position in *South Riding*. And yet Holtby also emphasizes the importance of the insight of the older woman, using the structure of the novel to incorporate and appropriate aspects of a political perspective not her own into the motion of a liberal-feminist history. Like Woolf, Holtby casts younger feminist women as still too ambitious, too absorbed in what they as individuals can accomplish and not enough in what the community needs, and

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47 North sees a primeval lack of civilization in the fact that each person can speak only of their own children: “*my boy—my girl*” (277). He also continually curses everyone for thinking only about “politics and money”—a catchphrase that he repeats so often that he seems to be in a rut of his own; this suggests the limits of his cynical critiques, which see only one side of everyone.

48 Marion Shaw has compared Holtby to Eleanor Pargiter, noting that both claim their lives have been “other people’s lives” (*Years* 269; *Clear Stream* 253). The title of Shaw’s biography comes from Holtby’s remark that she hasn’t had her own life; instead “my existence seems to me like a clear stream which has simply reflected other people’s stories and problems” (*Clear Stream* 3-4). Shaw also notes, however, that Woolf had no access to this remark when *The Years* was published (*Clear Stream* 253-4).
she uses the position of age to represent a perspective of deep civic duty—despite the fact that the older women remain associated with a conservative political perspective Holtby herself repudiates. The perspective that the novel advocates in its finale is a fusion of the perspectives of these two women, which are shown to be incomplete without each other.

Holtby, like Woolf, valued “maturity.” In *Women and a Changing Civilization*, her survey of the history of women, she frequently expresses her goals for women’s education in terms of the desire to “achieve full human maturity” (174; see also 191). She made a campaign, in this book and in *South Riding*, of defending spinsters from the charge of frustration—which she saw as Freudian in its origins. Sarah Burton, the spinster protagonist of *South Riding*, is an exemplar of vitality, as a woman nearing forty who starts life over as headmistress of a school. But in addition to the defense of spinsters, *South Riding* engages with issues of gender and aging from another angle as well, casting Sarah Burton as the younger woman compared to Alderman Mrs. Beddows. Holtby thereby redesigns the plot of the spinster by suggesting the importance of relationships between women; though Sarah does fall in love in the novel, the most important combinations of perspective in the novel do not come from Sarah’s romantic love, but rather from the dialogic relationship between these two women, which at the end of the novel gives Sarah the vocabulary for her new perspective.

49 Lisa Regan argues that Holtby opposes this Freudian-derived model of spinster psychology with an Adlerian model based on the importance of “self-esteem” (194-218). Adler’s psychology, with its emphasis on the roots of one’s self-image in the opinion of the broader community rather than the child-parent relations, is particularly suitable to Holtby’s vision.

50 Holtby strategically makes Sarah a woman who lost her first fiancé to the War, but who has since then been engaged to other men who were alienated by her feminism (*SR* 48). This allows Holtby to situate her protagonist’s pacifism as a response to personal loss, while still making Sarah’s spinster status a matter of her own choice.
I say that the relationship between the two women is dialogic because it quite literally emerges through dialogue; Mrs. Beddows’s response to one of Sarah’s favorite philosophical adages actually motivates Sarah to change her mind and adopt a perspective somewhere in between her old viewpoint and Mrs. Beddows’s viewpoint. Sarah begins the novel believing that God says, “Take what you want . . . Take it—and pay for it” (161). This phrase seems at first to express a hard-headed, even cynical individualism; one can have anything, but there are costs and penalties involved. But Mrs. Beddows counters by asking, “But who pays?” (189). Sarah’s view eventually becomes a combination of these, as by the end of the novel she comes to see that “we all pay . . . we all take; we are members one of another” (490). It is Mrs. Beddows’s more elderly perspective that shifts Sarah’s stance towards the communal; Holtby suggests that what seemed at first to be a hard-headed awareness of the costs to the individual was itself naïve, because the individual can never make decisions in a vacuum.

Through Mrs. Beddows, Holtby also appropriates the perspective of her own mother, who explicitly serves as the basis for that character. The logic of this appropriation, which is questionable though quite interesting, is revealed in Holtby’s Women and a Changing Civilization. Holtby there describes how modern women, with a life of their own outside the domestic sphere, may in fact make better mothers than women of previous generations, as between mother and child “there is less possessiveness and more comradeship, less discipline and more understanding” (145).

Holtby makes this clear in her Introduction to the novel, while at the same time claiming that Mrs. Beddows cannot be completely identified with her mother. This was unfortunately not enough to keep Alice Holtby from feeling that she and other political figures in Yorkshire had been publically embarrassed (Shaw Clear Stream 43).
Women and children can approach each other, that is, as whole people. Holtby then makes the interesting claim that:

My own mother, though born over seventy years ago, is essentially “modern.” As a country alderman, she finds life rich with varied and absorbing experience. I can visit or leave her without compunction, knowing that she has her life to live as much as I have mine; yet when we meet there is none of that awkwardness, that “making conversation,” which I see between so many parents and children. In the future the child will be as much interested in the mother’s career as the mother is in the child’s, and the shared experience of two generations should be helpful to both. (145-46)

*South Riding* aims precisely at this “shared experience” of the two generations, joining the perspectives of a woman roughly Holtby’s own age and a woman based on her mother. But in this passage Holtby also claims that her mother is already essentially modern, not because she is particularly liberal in her views, but simply because by working outside the home as a public servant she has freed herself from an identity based only on domesticity. This claim is revealing in the light of Holtby’s project to write a novel about local government, as she suggests that the experience imbibed by serving the local public makes one essentially modern and allied with liberal improvements, regardless of one’s actual views. That is, there is a certain practicality to being “modern” which absorbs anyone who works out in public, making them, even if they are conservative, into an ally of liberal reforms. It is this alliance that *South Riding* dramatizes.

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52 As Shaw notes, Holtby’s mother also remained “staunchly conservative” (*Clear Stream* 34).
The contrast between Sarah’s views and those of Mrs. Beddows is also heavily invested in the symbolic meaning of women’s ages. Their conflict stems from Sarah’s attempt to save an impoverished girl, Lydia Holly, from the burdens of caring for her young siblings after the death of her mother. Lydia Holly represents the hope for the women of the future in the novel; she is not only the prize pupil whom Sarah hopes to send on to university, but also a figure of potentiality itself. The description of her love of reading almost seems borrowed from the aspirations of the young Jude in *Jude the Obscure*, as she reads Shakespeare and feels that “below all these present pleasures lay the lovely glowing assurance of future joy” (*SR* 33). But unlike Jude’s ambitions, Lydia’s potentiality is not the focus of an individual narrative of aspiration. *South Riding* focuses instead on the broader community, placing at the centre of the plot Sarah’s attempt to save this potentiality because Lydia could be one of the new women with a career, and so function as a role model. Sarah’s ambitions are not for herself but for Lydia, and focus on Lydia’s ability as a writer rather than her class mobility; by focusing on the desires of others to save the potential of youth, Holtby distances herself from the corrosiveness of upward mobility and competition which Hardy found all-encompassing and which Sackville-West associated with the middle of life. As I suggested in my discussion of Eleanor Pargiter’s dream, the potentiality of the community figures as a positive value: it is the egotistical investment in one’s own potential as an individual that is problematic.

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53 Holtby also deals with aging from a number of angles in *South Riding*, which is as much a panoply of reflections on time as *The Years*. One example is the protracted conflict between the students, who are too young to assume authority figures vulnerable (303-4), and Agnes Siggleshwaite, the dry and aging science teacher who feels herself “too old”—but mainly in contrast to Sarah’s efficient and modern management of the school rather than in contrast to her pupils (154-56). Carne’s political views, belonging to a “past age,” are also paralleled to the sense of waste Sarah feels as he reveals an illness that is killing him (355).
That egotism is reflected in Sarah, whose progressive perspective comes up against Alderman Beddows’s belief that Sarah is too youthful and ambitious in her desire to grant Lydia a special scholarship to liberate her from her domestic duties. Mrs. Beddows counters that there is no great tragedy in a talented young woman remaining at home in a world where so many women have to do so, and asserts that her mature age and experience have shown her we must never try to do too much: “if you give too much here, another must go without there . . . We need patience” (188). Sarah asserts that over time we can master chance; Mrs. Beddows believes this goal to be impatient and hubristic. Sarah’s efforts to improve the human species, which she sees as “a blind and stumbling race of savages, crawling up out of the primeval slime” (189), are understood by Mrs. Beddows as youthful willfulness and mere ego. While Mrs. Beddows’s perspective may seem stoic to the point of resignation, it is also important to see that there is some credence to her claim that when one gives too much somewhere, one loses out; Sarah’s plan to save Lydia’s literary talent is a considerable expenditure on one child for a town trying to serve many on limited means. It is also important to see that Mrs. Beddows has understood something about Sarah’s desire to produce a star pupil and role model. Sarah imagines Lydia going on to be a leader of young women much as Sarah herself hopes to be, which suggests that there is an element of self-replication in Sarah’s desire to save Lydia.

It would not seem, at first, that anything necessary for the furthering of Holtby’s own progressive views would be found in Mrs. Beddows’s stoic, tragic wisdom, particularly as it is connected to the frustrations of a woman who has lived her life under the patriarchal reign of an especially petty man. Mrs. Beddows’s resignation is explicitly
connected to her disappointments in marriage to Mr. Beddows, a penny pincher who constantly thrusts his own tiny victories in other people’s faces (130-31; 189). Sarah believes Mrs. Beddows has been wasted by marriage, giving three-quarters of her energy to “quite unnecessary domestic ritual and propitiation” (183). Mrs. Beddows’s resignation is also connected to many other sufferings, including the loss of her son and her unfulfilled love for Robert Carne. But the more nuanced and communitarian view that emerges from the combined perspectives of the two women—“we all pay . . . we all take; we are members one of another”—does not disrupt Sarah’s reformist ambitions, but furthers them. At the close of the novel, Sarah is still committed to leftist feminism, but having lost Carne to an accident she has learned she cannot master chance. And though Carne has been killed by chance, Lydia has been saved by chance: her father happens to meet an old friend and lands himself a new marriage, relieving Lydia of her domestic burden. Through these combined incidents Holtby suggests that Sarah’s original version of progressive politics, which imagined the eventual conquering of chance, were in fact willful. At the novel’s conclusion, Sarah still intends to work for liberal feminist causes but no longer believes she can actually win—or entirely approve of herself for doing so.

In the second big scene where Sarah and Mrs. Beddows meet, Sarah tells Mrs. Beddows of her attempt to seduce Carne and expects to be condemned, but is instead only told that having given up on liking herself, she has just begun to live: “And when there’s no hope and no remedy, then you begin to learn and to teach what you’ve learned. The strongest things in life are without triumph” (473). What Mrs. Beddows has to offer, in other words, is impotentiality—expressed in this rather strident claim that one is only ready to be a teacher when one has given up on happiness. Whereas previously, Sarah had not had
“much use for the defeated” (472), she adapts a perspective arguably more appropriate for an educator: “It’s no use only having a creed for the successful,” as Mrs. Beddows notes (473). But all this humbling does not make Sarah any less committed to her goals. The novel ends with Sarah recommitting to her educational work and feeling beckoned on by Mrs. Beddows “from a serene old age” (492), despite the fact that the two women have never come to political agreement. Mrs. Beddows’ serenity is of course not the same as happiness—but it is a release from striving. As in *Women and a Changing Civilization*, the alliance is forged not because they have precisely come to agree, but simply by the fact that they both do public work.

The more mature perspective that Sarah Burton adopts is a perspective of impotentiality in another important sense. Sarah does not only give up on willful striving, but also on approving of herself; it seems to be a central aspect of Holtby’s sense of maturity that the mature person does not really like himself or herself. As a novel that gives credibility to characters of various political viewpoints, it is central to *South Riding* that the most laudable characters, though they may not agree, are all relentlessly hard on themselves. No political angle is taken to be villainous: both the socialist Astell and the conservative Carne are portrayed as merciless towards themselves for failing their respective ideals, and neither really likes himself (*SR* 273-74; 288-90).54 Sarah joins this company at the end of the novel. This is another version of impotentiality directing the

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54 The text does, however, represent a form of villainy in the figure of Snaith, who is not associated with a particular political perspective but rather with the manipulative power of money. Holtby attempts to make Snaith’s villainy more psychologically real by tracing it to a form of childhood abuse (*SR* 134-37). Holtby has been criticized for her tendency in *South Riding* and other texts to make villains out of homosexuals; Snaith is an effeminate bachelor who hates vitality itself (see Woods, Sponeberg). Sponeberg argues that Holtby displaces lesbian anxiety on to gay men, whom she equates with fascist impulses (183).
self outwards—all genuine public servants in this novel derive commitment from the fact that they are past striving egotistically towards a positive image of themselves.

The perspective Holtby associates with Sarah at the end of the novel is thus a picture of maturity as radical humility, as a commitment to working for others without the hope that would derive from the positive individual self-image of knowing one has made a difference. This perspective allows Holtby to position herself in such a way that the frustrations and pains of older women who have lived in even more restrictive times, frustrations which may not in fact often find expression in progressive views, are still brought on board with her reformist project. Mrs. Beddows is an active, competent woman, but she does not necessarily have Eleanor Pargiter’s openness, tolerance, or liberalism—as indeed, many older women of the 1930s likely did not. But Holtby is able to position Mrs. Beddows’s awareness of finitude as a progressive force in a weaker sense, by using her to assist Sarah in escaping egotism and seeing more clearly the human vulnerability that reformist projects are, after all, designed to assuage. In this, Holtby provides her own answer to the question of the age of the age: for while humanity may still be crawling out of a primeval swamp, as Sarah claims, it is simultaneously a species that has long steeped in vulnerability and failure; the liberal commitment to improving the world is ultimately a product of our memory of that history.
Coda

While *South Riding* can be situated in a long tradition of British novels of political compromise, its most proximate source of inspiration is *Middlemarch*. The ending of *Middlemarch*, which situates a humbled and less egotistical Dorothea somewhere in the middle of the march of progressive history, is arguably in the background of all three of the texts I have examined, each of which expresses hope for greater opportunities for women while simultaneously lauding the efforts of those who will rest in unvisited tombs. But comparing *South Riding* to *Middlemarch*, we find in Holtby’s novel a considerably more radical call for humility; Holtby re-inherits and sifts the ideas of *Middlemarch*, borrowing that novel’s sense of inter-connectedness and its hope for reform, but advocating a much greater sense of destitution. Paradoxically, Holtby seems to call for improvement without hope—or at least without hope for the individual. The call for the individual to allow herself to be absorbed into serving the community is very strong in Holtby’s novel; she could perhaps be faulted for lauding too strongly the self-punishing mindset of Astell—a mindset which Freud would associate with the domination of the superego. (It is not clear to me this kind of self-punishing mindset really does produce generosity; bitterness and self-flagellation are not necessarily any less egotistical than soaring ambitions, and a more authentic position of “impotentiality” would seem to involve being less cruel to oneself.) But Holtby also worked to develop a logic by which the conservative, stoic and possibly frustrated

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55 Holtby is generally seen to have drawn inspiration from *Middlemarch* regarding the interconnectedness of town life. Patsy Stoneman argues that Holtby refashions and attenuates the omniscient realism of Eliot’s novel by emphasizing the separateness and irreconcilability of the various characters’ perspectives (139-148). The novel also explicitly compares itself to *Jane Eyre*. In its depictions of a dignified and conservative landowner whose perspective is ultimately fused with another through love, it hearkens not only to *Jane Eyre* but also dimly to *Pride and Prejudice*, and perhaps to Forster’s *Howards End*. 
position she associated with older women could enter into dialogue with feminist politics and eventually prove an ally—an important act in the reclamation of women’s pasts.

Holtby’s novel, despite my reservations about its attitude to self-punishment, arguably invests itself more deeply than the other texts in impotentiality. Sackville-West’s portrayal of Lady Slane is rosy and simple by comparison. Woolf’s novel, with its optimistic older protagonist, does not make the same demands and does not ground the possibility of improvements for the community in the eclipsing of the aspirations of the individual. Eleanor Pargiter instead figures a subjectivity that seems ready to finally benefit from the unconscious inheritances of the past, so that the human species, though still in its “infancy” according to Nicholas, is perhaps finally mature enough to start learning. Holtby, less concerned than Woolf with the unconscious accretions of history, imagines maturity more concretely as a sort of unselfish putting of one’s shoulder to the wheel—Holtby, after all, wrote an entire novel about local government in an impoverished part of England. But ultimately, all three authors can be seen as posing solutions to the problem that Woolf articulates in *Three Guineas*: the problem of articulating a politically progressive feminism that also challenges some of the aspects of modern “progress” that seem dangerous, violent, or corrosively atomistic. All three authors aim to shift feminist discourse away from a tone of individual striving and towards a concern with the health of the community, offering elaborate replies to the old accusation that the gains of feminism will make coming generations of women selfish.
Chapter Five: Modernist Time and the Epidemic of Immaturity: Evolution and the Unconscious in Freud, Butler, and Eliot

It seems, as one becomes older,
That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence—
Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy
Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,
Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past.

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I have said before
That the past experience revived in meaning
Is not the experience of one life only
But of many generations—not forgetting
Something that is probably quite ineffable:
The backward look behind the assurance
Of recorded history, the backward half-look
Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror.

—Eliot “The Dry Salvages II” (CPP 132-3).

Is the human species a young species or an old species? At the end of The Years Nicholas makes a toast to the human race, “now in its infancy, may it grow to maturity!” (312). Though Nicholas is speaking to a group composed largely of elderly people, he considers the species new. Is humanity just getting started, still adjusting to the condition of living in civilization? Or are we the highest achievement of nature, drawing on a massively long natural history? In the modernist period, the question of the “age” of the modern age was underwritten by another discursive context: the long time scale of prehistory introduced by Darwinian evolution. Humanity itself could now be seen as a callow youth of ignoble origins, dropped comparatively recently into the natural order. When Virginia Woolf claims that her traumas prove she was born “many thousands of
years ago,” she gestures to a new awareness of temporal time scale that connects the human to the animal, throwing the age of the species into question (*MB* 77).  

Because maturity, as I have demonstrated, was often imagined by the modernists as the result of the steeping of historical awareness, conceptions of maturity were inevitably affected by the broadened awareness of a pre-civilized historical past. After Darwin and Lyell, nature itself has a long history. “Nature” and “History” would have been opposed categories to a thinker such as Rousseau, who imagined a “state of nature” before history began, and they were still opposed categories for Hegel at the start of the 19th century. But once a Darwinian understanding of evolution enters the picture, “maturity” can begin to figure not only as the opposite of “childhood,” but also as the opposite of the animal, the primal, or the protoplasmic.  

This shift raises the stakes for maturity, engendering a new level of anxiety about whether or not one is psychologically adult, since the alternative might be somehow to fail to be fully human.

Sigmund Freud, Samuel Butler, and T. S. Eliot provide examples of thinkers who took the possibilities for evolutionary models of maturity in contrasting directions. For all three, psychological maturity is a specifically post-Darwinian quality, a way of imagining human virtue and health for the evolutionary age by fashioning a proper,

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1 Of course Darwin is far from the only person responsible for the 19th- and 20th-century awareness of the old age of the planet. Lyell and other geologists had established this well before Darwin’s work began—but Darwin still functions, as he did in his own time, as a byword for this shift in awareness. Bowler’s *Evolution: The History of an Idea* offers an overview of the estimates of the age of the Earth in the context of Darwin’s discoveries. The suggestion that the Earth was very old had been made in the late 18th Century, but it was then considered shocking (48). Bowler argues it was generally accepted by educated persons by Darwin’s time.  

2 Carrie Rohman has recently argued that the divide between civilized and savage is more acutely experienced in the modernist period as a divide between human and animal; Rohman conceptualizes modernist accounts of subjectivity through this dichotomy (Rohman 13). For other accounts of the influence of Darwin and the reconceptualization of nature he engendered on modernism, see Norris and the later chapters of Levine. Norris argues compellingly for a tradition of bio-centric writing localized entirely in the modernist period.
psychologically adult relationship to the massive time-scale that came before. But the thinkers are divided on whether this relationship is one of differentiation or one of contiguity. For Samuel Butler, maturity involves a proximity to humanity’s biological inheritance, allowing us to benefit from it. But for Freud and Eliot, maturity is just the opposite; it involves taking distance from the savage, “childish” past in order to achieve a conscious adult state—though Eliot and Freud hold opposite opinions on several other aspects of maturity, such as the role of religion. As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, metaphors of age continually run in opposing directions. By the same logic I have observed throughout this project, the metaphorical overlapping of the “ages” of individual, group, and species leads not to a single mode of parallelism but rather to a loaded concept of “adulthood” capable of driving contradictory interpretations.

The ethical polarities change slightly when we shift to consider issues of maturity at the level of the species, but many of the concerns are the same. We saw that James, Woolf, and Holtby all describe the renunciation of the potentiality of youth and the advent of new forms of self-development in impotentiality. For these authors, the failure of the individual can divorce her from the egotistical investment in potential, initiating a new form of ethical relationship to the broader community. We might expect that as we shift to consider species-maturity, failure and impotential lose some of their significance as ethical modes, since the broader community is already at stake. No one wishes the potentiality of the species itself to be extinguished, and for many modernists, the fear of

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3 The rhetorical temptation to exploit the metaphorical overlap between the ages of an individual and the ages of history persists in a new form in accounts of evolution as well, which often tell their own meta-history of the development of evolutionary thinking as an evolution in itself. Thus Henry Fairfield Osborn claims in his 1894 history of evolution: “Like an animal or plant made up of many different parts which have been added one by one along the ages, we can take up [the history of evolutionary theories] as we should a bit of biological research” (17).
species-exhaustion which we saw in *Jude the Obscure* is very real. But for the most part Freud, Butler and Eliot do not exploit the fear of exhaustion; they emphasize instead a form of species-maturity that resembles the individual models of maturity I have already charted in its emphasis on humility and connection to the past.

The contrasting, progressive model of the growth of the species, based in the emphasis on potentiality, was widely popular in the modernist period in the form of eugenics. The field of eugenics proposed various, often stringent means to secure the future at the level of the gene, providing a profound indicator of the anxiety concerning bio-potentiality. Eugenics spanned the political spectrum, but was always associated with the quest for progress and often with a sense of rushed, urgent need; as one scholar notes, all that was required of a eugenicist was “to believe that application of knowledge of evolution and genetics to social engineering could ultimately improve human life and accelerate social progress” (Gillette 10). Francis Galton, the founder of the eugenics movement, often stressed the necessity of hastening the work of nature (Kevles 12). So despite the range of political views found among adherents, eugenics was in all cases a movement profoundly invested in the anxious protection of the grand narrative of progress, concerned with harnessing the genetic future as if the entire species was a bright child who had “potential.”

Although T. S. Eliot did have some interaction with eugenics, the three authors I discuss here do not tend to think along the lines of that movement, and they certainly do

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4 Indeed, Galton emphasizes that the species is young, having recently discovered civilization, and so very close to its savage beginnings (*Hereditary* 350; *Inquiries* 216). The belief that we have only recently become civilized and are not really adapted to life in civilization, without the emphasis on potential, appears in various forms throughout this chapter.
not emphasize the need to perfect the potential of the species. Rather, these thinkers are deeply concerned with retrospect, and with uncovering a proper relationship to the evolutionary and biological past. They desire to locate a maturity that consists in the individual benefitting from her evolutionary inheritance. None of them claim that the human species is the greatest achievement of nature, looking down on the other animals from a state of adulthood. Rather, they see the human species as possibly a highly advanced animal, but an animal placed into a special state of peril by that very advancement, and so facing a paradoxical crisis of egotistical narrowness and immaturity. The spirit of progress, for these authors, can in fact eclipse maturation; a proper relationship to our biological inheritance is necessary in order to enable mature behaviour. A humanity that doesn’t understand its roots in evolutionary process is at risk of being prideful and egocentric, captivated by a false and too-triumphant image of itself.

Accordingly, the suspicion of a trumped-up, false maturity, of the kind that Woolf criticized in Abel Pargiter, drives these authors as well. For Freud and Butler, despite their nearly opposite configurations of the unconscious mind, the position of a respected and stable 19th century gentleman is equally false, based in a deluded and juvenile relationship to the unconscious inheritances of the past (we should remember that Woolf’s description of Abel’s “infantile fixation” was inspired in part by Freud). For Eliot, the case is slightly different; the majority of his attacks against the false maturity of his contemporaries are reserved for liberal-progressive enthusiasms. Whereas for Freud and Butler, it is a proper relationship to the unconscious which allows humanity to see

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5 On Eliot’s interest in eugenics, see Childs (75-98) and his review “Recent British Periodical Literature in Ethics.” The eugenics movement tended to focus on the differential birth rate between social classes, though it also considered racial differences; Eliot seems to have been primarily concerned with the former.
itself accurately, maturity for Eliot is largely a result of a religiously-inflected consciousness. Particularly after his conversion to Anglicanism, maturity entails for Eliot both a mistrust of progressive theories of evolution (such as Bergson’s) and an awareness of our division from eternity through original sin. Eliot emphasizes radical human fallenness and encourages humans to look back and take cognizance of our evolutionary history in order to appreciate our fallen state. He thereby comes much closer to describing a state of ethical impotence for the species, arguing that a mature humanity understands the poverty from whence we have emerged and our concomitant need for grace. Despite their differences, however, for all three thinkers there is a considerable suspicion that “progress” as conventionally understood is in fact snuffing out maturity, and that the attainment of adulthood on the level of the species requires a re-interpretation of the biological past. All three call for the difficult work of learning to benefit from the vast and largely alien prehistory which, according to Darwinian thinking, we are both differentiated from and contiguous with.

**The Unconscious Mind and the Eclipse of Darwin**

The unconscious tends to enter into modernist era discussions about the timescale of evolutionary pre-history. After all, we do not seem to be carrying any lessons from invertebrates or small mammals in our conscious minds. Freud is only the most famous of representatives of the attempt to use theories of the unconscious to connect us to the evolutionary past—though in fact Butler, Freud (and to a lesser extent Eliot) drew on some of the same body of theory. All three took an interest in Neo-Lamarckian theories of evolution, placing them in a trajectory that Laura Otis has called the theory of
“organic memory”—a theory that was able to thrive in part because of the ambivalent state of evolutionary science in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The period was marked by heated rivalry between several theories of evolution. Julian Huxley would later refer to this period as the “eclipse of Darwin.” Before the rediscovery and acceptance of Mendelian genetics, Darwin’s theory of “Descent with Modification” was not considered sufficient to explain the arrival of new species, and competing theories entered to fill the void. The confusion is understandable: one can certainly use the model of “survival of the fittest” to explain how giraffes’ necks get longer over generations through the starvation of the shorter-necked individuals: but without a theory of genetic mutation, how can one explain the sudden appearance of legs on a fish? Bergson’s evolutionary vitalism, as well as the Neo-Lamarckian viewpoint advocated by Butler, attempted to explain evolution in non-mechanistic terms, using the volition of animals to fill the gap between fish and leg.

Organic memory theory was one popular way of explaining how the present might be related to that evolutionary past; Otis describes this tradition as an attempt to find “epistemological unity” by claiming that archaic histories were inscribed unconsciously in the memory of the present (Otis 3-4). Given scientific legitimacy by the lectures of Ewald Hering in 1870, the theory of organic memory combined Lamarck’s

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6 For a summary of Huxley’s view of the period and his account of the synthesized evolutionary theory, which is more or less in accord with evolutionary theory today, see “Darwinism Today” (Huxley 169-83).

7 Darwin’s own theory of the way new elements enter the species was not, to the minds of many of his critics, strong enough to account for the wide divergence we see among species. Darwin’s model of inheritance, called “pangenesis,” posits that new traits enter a population as the growth processes of animals are disturbed by pressures from their environment. This theory is itself somewhat Lamarckian, though it is not thought to be inspired by Lamarck (Bowler 210).

8 There were other possibilities put forth as well, including the theory of “orthogenesis,” which is the belief that a specific organism develops in a particular pre-determined direction, non-adaptively, whether this development ensures survival or not; this theory lends itself to fears of racial overdevelopment and senility (Bowler 268-69). For a summary of the entire “eclipse of Darwin” period, see Bowler (246-81).
theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics with Haeckel’s law that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny: that the development of the individual re-enacts in miniature the evolution of the species.\(^9\) The theory also imagined that the biological inheritance was analogous to memory; Hering described these transmitted memories as “vibrations” that pass from cell to cell and then to offspring, all the while adapting to the outside world. What these vibrations promised was a mechanism by which the unconscious “memories” of an individual, imbibed during the embryonic gestation period, could actually contain the life-experience and adaptations of prior generations.\(^10\) Butler was a fierce advocate for the theory of organic memory, and translated Hering’s lecture into English. Freud also borrowed from organic memory theory increasingly in his later work, and the same body of Neo-Lamarckian reasoning has been cited as an influence on Eliot’s conception of cultural inheritance. “Organic memory” is considered pseudo-scientific by 21st-century standards, and could also be criticized for its complicity with some of the elitist and racist discourses connected with Haeckel’s recapitulation theory.\(^11\) But my primary interest is not to criticize the thinkers for these blindesses, so much as it is to explore the way they appropriated and re-interpreted biological ideas to build models of psychological maturity. For the thinkers I discuss, the mature mindset depends on the proper kind of relationship to humanity’s prehistory, whether that relationship involves fear or acceptance, overcoming or immersion.

\(^9\) Gould’s history of recapitulation theory also offers a helpful summary of the influence of organic memory on a variety of discourses, including child psychology, in the modernist period (Gould 115-166).

\(^10\) There was some overlap between Lamarckian theory and eugenics as well as tension between them. Eugenics tended to draw on Mendelian genetics, but Childs notes that Lamarckian thinking was also to some extent kept alive by eugenics (5). Being a Lamarckian, in and of itself, neither allied one with eugenics nor firmly separated one from it.

\(^11\) As has been well-documented, recapitulation theory broadened the avenues of racism considerably, by making it possible to argue with a new and seemingly scientific literalness that non-European people were childish and Europeans advanced.
Freud: Maturity rather than All Fours

Freud’s later thinking is marked by a mania for parallels between the small and the large. Toward the end of Civilization and Its Discontents, he claims that the conflict between Eros and Thanatos operates at three levels, governing the development of civilization, that of the individual, and that of organic life in general (86). Unable to expand on the third element, Freud satisfies himself with arguing that “the process of human civilization and the developmental or educative process of individual human beings” are “the very same process applied to different kinds of object” (86). But despite Freud’s pushing the third parallel to the margin, it is this undeveloped dimension that expresses a new interest particular to the post-evolutionary era: if Hegel was animated by parallels between individual and “History,” Freud adds a third level of continuity between individual lives and the secret life of cells. In Freud’s later work, such paralleling leads to fantastic claims about the importance of psychoanalysis as a scientific discipline engaged not only with the health of individuals but with broad historical trends.12

Freud wants to use these historical powers of diagnosis to help Western culture work its way to a form of maturity. This maturity involves modern humanity adopting a less flattering view of itself, and taking note of its proximity to the evolutionary past. Freud, for all that is revolutionary about his work, deeply values consciousness and maturity, and sees the unconscious as close to the animal. This animalistic unconscious is

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12 For Freud at this last stage of his career, the idea that traumas are part of a long history also seems to be a much needed comfort: Moses and Monotheism, written mostly after Freud had fled to England to escape the Nazi regime, diagnoses anti-Semitism as a particular outgrowth of the guilt experienced by all humans as a result of the murder of the primal father (115-16). Granting a deep-rooted cause to anti-Semitism also grants it a reason; only what can be diagnosed can be cured.
a complex creature for Freud, by turns a traumatic curse and a wellspring of creative energy; yet while the unconscious can never be overcome or fully domesticated, Freud does believe that an acknowledgement and working-through of unconscious materials by the more mature conscious mind is almost always desirable. Because our primal, animal past is frozen and immobile in our unconscious minds, it poses a hindrance to real maturation if not worked through. Our evolutionary past may contain much that is difficult to confront, but our ignorance, repression, and disavowal of our inheritances from that past is causing grave problems. The guilt and aggression that subsist in the unconscious are, especially for the Freud of *Civilization and its Discontents*, giving shape to vast cultural movements that disavow the very impulses from which they originate, leading to dangerous cycles of behaviour. On a mass level, Freud aims to criticize our egotism, for the flattering view of ourselves as charitable and upright, based in the disavowal of these darker unconscious forces, is leading to an infantilizing false maturity.

Freud’s engagement with Darwin and with the biology of his time more generally has been well-documented. Proclaiming that the ego was not master in its own house, Freud situated himself as Darwin’s inheritor, claiming the position as the third in a line of Copernican blows to anthropocentrism of which Darwin’s had been the second. In his classic study *Sigmund Freud: Biologist of the Mind*, Frank Sulloway describes Freud as a “crypto-biologist,” arguing that his ideas were incomprehensible apart from his self-understanding of them as solid biological science. Sulloway also argues that Freud becomes increasingly rather than decreasingly dependent on biology in his later work,

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13 Gillian Beer notes this manoeuvre on Freud’s part, adding that Freud’s use of the magical number three suggests he will be the final of these prophets (*Darwin’s Plots* 8-9).
where he draws considerably on the Neo-Lamarckian theory of organic memory, arguing that organisms are able to pass on experiences and memories to their offspring which had occurred after they were born.\(^\text{14}\) This aspect of Freud, while perhaps not quite so determining of his thinking as Sulloway maintains, is certainly important, though it has tended to be ignored or downplayed in the history of literary uses of Freud.\(^\text{15}\) In his final complete work, *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud laments that scientists have set aside the Lamarckian inheritance of acquired characteristics, and essentially argues that it must be true because his own thinking requires it to be.\(^\text{16}\) In the same work, Freud goes so far as to claim that his most famous idea, the Oedipus complex, “can only be understood phylogenetically”—that is, the complex is only traumatic to the individual because it borrows the energy of prior ancestral traumas (*Moses* 127). This striking statement is perhaps the clearest instance of the importance of the theory of organic memory to the later Freud, who claims that the Oedipus complex is only traumatic because it is a re-experiencing of the murder of the primal father.\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{14}\) The issue of periodicity in Freud’s work is complex. Sulloway consistently breaks Freud’s engagement with biology into four periods; almost all the works on which I focus fall into the fourth. It is more common to divide Freud’s work using his two typographies, and simply abandon his pre-1897 work dealing with the seduction theory. For my purposes the most important divide in Freud’s work is the one noticed by philosopher Alasdair Macintyre, who notes that it is only in his very late work that Freud allows for unconscious materials that were directly inherited and not repressed by the individual (Macintyre 65).

\(^{15}\) The influence of Lacan’s re-interpretation of Freud among literary theorists is certainly part of the reason, as Lacan’s reading of Freud emphasizes linguistics so fully that issues of biology are absorbed into considerations of the signifier. My claim here is primarily true of the early Lacan; Lacan’s later concern with the Real and the body bring him into closer contact with the biological.

\(^{16}\) Freud claims that despite the “present attitude of biological science,” he cannot “in all modesty . . . picture biological development proceeding without taking this factor into account” (*Moses* 128). Ernest Jones recaps in his biography that he actually begged Freud to remove this remark from the book, but Freud refused, insisting other scientists were wrong (cited in Otis 184).

\(^{17}\) An account of this murder is given in *Totem and Taboo*, which explores at length the parallels between savages and children, and relies heavily on organic memory theory (See especially *Totem* 125-200). This type of thinking of course runs contrary to Freud’s earlier and better-known accounts of the Oedipus complex, in which the fear of castration generates the trauma on its own.
Freud’s reliance on the theory of organic memory reflects his tendency to situate the unconscious close to the animal in his later work. Whereas his earlier work had conceived of the unconscious as solely the result of an individual’s acts of repression, Freud’s later period also locates a residuum of animal states in our unconscious inheritance. In more than one work, spread over two decades, he claims that the latency period in human beings stems from our tendency to repeat the qualities of an earlier animal from which we are descended (see Civilization 46, 53; Moses 94). The shift from walking on four legs to walking on two occupies an even more important place in Freud’s mind, as the whole idea that we developed an ability to repress conscious materials supposedly stems from this shift.\(^{18}\) For the later Freud, the claim that we are recapitulating the experiences of our human and non-human ancestors is increasingly brought in to explain the weight of traumas upon us.

Carrie Rohman has recently argued that Freud secures the human by disavowing the animal (Rohman 23). It is certainly true that in imaging the unconscious as participating in both the primitive and the “animal,” Freud constructs the relationship between modern people, animals, and “ primitives”—and also children—along a linear, hierarchal axis.\(^{19}\) But the relationship to the animal is not entirely one of disavowal, for Freud also believes that our incomplete distance from the animal world is causing a dangerous increase in pressure, precisely because we will not acknowledge the

\(^{18}\) This is called the theory of organic repression—the belief that the root of the power to repress at all stems from the shame that arises from walking upright. Sulloway calls Freud’s discovery of organic repression, articulated fully in Civilization and its Discontents, his “grand synthesis,” because it allows Freud to combine the unconscious as repressed-content with the phylogenetic inheritance (381).

\(^{19}\) While Freud imagines the natural world as a more or less unchanging realm, this is not true for the prehistorical human world; important historical events such as the murder of the father and the development of the totem occurred in it. But the world of prehistorical humans is vast and mysterious, if not unchanging; it looms like Conrad’s jungle at the beginning of time in Heart of Darkness.
aggressive and “animal” forces which still drive us. While the animal may be equated with dangerous forces, Freud’s purpose in writing about these “animalistic” portions of the mind is precisely to seek an acknowledgement and acceptance of them. Inasmuch as animality is equated with childishness, humanity is the most mature of animals, but our inability to confront that animal inheritance, and our belief that we have transcended it already, is destructive and infantilizing; we would paradoxically be more mature if we could confront our childish selves more ably. Hence Freud praises animals, perhaps somewhat romantically, for their state of balance with their environment; humanity is imperiled because it is an awkward developmental stage, not far enough from the animal to find a new form of balance (Civilization 70).

In Civilization and its Discontents, Freud argues that feelings of guilt and unconscious desires must be confronted, both in individuals and cultures, to bring a halt to a vicious cycle whereby the Superego is becoming increasingly aggressive. Freud claims that the progress of civilization is wrapped up with an increase in guilt, such that the Superego becomes more and more powerful and aggressive over time, trapping the individual with its commandments to “love thy neighbour” and thus rendering her unable to acknowledge or give vent to her aggressive instincts. It is crucial to note that while the Superego makes these demands upon us, it does so by borrowing its energy from the animal Id—so what seems to be the progress of morality is actually the revenge of animal aggression, as our Superego turns our animal selves against us. Idealism is therefore a false maturity. The maturity of appearing to be adult and moral—the maturity of the Superego—is actually a misdirection of animal impulses that allows the more juvenile portion of the mind to reign. If the frozen wishes of the unconscious are childish
or animalistic, then on both the individual and historical levels, what we need is more adulthood—but that adulthood includes an acceptance of aggression. Accordingly, progress as it is usually understood is something of a sham; Freud offers an ominous warning that our weapons are getting better as we become more neurotic and unable to deal with our aggression (Civilization 91-2). Freud criticizes progressive narratives of history, including the Marxist narrative of the motion towards peaceful communism (Civilization 60). The general trajectory of history seems to run more frequently in the opposite direction; the victories of adulthood over childhood are won against the grain, since the more common tendency seems to be for the burdens of guilt to increase with time.20

What would get us out of this cycle? Freud presents himself at something of an impasse. But generally, the motion towards health, for Freud, is a motion towards maturity and consciousness, and his own writing is certainly meant to encourage a conscious acknowledgement of the condition he describes. Freud does not entirely denigrate the unconscious, or believe that it can or should be entirely overcome—its excess power always remains, and certainly has its positive side. The positive side figures especially in Freud’s discussions of artistic sublimation, where he describes the creativity that emerges from our hidden unconscious lives.21 But Freud does consistently value the motions by which consciousness is able to convert the static states of the

20 That is not to say that no improvement has occurred: as Freud notes in Moses and Monotheism, Christianity actually represents an improvement in the working-through of the primeval guilt of the murder of the father, because the guilt is at least acknowledged consciously by the Christian emphasis on redemption (Moses 113).
21 For Freud, all creativity is based in erotic wish and longing; his essay “The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming” is an eloquent summary of his view of art, suggesting that the pleasure of reading consists in “the writer’s putting us into a position in which we can enjoy our own day-dreams without reproach or shame” (183).
unconscious into less rigid and more conscious processes. Even when discussing artistic sublimation, Freud points out that the successful sublimation of sexual instincts, putting the repressed wishes to work, is actually an *alternative* to the complete repression of those instincts (*Five Lectures 52-4*). In his work on Leonardo Da Vinci, where Freud describes Leonardo’s almost complete sublimation of sexual desire, he also contrasts the artist’s rare and excellent form of sublimation with the kind that smothers sexual instincts through “powerful religious inhibition” (*Leonardo 79*). Artistic sublimation, then, taps into the creative forces of the unconscious by not repressing them entirely but putting them in dialogue with the rational and temporal work of the conscious mind.

Freud’s belief that therapeutic processes consist in our ability to work through the traumatized frozenness of the unconscious is a direct result of his argument that “in the Id there is nothing corresponding to the idea of time” (*New 104*). Since the unconscious admits of no temporality, “the repressed remains unaltered by the passage of time” (*New 105*). This means that our evolutionary inheritance is static. Freud himself points out that he is doing too little with this idea, and indeed it is decisive for his later thought in more comprehensive ways than are usually noticed. Since there is no time at all in the unconscious mind, there can be no maturation; the contents repressed by the individual, along with the hereditary and animal contents of the Id, figure as entirely static hindrances. Only the Ego experiences time, which it mediates to the Id (*New 106-7*). If the mind is an ancient city with all its levels intact, this is because the bottom levels are frozen (*Civilization 15-18*). Thus the impasse of *Civilization and its Discontents*: maturation is composed of a process of adaption by the Ego, but the Ego is often deluded
into neurosis by fulfilling the demands of the static Id. Maturation is therefore a difficult feat to accomplish on one’s own—that is, without analysis.

Freud is clearly not sure, however, how one offers analysis to an entire civilization. The repressed materials of past generations accumulate in the unconscious, but once stored there they become frozen and cannot be ameliorated. This is why the Superego of Western civilization can be getting stronger and more powerful over time: guilt can easily be added but is difficult to work through. So when Freud claims at the end of *Civilization and its Discontents* that our entire civilization is neurotic, this is really a claim that our civilization has become unstable through the processes of its aging without ever becoming well-adjusted and mature: like Little Father Time, we have passed into our dotage as a child with grey hair. Freud’s fears for the future of Europe in the 1930s are certainly not without grounding, and the aggressiveness he saw was obviously a genuine threat, whatever we think of his diagnosis of the cause. But the peculiar impasse of his later thinking is that he goes so far in simultaneously claiming maturity is both desperately needed and extremely difficult. Freudian species-maturity would involve our shaking hands with the animal, putting the traumatic residues of evolution into motion by letting them into dialogue with the temporal life of the conscious mind. The less flattering view of humanity that would emerge from such a therapeutic process would also, for Freud, lead to a decrease in political aggression and more specifically, as we learn in *Moses and Monotheism*, a decline in anti-Semitism. Freud believes that the ethical agency of social groups is embedded in an acceptance of the evolutionary residuum, and in the more subdued maturity of a species that knows that
changes such as the shift to walking upright were recent and traumatic events with which
we have not yet managed to cope.

**Butler: Maturity rather than Convention**

Samuel Butler’s extensive engagement with Neo-Lamarckian ideas was
instrumental in their popularization. Pre-dating even Freud’s early work by two decades,
Butler was also the first person to bring Hering’s model of organic memory to the
attention of the English when he included it in his *Unconscious Memory* (1880). Butler’s
understanding of maturity resembles Freud’s in some important ways: Butler attacks the
false maturity of Victorian moralism throughout his work, and like Freud, he promotes a
form of species-humility. Butler’s interpretation of organic memory, however, renders
the value of consciousness and unconsciousness in a way nearly the opposite of Freud’s.
Butler’s version of species-maturity arises not from working-through the traumatic
weight of a static unconscious, but from turning away from the shallow and
comparatively immature voice of consciousness; for Butler, the inherited, animal
unconscious is not a hindrance, but a cache of innate wisdom. By a set of astonishing and
counter-intuitive manoeuvres, Butler’s celebration of the beneficent unconscious also
enables him to completely reverse the traditional meanings of youth and age—something
as important to his social critique as Freud’s claims about the childishness of religion
were to his project.
Butler insists, against Darwin, that evolution is teleological, rather than accidental. He also sees evolution as deeply imbricated in memory. Reasoning that we must have more practice with unconscious processes—such as breathing—than we can account for (because we know how to do them when we are born), Butler argues that this practice must be passed on to us by the memory of past generations’ experience. Butler takes all knowledge on the model of memory, without seeming to be aware there might be other ways to conceive it; skills that contemporary science might see as genetically hard-wired, such as the “knowledge” of how to breathe, Butler views as the result of long practice. Since this unconscious knowledge is passed on by Hering’s “vibrations”, it does not require cognitive representations. In a striking contrast to Freud’s later and more influential arguments, Butler believes that we do not have any reactions to particular events or traumas from prehistory lodged in our minds—instead we simply have habits. Traumas are the outliers: Butler imagines traumatic events primarily as those that bring death, meaning that they are precisely the end of what gets passed on by unconscious memory. What we inherit from our ancestors is pure competence. We cannot bring this habitual knowledge to consciousness, but only in the sense that it is difficult to become conscious of one’s heart rate. So there is no bar of repression for Butler: rather, all of the

22 Butler began his career praising Darwin without realizing at first that he was actually disagreeing profoundly with him—and eventually the battle became quite personal, when Butler accused Darwin of having covertly attacked him in the preface to a translation of a book about Darwin’s grandfather Erasmus Darwin. The two men never reconciled, and Butler’s insistent attacks on Darwin, treated as amateurish by most Victorian men of science, grew more insistent over Butler’s career, spurring him to produce four very similar books. See Raby for a full account of this battle (176).

23 Butler in fact only learned of Hering’s work after writing Life and Habit, but then included it into his next book Unconscious Memory as further proof of his thinking.

24 Butler thus claims that when a seed enters an animal’s stomach, it perishes only because it has not inherited any memory of how to survive such a situation, its ancestors having never been in this situation and escaped alive to pass on the necessary adaption (LH 111-13). That Butler does not notice the circularity of this reasoning is, frankly, astonishing.
Butlerian unconscious resembles what Freud would call the preconscious—except that this preconscious realm is now vast, and the act of bringing it to consciousness actually defeats its purpose. Just as we might trip if we focus too hard on walking, habitual knowledge should be left to itself. Butler therefore offers a version of the Victorian model of “the enabling unconscious” that I discussed in Chapter Three.

If Freud’s model of the stubborn unconscious is connected with his claim that there is no time there, Butler’s model of the unconscious is the perfect inverse: the enabling character of the unconscious for Butler is a direct result of its being profoundly temporal. Butler stresses it is the things that we—and our ancestors—have been doing the longest that are the deepest and the most removed from conscious knowledge. Even once a form of knowledge has become unconscious, its continuing practice means that it wears an even deeper groove in the unconscious bodily memory, and is remembered even more automatically. So for Butler, the unconscious is a site of steeping and repeated practice.\textsuperscript{25} The persistence of time in Butler’s vision of the unconscious makes a decisive difference: for Freud, the unconscious is simultaneously ancient and childish, like a reptilian species that has long stopped evolving. But for Butler, it is the unconscious that is mature and experienced.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{25} In this Butler resembles Woolf somewhat, except that Woolf’s sense of unconscious steeping is interwoven with a belief that the unconscious functions like a linguistic tradition. Butler, by contrast, doesn’t trust language and values our unconscious inheritance in part because it escapes the superficiality of words, which “produce the appearance of hard and fast lines where there are none” (\textit{LH} 68).

\textsuperscript{26} Also, because Butler does not discuss repression, his model of the unconscious is not marked by excess. Freud believes that the repressed character of much of our unconscious contents leads to unhelpful distortions of the original acts of will that lay behind those desires, at least until we work through them in some way. Repressed materials inevitably take on the character of excess, and the psychological tendencies that are mired in a mass childhood therefore also bear the characteristics of excess and distortion. Thus, Freud claims in \textit{Moses and Monotheism} that only repression can lead to the excessive energy with which humans approach religion—tradition as “word of mouth” is not enough on its own (\textit{Moses} 130).
So intimate is the connection between the past generations and our unconscious memory for Butler that he refuses to distinguish between an individual and his or her ancestors, claiming that our habitual knowledge is our own as much as anything could be. Quite simply, we are our ancestors (LH 29-30). “Birth has been made too much of,” Butler claims (LH 49). What he means by this is not that birth is unimportant, but that it is a disadvantage: once we are born and begin undergoing individualized experience, we also begin to lose the certainty which we had before birth, when we only operated within the realm of unconscious memories. Birth is the beginning of ignorance. This devaluing of birth also leads to a reversal in the meanings of youth and age, something which Butler capitalizes on in *Life and Habit* in a vertiginous passage:

A living creature well supported by a mass of healthy ancestral memory is a young and growing creature, free from ache or pain, and thoroughly acquainted with its business so far, but with much yet to be reminded of. A creature which finds itself and its surroundings not so unlike those of its parents about the time of their begetting it, as to be compelled to recognize that it never yet was in any such position, is a creature in the heyday of life. A creature which begins to be aware of itself is one which is beginning to recognize that the situation is a new one.

It is the young and fair, then, who are the truly old and the truly experienced; it is they who alone have a trustworthy memory to guide them; they alone know things as they are, and it is from them that, as we grow older, we must study if we would still cling to truth. The whole charm of youth lies in its advantage over age in respect of experiences, and where this has for some reason failed, or been misapplied, the charm is broken. When we say that we are getting old, we should
say rather that we are getting new or young, and are suffering from inexperience, which drives us into doing things which we do not understand, and lands us, eventually, in the utter impotence of death. The kingdom of heaven is the kingdom of little children. (*LH* 243-44)

This logical reversal is crucial for Butler’s project of social critique. Butler’s claim that we become weak when we wander from our inheritance—which sounds initially like a program for a radical conservatism—leads instead to a strident critique of Victorian conventions, because the bearers of conventional authority are divorced from that authority by this reversal of the polarities of age.27 For if we become weak when we wander from our biological inheritance, then even well-established traditions, like the Christian faith, are latecomers compared to our deeper unconscious knowledge. The figure of the father, whose authority is based not only on his gender but also on his age, is crumbled to irrelevance by the contrasting time-scale of unconscious “habit,” which has been accumulating for millions of years. Many of our traditions and conventions may be unprofitable and young growths, leading to the false and prideful maturity of many Victorian parents.

Butler’s version of modernist maturity, then, might initially sound as if it has more in common with the avant-garde image of the artist as youthful rebel, and Butler was certainly inspiring to some of the self-styled renegades among modernist writers.28

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27 This is not to say that Butler is entirely on the political margins. He describes himself as a political conservative, but radical in every other way, applying the same description to Ernest Pontifex in *The Way of All Flesh* (430). It is difficult to discern what this means, but Butler seems to want to indicate that he is entirely against forms of conventional social pressure and authority, and especially the family, but that he is not in favour of an organized political revolution because he does not particularly trust any alternative form of ideals or ideologues.

28 Butler has sometimes been faulted for this; Alex Zwerdling contrasts him unfavourably with Woolf, claiming that his perennial rebelliousness kept Butler from achieving fully mature works (152).
Perennially youthful, Butler described himself as the “enfant terrible” of English literature, tossing bricks at the establishment on behalf of the deeper wisdom of youth (Notebooks 183). But the quality Butler associates with youth is a paradoxical state of being an old, instinctive rebel, benefitting not from a willful negativity or pride in one’s own futurity, but from a steady proximity to the ancient. Butler may code his rebellion as youthful, but only because he grants to youth the quality of benefitting from an evolutionary past that has already steeped and sifted itself into effectiveness. Because for Butler, even more than for Woolf, the young person was actually born millennia ago, he or she has a position from which the egotistical positions of convention can be undermined. Our individual experiences mean something for Butler, but they are primarily of value when they echo our unconscious inheritances, and are of little value when they fight against it. Butler values the accumulations of experience as much as Henry James does, but he thinks experience and inheritance are nearly the same thing.

The logic of age reversal drives Butler’s The Way of All Flesh, which substantially develops his critique of the egotism of mainstream Victorian culture, portraying conventional maturity as a state of petty and self-deluded tyranny. This eccentric Bildungsroman, most of which was written while Butler was working on Life and Habit in the 1870s, quotes many of his own ideas about inheritance. Butler’s claim that the youth are wiser than the aged is reinforced by the novel, whose parents are universally obtuse.²⁹

²⁹ Gillian Beer claims, by contrast, that the enabling theory of inheritance Butler pursues in his books on evolution is rendered stifling when applied to humans in his novels (Beer “Butler”). Beer is discussing Erewhon Revisited; I do not think that in The Way of All Flesh human inheritance is quite so stifling.
One of the critical conundrums about the novel has traditionally been the question of why, if Butler is trying to support his views about inheritance, the Pontifex family actually seems to decay as the original glory of John Pontifex devolves to his unlikeable son and grandson.\(^{30}\) Some have argued that John’s wife breeds a bad strain of genes into the line; I side, however, with interpretations that stress the deadening interference of Victorian institutions on the Pontifex family.\(^ {31}\) John Pontifex may be a good and naturally graceful man, but his children are pressured by convention into prudery and into the Church—the latter institution amounting in Butler’s novel to a massive temple to lip service, and to false knowledge that is divorced from the deeply imbibed wisdom of habit. Even the veneration of the human family is held to be against nature; Overton proclaims that the “family system” should have been confined to the lower species (131). Each male inheritor of the Pontifex family line tends to repeat the patterns of the previous generation—Ernest and his father Theobold give nearly identical advice to dying persons on the necessity of believing in hell to be saved, and in each case it is an insensitive repetition of a doctrine that touches no real experience they have (272).

The novel accordingly stresses that despite the doctrinaire patterns he is repeating, the “real Ernest” is the unconscious Ernest, who is not accepting what he is

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\(^{30}\) Butler’s ideas sometimes appear to be contradicted only because of the novel’s elaborate ironies. The narrator Overton, for example, proclaims that youth, like Spring, is an over-praised season, and that old age enjoys life more (Way 58). This might seem to contradict Butler’s defence of the maturity of youth; the context of the passage, however, which involves a father cruelly breaking the wills of children, suggests that the reason old age “enjoys” itself more may not actually be related to its greater wisdom.

\(^{31}\) On this debate, see Guest (281-5). The argument that John’s wife pollutes the line is made by Holt (68). I side with Guest’s argument that the novel is primarily a condemnation of conventions, so that the importance of the biological family line should not be over-emphasized. Ganz observes that the escape from conventions into irony simultaneously exposes Butler’s characters to the wisdom of the unconscious, and argues that Butler’s characters actually mature towards a deconstructive sense of themselves (367). It may be the case that the characters in The Way of All Flesh seem to anticipate some aspects of deconstruction, but Butler’s philosophy of Nature is as monistic as possible, and perfectly in accord with what Heidegger terms the metaphysics of the will.
being told (158-9). Ernest is described as possessing an “unconscious obstinacy” (216). The Pontifex children, we are told, are starving spiritually, because they are being “over-crammed with the wrong things”—a conventional education and an emphasis on conscious, memorized knowledge (138). But Ernest can resist that education because his character encourages the persistence of his deep inheritance, underneath the humbug of shallower forms of inheritance (his education, the habits of his father and grandfather). This is his strength and his latent maturity: Ernest has a powerful unconscious. At times, this strength produces effects rather like the “backlog” of repressed unconscious knowledge in Lambert Strether—though Ernest’s unconscious wisdom seems more to be overwhelmed by his education than actually repressed. Several times in the novel, Ernest realizes that he has been believing things that fail to make sense, but he can only see this if someone tells him. Ernest knows that he hates being a clergyman, but only knows that he knows when he is asked how he feels about it (303). Butler has his narrator note several times in the novel that even animals need an education from their parents in order to know what they like; without role models, they may persist in eating foods they do not enjoy (274-5). Ultimately this is the source of the novel’s conflict: any animal can receive a poor education, but a human being is especially imperiled, as our increased reliance on the conscious mind also leaves increased room for deviation and error.

Ernest manages, however, to make mistakes which successfully distance himself from his upbringing. As Danielle Nielsen notes, there is a striking difference between Freud and Butler on the matter of trauma; in The Way of All Flesh, it actually seems to be traumatic experiences that leave room for Ernest to break with the patterns of the past and find his own direction (Nielsen 84). After going to jail and having his perceptions
shattered, Ernest is ready to make his own way and winds up sounding like a pseudo-
Butler, publishing renegade works for future generations. He also requires some
assistance, however, from a procedure described as “crossing.” A doctor offers this
prescription for him:

I have found the Zoological Gardens of service to many of my patients. I should
prescribe for Mr. Pontifex a course of the larger mammals. Don’t let him think he is
taking them medicinally, but let him go to their house twice a week for a fortnight,
and stay with the hippopotamus, the rhinoceros, and the elephants, till they begin to
bore him. I find these beasts do my patients more good than any others. The
monkeys are not a wide enough cross; they do not stimulate sufficiently. The larger
carnivora are unsympathetic. The reptiles are worse than useless, and the
marsupials are not much better. (374-5)

In this vein, the possibilities Ernest finds for escaping atrophy through crossing with
animals provides a striking contrast to the exhaustion of the form in Jude the Obscure. If
the stifling customs of Victorian England are bankrupt, the biological realm (which for
Hardy was also exhausted in the figure of Little Father Time) can here be rejuvenated by
contact with other mature entities through the “crossing” of unconscious memories. As
vibrating matter, memory can be absorbed; the short-term errors of human habit can be
corrected by significant contact with other species whose habits might not be too far
from our own. We should note, however, the significance of which animals are
disallowed. Ernest is told to spend time with animals that are close to humanity, but not
too close. Monkeys are perhaps too close to our own over-conscious state; reptiles are
too far. More strikingly, large carnivores, even if mammals, are unhelpfully aggressive
and so not “sympathetic.” Ernest is told to visit only enormous vegetarian mammals: animals that resemble humans in their propensity for community (live birth) but are perhaps too large to experience much fear. Ernest can learn, in short, from animals whose habitual knowledge will have rendered them unafraid and relatively autonomous. The marsupials, of course, are disallowed; Ernest has already spent long enough being carried in the pocket of the prior generation.

The zoo scene poses a counter to species-egotism. If humans are endangered by their tendency to rely on a superficial consciousness, then they must learn from other species. In being told to reach out to the members of his species-family by crossing, Ernest is invited to learn by absorption a sort of biological humility—for apparently, even the animals we have housed in zoos are sometimes wiser than we are. In contrast to Freud’s model, where our distance from the animal may be won by processes of working-through, Butler advocates proximity to the animal, countering with his satirical humour the propensity to read evolutionary theory as a narrative of triumph.

**Eliot: Maturity rather than Nothing**

T. S. Eliot’s views of maturity are strongly expressed in a review of George Bernard Shaw’s *Back to Methuselah* (1921). A cycle of five plays that draws inspiration from, but also modifies, Butler’s theories, Shaw’s strange epic presents the claim that in order to survive, human beings will have to learn to live for 300 years. World War I, Shaw argues, has nearly obliterated our species because we lack the maturity to operate our complex technologies—our life spans are too brief to allow the achievement of adulthood. Unlike Freud or Butler, Shaw—who sides firmly with eugenics—envisions a
triumphant finale to the progressive story of evolution; in the final play in the cycle, we see a future humanity evolve beyond the body to live as pure consciousness. For T. S. Eliot, however, Shaw’s enthusiasm is itself the height of immaturity. Claiming that Shaw’s mind is a dated, “Edwardian” mind, Eliot dismisses the enthusiasm for evolutionary models:

Creative evolution is a phrase that has lost both its stimulant and sedative virtues. It is possible that an exasperated generation may find comfort in admiring, even if without understanding, mathematics, may suspect that precision and profundity are not incompatible, may find maturity as interesting as adolescence, and permanence more interesting than change. (“London Letter”)

Shaw, who had claimed even elderly modern statesmen were too immature to navigate the modern world, is associated with immaturity himself by Eliot, who asserts that the mind that is fascinated with change fails to find adulthood interesting.

Eliot is aware of the same biological and evolutionary issues as Freud and Butler, and also takes an interest in Neo-Lamarckianism; these issues guide his thinking, however, in an alternate direction. Of the hundreds of prose pieces Eliot wrote for magazines, a substantial number engage with the biological questions of his time, concerning evolution, anthropology, and primitivism. Much recent criticism has drawn attention to Eliot’s concern with anthropology, in particular, and the sense in which his use of key terms such as “tradition” and “culture” is informed by anthropological discourse in a complex way that goes beyond his well-known interest in fertility rites as a

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32 It has been argued that Eliot’s interest in tradition in some of his later works is shaped by a Neo-Lamarckian understanding of inheritance (Childs 92-8).
background for “The Waste Land.”

Eliot kept up on debates in anthropology and frequently wrote reviews of books on “primitive” religions.

While Eliot does not at any point dispute the basic claims of evolution, he believes that “maturity” to some extent consists of acknowledging evolution without developing an enthusiasm for progress. Despite his passing support for eugenics, Eliot opposes the idea of human perfectibility through science and biology even more stridently than Freud or Butler, and goes further than they do in advocating a consciousness of species-humility. Eliot’s emphasis on humility is much stronger after his conversion to Anglicanism in 1927, though it is latent in his early career as well. In his later work, Eliot gets closer than the other authors I have examined to arguing for what might be called a state of impotentiality at the level of the species. Eliot’s religiously-inflected consciousness emphasizes radical fallenness and original sin, thereby sharply dividing the matters of salvation from the material world. Finding both contiguity and difference between modern people and “primitives,” Eliot asks us to take cognizance of our continuing relationship to the primitive and learn a form of humility and maturity from the encounter. The political thrust of Eliot’s ideas tends in the opposite direction from Agamben’s Marxism, but both advocate the ethical efficacy of seeing what Agamben calls humanity’s radical “poverty” (LD 96).

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33 See Patey, Crawford, Manganaro.
34 See for example “Group Theories of Religion and the Religion of the Individual.”
35 On Eliot’s rejection of evolution in general, see Cuddy, who seems to confuse evolution with progress.
36 Childs argues that Eliot’s interest in eugenics is more than passing, locating subtle ways in which Eliot’s eugenic sense directs his imagination towards the fear of disaster. I argue, however, that Eliot’s fears are not primarily inspired by his engagements with biology.
37 Eliot’s emphasis on original sin is often tied to the influence of Hulme; on the development of these views in Hulme’s work, see Levenson (Genealogy 80-102). Eliot makes his support for Hulme’s model of original sin clear at the end of his “Second Thoughts on Humanism” essay (SE 402).
Eliot is concerned almost obsessively with maturity, which operates for him on multiple levels. Artists, attitudes, cultures, manners, and religions can all in different senses be mature or immature. He often associates maturity, as in his criticism of Shaw, with permanent standards rather than enthusiasm for change, and this is what separates him from the more aggressive eugenicists. Maturity for Eliot tends to stand on the side of Classicism: the ideas aligned with Classicism are mature and stable, drawing humans to acknowledge something larger than themselves, whereas the whole litany of Romantic sins—individualism, liberalism, and progressivism—are adolescent for their reliance on the vague and self-absorbed “inner voice.” Eliot makes it clear in his attacks on Middleton Murry that the pantheistic religious trends of his day are immature escapes, whereas Classicism is “adult” (SP 70). He describes Percy Shelley’s views as simply “puerile” (UPUC 82). Maturity commonly describes for Eliot an awareness of something larger than oneself, which is why it can also be, as we shall see, an opening to religious and mystical experience.

Maturity serves different purposes for Eliot at different points in his career, but it often has a relationship to the anthropological past.38 In many of his pre-conversion writings, Eliot takes the angle that the primitive is a vital source of energy that the poet or artist should be able to incorporate as a part of human heritage. As many critics have noted, Eliot’s concept of tradition in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” includes not

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38 One of the central issues in Eliot criticism is of course the question of whether his conversion represents a radical break in his thinking or only a moderate shift. Older critics tended to see the conversion as a betrayal of radical modernism. Even important books like Menand’s Discovering Modernism often focus on the early Eliot alone, discussing how he established his cultural position as a poet and then ignoring his post-conversion works. But there are important arguments for continuity as well. Critics like Manganaro who look at Eliot’s interactions with anthropology tend to connect the two halves of his career more closely. Asher offers an illuminating treatment of Eliot’s entire body of work in terms of the continued influence of Charles Maurras and other French conservatives (Asher 3).
only Shakespeare and Homer, but also “the rock drawing of the Magdalenian
draughtsmen” as something of which the artist must be conscious (SP 39).[^1] In 1918,
Eliot praises the vitality of Lewis’s *Tarr*, claiming Lewis demonstrates “the thought of
the modern and the energy of the cave man” (“Tarr” 106). In *The Use of Poetry and the
Use of Criticism* (1933), Eliot associates the poet’s maturity with the ability to take in all
of this prehistoric tradition, noting that “hyperbolically one might say that the poet is
older than other human beings—but I do not want to be tempted to ending on this sort of
flourish” (UPUC 148). This passage imagines maturity as an overlapping characteristic
of individual and species; the poet becomes old by tapping into the old age of the human,
keeping alive the vitality of the origins. Eliot’s celebration of primitive energy is
admittedly problematic; not only is it a simplified model of the cultures it describes, but
even in the midst of praising primitive art Eliot will often relegate it to a lower position.
He praises the proximity of savage religion to the mystical mindset, but gives his assent
to view that “the mystical mentality, *though at a low level*, plays a much greater part in
the daily life of the savage than in that of civilised man” (“Group Theories” 116, my
italics). As David Chinitz notes, Eliot has a tendency to stress the validity and dynamism
of the primitive while simultaneously claiming that savage art needs a modern artist to
improve upon it (78).

Eliot’s opposition between primitive and civilized also takes place in a larger
evolutionary framework, as we see in his review of D. H. Lawrence written the year of
his conversion:

[^1]: As Michael Levenson points out, Eliot is not so much praising the primitive here as appropriating it (*Genealogy* 195). The incorporation of the primitive into Eliot’s theory of the poet is fleshed out by Manganaro.
Mr. Lawrence is a demoniac, a natural and unsophisticated demoniac with a gospel. When his characters make love . . . they not only lose all the amenities, refinements and graces which many centuries have built up in order to make love-making tolerable; they seem to re-ascend the metamorphoses of evolution, passing backward beyond ape and fish to some hideous coition of protoplasm. This search for an explanation of the civilized by the primitive, of the advanced by the retrograde, of the surface by the ‘depths’ is a modern phenomenon. . . . But it remains questionable whether the order of genesis, either psychological or biological, is necessarily, for the civilized man, the order of truth. (“Novel” 276)

Setting aside for the moment the slippage from the primitive to the protoplasmic to the hideous, this passage is interesting for the final sentence, which describes precisely the difficulty for someone with Eliot’s intense religious commitments who also pays close attention to evolutionary theory. Our contiguity with the vitality of the primitive loses some of its value as revelation comes to play a larger part in ordering the world. Neither Freud nor Butler would have written that sentence, for each of them is, in his own way, as committed to a genealogical model of explanation as Nietzsche or Foucault. Eliot, by contrast, must navigate between his sense of fallenness and division from the eternal as permanent conditions, and his sense of evolutionary history as a fact.

Eliot’s engagement with the primitive as creative vitality does not disappear all at once after his conversion; it is alive and well in the passage I quoted from The Use of Poetry in 1933. But as Eliot’s career continues his thinking on evolution and anthropology shifts significantly. The later Eliot tends to see maturity as related to a type of cultural and religious consciousness in which the category of the primitive plays a
complex role. Species-maturity is not something we can progress deliberately towards; rather, like the state of impotentiality, it tends to be something we approach as we understand our innate weakness, which for Eliot is connected to our fallen condition. “Primitive” people figure in a contradictory manner in this account of fallenness. On the one hand, as Eliot moves away from stressing the vitality of tribal cultures, he shifts to considering them instead as reminders of a lost unity—as emblems of a less conscious and more organic cultural life that existed before the dissociation of sensibility set in and modern culture became exceedingly mechanical. Eliot’s turn to drama in *The Rock* is inspired by his belief in the importance of communal myth and ritual as a basis for art, which is related to this model of the primitive. On the other hand, primitive cultures have a slightly more negative place carved out for them in Eliot’s mind once he becomes a committed Christian who believes strongly in fallenness, and I would argue that this is because the “consciousness” that primitive cultures lack is now metonymically associated with the lack of grace. Though this view is clearly problematic, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of Eliot’s approach. He rarely if ever succumbs to the temptation of associating primitive cultures simply with the bestial—indeed, Eliot emphasizes that any religion is capable of building a substantial culture (*NDC* 32). Accordingly, some scholars have claimed that the important strain of cultural relativism in Eliot’s thinking does not simply disappear in his later work.\(^\text{40}\) Because Eliot wishes to oppose progress on all fronts, primitive conditions and mentalities cannot simply be viewed as overcome; even in his exploration of Christianity in *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Eliot advocates for “the recognition that even the most primitive feelings should

\(^{40}\) Chinitz emphasizes the relativistic element of Eliot (76-80).
be part of our heritage” (*ICS* 63). In that text, Eliot also uses the primitive as leverage against the myth of progress and the restless striving of modern life:

> For a long enough time we have believed in nothing but the values arising in a mechanised, commercialised, urbanised way of life: it would be as well for us to face the permanent conditions upon which God allows us to live upon this planet. And without sentimentalising the life of the savage, we might practice the humility to observe, in some of the societies upon which we look down as primitive or backward, the operation of a social-religious-artistic complex which we should emulate upon a higher plane. We have been accustomed to regard “progress” as always integral; and have yet to learn that it is only by an effort and a discipline . . . that material knowledge and power is gained without loss of spiritual knowledge and power. (*ICS* 62-3)

Despite the use of the term “savage,” Eliot is here describing a cultural life to which he is willing to ascribe considerable spiritual knowledge.

Yet on the other hand Eliot’s emphasis on radical fallenness seems in some passages to lead him towards Christian chauvinism. Though Eliot stresses that any religion can found a culture and function as a bulwark against chaos, he also indicates, though cautiously, that Christian culture is at least potentially “the highest” culture, when taken at its best (*NDC* 32). In 1936, Eliot claims that “any program that a Catholic can envisage must aim at the conversion of the whole world” (*EAM* 123). In “Thoughts after Lambeth” (1931) he reveals a definite bias towards connecting the Christian religion with the civilized, claiming:
The world is trying to experiment of attempting to form a civilized but non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time: so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and rebuild civilization, and save the World from suicide. (SE 332)

It may be that Eliot’s comments here, in the context of a reflection on the conference of the Anglican Church, are only intended to apply to a part of the “world.” Nonetheless, it would be difficult for a person who believed so strongly in the mission of a single faith to save the world from suicide to also see tribal religions as equally valid. And yet, Eliot could also critique missionary work for sapping the vitality of other cultures (NDC 64-5).

It is important to remember that Eliot’s fear that a complete lack of religion will lead the world to “suicide” is entirely a fear of the results of the Western ethos of liberalism and progress. This fear of annihilation represents only a slight shift, then, from Eliot’s earlier, pre-conversion description of the effects of missionary work in “Marie Lloyd” (1922), where he had agreed with an anthropologist that a tribal culture had been bored nearly to the point of suicide by the importing of Western norms (SP 174).

Eliot’s fear of an impending loss of faith in life arises from his deep sense of humanity’s need of grace. The later Eliot wants to keep in our minds the worst of possibilities, the sense of “the primitive terror” mentioned in the epigraph to this chapter. Later in “The Dry Salvages” Eliot will speak of “pre-conscious terrors” (CPP 136). There is a considerable contiguity between these various levels of terror; the fear, loneliness, and division experienced by the primitive person are ultimately much the same as the fear experienced by all humans—and this is why primitive cultures are still,
for Eliot, an important part of our heritage.\textsuperscript{41} A primitive culture is not, of course, the same as a primitive terror: all cultures are reactions to the primitive terror, and Eliot fears that the loss of religious feeling in the modern world will leave us only with that terror, and no proper culture to speak of. Thus in \textit{Notes towards the Definition of Culture}, Eliot claims that “any religion, while it lasts, and on its own level, gives an apparent meaning to life, provides the framework for a culture, and protects the mass of humanity from boredom and despair” (32). The sense of “levels” of culture remains—but more important to my analysis is the observation the mass of humanity is never far from despair; any culture only protects us “while it lasts.” On the nether side of cultures—which for Eliot arise directly from religions—is a frightening despair.

The fear of nothingness is sometimes connected to our evolutionary origins; in \textit{Murder in the Cathedral}, the experience of the loss of the archbishop not only serves as a parallel to the loss of religious sense and religious authority in Eliot’s modern world, but also reminds the Chorus of similar terrors stretching back through evolutionary time. The Chorus feels fear because nature is out of order, but the strange behaviours of the animals, heralding disaster, are described in a manner which also evokes the surprise of evolutionary contiguity: “I have seen/ Trunk and horn, tusk and hoof, in odd places; / I have lain on the floor of the sea and breathed with the breathing of sea-anemone” (\textit{CPP} 207). The smell of “corruption” is paralleled with the experience of becoming animal, and the vision of “Rings of light coiling downwards, leading/ To the horror of the ape”

\textsuperscript{41} My emphasis on fear in Eliot’s work draws on Crawford’s \textit{The Savage and the City}, a book to which I owe a significant debt for helping me parse Eliot’s later work. Crawford’s analysis emphasizes Eliot’s denigration of the primitive slightly more than I do; he claims that for the later Eliot, “tradition includes and is aware of its primitive origins: this reminds the tradition of its need to look for higher guidance, while keeping aware of crude root emotions which cannot be avoided. The fear of savage ‘folly’ links with the fear of God” (221).
(CPP 208). The primitive terror and the horror of the ape are indications of the way that primitive culture, for the later Eliot, borders more closely and experiences more directly a universal fear. Eliot does not want modern people to overcome this fear—indeed he wants us to remember it.

Eliot believes that the most needed virtue is a consciousness of fallenness as a serious problem and burden; his anxiety concerns what will happen when we invest so deeply in progress that we lose this consciousness of our fallen state, but remain fallen. Historical consciousness, which was already a virtue for the younger Eliot, has shifted its meaning and become both a religious and an historical virtue. This consciousness is his version of species-impotentiality; in the absence of it, we lapse into a juvenile condition not possible for primitive people, whose cultures are protectively immersive. The opposite of religious consciousness is modern immaturity. In After Strange Gods, Eliot claims that the decay of religion has led to the “prevailing flavour of immaturity” (41).

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42 I draw on David Rosen’s argument that Eliot’s lionizing of maturity arises from his privileging of “consciousness,” as the chief poetic virtue of modern poetry, in contrast to the visionary power of the Romantic poet (Rosen 481). Consciousness, for Rosen, is a specifically historical virtue of the mind, replacing visionary power with a synthesis of historical events and content. That is to say, Eliot celebrates the power of the poet not as a person with access to an ahistorical vision, but simply as someone who has taken cognizance of the world he or she lives in, including its past. We see this praise of the consciousness of the poet in Eliot’s pre-conversion description of Wyndham Lewis’s ability to connect to the vitality of the primitive “consciously,” whereas the savage drum-beat lives on only in the unconscious of most people (“Tarr” 106); we see it also in his praise of the attentiveness of the poet who must have “consciousness” of world tradition, and must take note of subtle experiences that to most would not be experiences at all (SP 40; 43). Rosen intends his claim to be only about the pre-conversion Eliot (Rosen 493). The interest in artistic and intellectual consciousness as a sense of the past, however, does not disappear in Eliot’s later writing; what is added is the interest in religious consciousness and the corresponding interest in the cultural, group-consciousness of non-artists (discussed below).

43 After Strange Gods must be cited carefully since Eliot did later claim it was a bad book, and distanced himself from the anti-Semitic claims it makes. But it is important to note that his distinction between tradition as an unconscious lifeblood and orthodoxy as a conscious regulation of that tradition, developed in this book, runs parallel to his discussions of the conscious and unconscious parts of culture in Notes towards the Definition of Culture (ASG 31-2). Eliot’s critique of progress in After Strange Gods is also contiguous with the rest of his later work (ASG 66).
Eliot notes that with the disappearance of belief in original sin, characters in literature have become less real (ASG 45-6).

But is Christianity, for Eliot, the only valid antidote? The answer is complex; Eliot still admires many things about earlier forms of religion, but seems to think that the strong sense of fallenness offered by his version of Christianity is to some extent the most accurate description of humanity’s condition. One of the missions of his later social works is to outline the viewpoint of a Christian state of consciousness as a necessary but difficult challenge. The increased consciousness and strain of the “higher” religions, as Eliot terms them—and he associates higher religions partially, though not entirely with universalistic religions as opposed to tribal ones (NDC 70)—is based in the greater demands of those religions and their increased awareness of humanity’s fallen nature.

Eliot stresses in *The Idea of a Christian Society* that one cannot be “consciously Christian” all the time—the strain is too great (ICS 29). The awareness of fallenness is a great burden, but for Eliot it is also the truth, and knowledge of this truth is the mature adulthood of the human species. Earlier, primitive cultures are not to be denigrated for lacking this consciousness, which is the result of revelation; it simply sets the limit to how far one should go in emulation of their organic vitality. But modern people who flee from this consciousness become childish and egotistical in a way perhaps impossible, in Eliot’s mind, for their primitive ancestors.

The shift in Eliot’s view of the role of consciousness also represents a shift in the role of the unconscious, which also plays a crucial role throughout Eliot’s career. For the earlier Eliot, the unconscious, like the primitive, is a source of ancient dynamism; in 1933 Eliot is still claiming that the poet puts us in touch with “the deeper, unnamed
feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves” (UPUC 149). But increasingly, the unconscious mind shifts to become the locus of community. Notes towards the Definition of Culture praises not poets, but communities, for having large numbers of unconscious bonds and traditions which keep them together. As critics have pointed out, in his later work Eliot’s use of “culture” for the entire set of practices of a people is essentially anthropological rather than Arnoldian. Eliot argues that this culture is inherited largely through forms of connection that are not conscious; culture is the one thing at which we cannot consciously aim (NDC 17). Eliot, like F. R. Leavis after him, values the organic and unconscious transmission of folk traditions. Ceasing to praise the vitality of the primal unconscious, Eliot emphasizes instead the inheritance of attitudes and habits of mind that have unconsciously accumulated since the primitive era, and that hold the community together. If Butler tended to cast social traditions as shallow, “conscious” phenomena, and Freud tended to emphasize that the power of traditions (at least religious traditions) could only be explained by unconscious trauma, Eliot takes the contrasting view, emphasizing the beneficial power of tradition to give shape to people’s lives primarily because it stems from an unconscious process of inheritance.

In Notes towards the Definition of Culture, Eliot claims that a culture is the “incarnation” of the religion of a people, and cannot survive the extinction of that religion, even though this claim “holds good only in the sense in which people are unconscious of both their culture and their religion” (NDC 29, my italics). Eliot stresses

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44 The distinction is emphasized by Crawford, who notes that Eliot finds the Arnoldian sense of culture as refinement and appreciation too thin for his account, and replaces it with the anthropological sense of culture as the entire life of a group (Crawford 224-5).
that religion and culture are not identical, and that indeed there may be many tensions
between them; nonetheless at some unconscious level religion is a necessary inspiration
for the generation of culture. This does not mean, however, that Eliot wants us to plunge
towards the unconscious to uncover the point of generation; rather, it is the case in fact
that higher religions, and particularly Christianity, actually generate a greater degree of
consciousness and take us *further from* this unconscious unity without abandoning it. The
evolution of culture both builds upon and preserves the unconscious unity that
characterizes primitive religions:

I asserted in the first chapter that in the most primitive societies no clear distinction
is visible between religious and non-religious activities; and that as we proceed to
examine more developed societies, we perceive a greater distinction, and finally
contrast and opposition, between these activities. The sort of identity between
religion and culture which we observe amongst peoples of a very low development
cannot recur except in the New Jerusalem. A higher religion is one in which it is
much more difficult to believe. For the more conscious becomes the belief, so the
more conscious becomes the unbelief . . . A higher religion imposes a conflict, a
division, torment and struggle within the individual. (*NDC* 67-68)

But noting that this seems to contradict the idea that culture and religion share an
unconscious unity, Eliot adds:

We do not leave the earlier stage of development behind us; it is that upon which
we build. The identity of religion and culture remains on the unconscious level,
upon which we have superimposed a conscious structure . . . To the unconscious
level we constantly tend to revert, as we find consciousness an excessive burden;
and the tendency towards reversion may explain the powerful attraction which totalitarian philosophy and practice can exert upon humanity. Totalitarianism appeals to the desire to return to the womb. (NDC 68)

In agreement with Freud, Eliot casts Fascism as a reversion to immaturity, both historically and individually. The appealing unity of the primitive now figures as something likely to be manipulated and capitalized upon by dictators. If the strain of being consciously Christian is too great, then the most corrosive forms of unconsciousness may surface as a result.

Average people, for the later Eliot, seem to be very bad at navigating the loneliness and fear that come from fallenness; he clearly does not believe most people can develop enough consciousness of their fallen situation to count as fully “mature” without the guidance of solid traditions. In After Strange Gods, Eliot claims most people aren’t even capable of strong feelings (ASG 60). While for the later Eliot, there are certainly still mature individuals, and mature poets like the “old” poet of The Use of Culture, Eliot now conceives of maturity primarily as a social virtue; the unconscious development of tradition provides something like the poor man’s maturity—it is what most human beings have instead of primitive terror, and it keeps them close enough to revelation and grace that they may at least experience it according to their lights. The more total consciousness of the highly mature individual or great poet is a rarity.

Indeed, for Eliot in the forties, even the heightened, conscious maturity of a great artist is related to the unconscious development of communal traditions, which provide the framework necessary even for exceptionally mature individuals. Eliot’s understanding of all forms of maturity as historical emergences, achievable only through
the development of traditions, is revealed in his 1946 lecture on “What is a Classic.”

Eliot defines the classic as being above all a matter of “maturity.” He claims that Virgil is the rare writer of the total classic, able to attain maturity of every kind because, in addition to his individual genius, he lived in a mature society—this is why he has the edge on Shakespeare. A classic for Eliot is not just the work of an isolated writer: “A classic can only occur when a civilization is mature; when a language and a literature are mature; and it must be the work of a mature mind” (SP 116). Eliot refuses to define maturity, claiming that “if we are properly mature” we simply know what it is (SP 117).

The writing of a classic requires maturity of mind, of manners, and of linguistic tradition—above all it requires a consciousness of history, which Eliot tacitly assumes a primitive society must lack (SP 122). In the absence of consciousness of the classic and regard for the classic, therefore, Eliot believes that we become provincial in the sense of being isolated from history, and this is the background for his surprising claim that the maintenance of the standards of the classic are “the price of our freedom, the defence of freedom against chaos” (SP 131). Once again, we see the backward glance over the shoulder towards the primitive terror: the maturity of the classic involves not only the appreciation of an advanced style of writing but also a sense of respect for the process of historical and cultural development that made that classic possible, and without which we

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45 There is a strange undertone in the lecture however, suggesting that a classic is also dangerous because it has the tendency to exhaust a language, burning the ground for writers who come afterwards. As Haneta argues, Eliot’s model of the “classic” seems at moments to privilege a form of silence that undermines some of what he says about tradition (303).
might have the terror of the ape. Maturity is an index of the steps we have taken beyond chaos: at the extremes, our alternatives are maturity or nothingness.\textsuperscript{46}

Maturity, in sum, is a complex historical virtue for Eliot, appearing in several shapes at both the individual and communal levels. But it is always a term of approval, and always involves a relationship to and respect for some aspect of the past, whether that is the primitive vitality or the continuing life of communal traditions; Eliot’s most strident critique of modern, irreligious culture is that it is “parochial” because cut off from the past (\textit{SP} 104). And yet Eliot’s insistence on maturity does not constitute a philosophy of progress; the Roman society of Virgil was eminently mature, and certainly, for Eliot, more mature than his own times. Rather, progress is repudiated in favour of a mature cognizance of fallenness. Maturity is above all a humble steadiness, renouncing the enthusiasms of progress. And while primitive cultures may not have had access to Christian revelation, they also had functioning religions and cultures—which for Eliot makes them more laudable than most modern people, who are animated by a corrosive pride.

I want to conclude with Eliot’s 1949 verse drama, \textit{The Cocktail Party}, because it demonstrates the way Eliot imagined multiple levels of individual maturity embedded in the history of the species. The play also attacks psychoanalysis, casting the psychological tendency to examine one’s own life history as a form of egotism; Eliot suggests that our deepest problems arise from the general condition of the species, rather than our individual traumas. Thus O’Reilly, the spiritual advisor who behaves like a

\textsuperscript{46} The fact that Virgil can be celebrated as the height of maturity implies, of course, that yet more complexities in Eliot’s scheme, for Virgil’s intellect and culture may be mature, but his religion is not the highest; Virgil occupies in Eliot’s “What is a Classic” essay exactly the same position that he does in Dante, functioning as an emblem of the highest point to which pagan learning can guide us.
psychoanalyst, mocks the idea that his patients would speak about their childhoods, seeing such talk as an aspect of modern pride; the discussion of childhoods and dreams is a method of flattering the patient’s vanity (CP 111). Suggesting that “Half of all the harm that is done in this world/ Is due to people who want to feel important,” O’Reilly advocates, as Winifred Holtby does, abandoning the struggle to think well of oneself (CP 111). O’Reilly posits that the belief that our problems are interesting, highly individual struggles is itself a failure of consciousness—since of course our real problem is the universal condition of fallenness. Eliot thereby presents a clever reversal of Freud; whereas Freud would heal the traumas that cause religion to perpetuate itself as a form of species-immaturity, O’Reilly tries to heal an egotistical belief in psychoanalysis by directing his patients to a religious consciousness.

The play tells the story of a couple, Edward and Lavinia, who almost separate, only to discover that their problems are much more serious than they thought: it is not only that they do not really love each other, but rather that neither of them appears to be capable of love. (We should recall here Eliot’s remark in After Strange Gods that most people are not capable of strong feeling.) The play thus engages with maturity primarily at the level of the emotions: Eliot is not investigating the lives of thinkers but of average middle class people, and presenting their crisis of emotional maturity as ultimately related to the fallen condition of the species. Edward thinks he loves his mistress, Celia, until his wife’s departure makes their affair into a practical possibility, at which point he discovers he is no longer interested. Both Edward and Lavinia, through this process of profound humiliation concerning their inner lives, appear to mature: Edward has now met himself, “A middle aged man/ Beginning to know what it is to feel old” (CP 65).
Edward is told by the spiritual advisor O’Reilly that this maturation has arrived because the darkness of his humiliation has cleared from him “The illusion of ever having been in the light” (CP 32). Edward and Lavinia see something of their fallenness and emptiness; the conclusion of the play, as they return to the seemingly benign life of hosting cocktail parties, has an oddly tragic tone. As Edward remarks, “Hell is oneself” (CP 98). After such a pronouncement, the return to the London social scene to host cocktail parties now registers as their “appointed burden” (CP 188).

But Eliot also provides a glimpse of the other life, the spiritual life of someone who does attempt to be consciously Christian at all moments, in his portrayal of Celia. Celia comes to O’Reilly feeling a vague sense of sin for which she must “atone” (CP 137). Her love for Edward has excited her but in the absence of it she is left with a sense of sin and loneliness that corresponds to no crime she has committed; in other words, she knows she is divided from eternity and longs for mystical experience. Celia’s sense of guilt is not based in a particular sense of wrongdoing, but in the fear that there is something wrong with “the world itself—and that’s much more frightening!” (CP 132). Life in the fallen world generates a deep sense of fear, an emotion distinctly Christian, but contiguous with the primitive terror. O’Reilly responds by giving her a choice: there are two lives, the life of spiritual striving and the ordinary life, and you can only live one. Celia chooses the spiritual life and becomes a relief worker in “Kinkanja,” attempting to aid new converts to the faith and work with the ill—many of whom are sick with

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47 I do not have room here to explore Eliot’s complex approach to mystical experience and its relationship to time, which drives the entirety of The Four Quartets. Maturity also has a dimension of openness to the mystical for Eliot, both in those poems and in The Cocktail Party. As Eliot claims in “Burnt Norton,” “Only though time time is conquered” (CPP 120).
diseases brought by the Europeans (CP 174). Eventually Celia is crucified by heathen natives, who attack the Christians under her charge. O’Reilly does not describe her suffering in physical terms, however, but insists that “she suffered more, because more conscious/ Than the rest of us. She paid the highest price/ In suffering. That is part of the design” (184). Celia is described as accepting her fate with saintly clarity, for the burden of fully Christian consciousness creates its own path. But that path includes confrontation with the primitive, as is demonstrated by Celia’s attempt to do relief work and her concomitant death at the hand of pagans. The maturity Celia attains is a total consciousness of our poverty as mortals: Edward and Lavinia, by contrast, find the poor man’s maturity, remaining in the drawing room but with a new cognizance of their inner emptiness. The couple finishes the play in a state of impotentiality, giving up entirely on liking themselves, living a conventional life with a sense that “every moment is a fresh beginning” (CP 188), but with no pride in themselves or their position: Eliot represents an average life as a burden and a half-opened door.

In advocating humility on several levels—that of the individual, the culture, and even the species—Eliot describes a state of impotentiality for the evolutionary age. Without forsaking the hopes for improvement, Eliot reacts to Fascism by advocating a less “progressive” and perfectionist society. For the later Eliot, we are never very far from primitive peoples, in part because all humans experience a frightful sense of loneliness and division that comes from being fallen. And it is the uniquely modern flight away from this sense of division that he fears is causing an epidemic of immaturity.

48 Eliot echoes here his critique of the British Empire for uprooting other cultures (NDC 64-5). Though Eliot may conceive of Christianity as the true religion, he believes missionaries in fact do more damage than good. Hence, Celia does not go to Kinkanja to convert, but to undo the ills caused by conversion (without of course undoing the conversions).
**Coda**

In a speech delivered at the close of World War II and later published in the journal *Psychiatry*, G. B. Chisholm, President of the Canadian National Commission of Mental Hygiene, declared that the real reason why the world was falling to war every twenty years was a dearth of maturity. “So far in the history of the world there have never been enough mature people in the right places” (Chisholm 6). This perennial immaturity, he claimed, was rooted in neurosis: “we have never had enough people anywhere who are sufficiently free of these neurotic symptoms which make war inevitable” (Chisholm 6). Chisholm’s lament is echoed in several authors in the years surrounding the close of the war. Immaturity, it seems, was epidemic. In his 1949 psychological bestseller *The Mature Mind*, American psychologist H. A. Overstreet quotes Chisholm, and goes on to make the further claim maturity is “the master concept of our time” (14). Overstreet argues that the proper psychological undertaking of mankind is the open-ended process of growth towards maturity; modern psychology has not only revealed that this is the real telos of human activity, but also revealed the most common impediment to this goal: arrested developments. Traumatic events and environments can stifle the growing child, freezing her at an early stage. Drawing on this Freudian-derived understanding of mental illness, Overstreet argues for a re-organization of society, so far as possible, along the lines of promoting maturity. Similar conclusions were reached by Luella Cole, a lesser-known American psychological writer, who argued in 1944 in *Attaining Maturity* that “Modern life, especially in periods of peace and prosperity, has a tendency to prolong childish attitudes and adolescent whims” (4). For
Cole, the complexity of the modern world both demands and inhibits maturation, and Nazism is only the worst of many popular escapes into the simplicity of childhood (8).

These claims by North American psychologists fall at the end of what we call the modernist period, expressing hope for a more mature world after World War II is over. Cole unknowingly makes the same diagnosis as Freud and Eliot, casting Fascism as a desire to return to the womb. As the worst outgrowth of modernity in the form of overwhelming philosophical simplification, Fascism could easily be cast as a failure of adulthood—a sign that the modern, putatively mature species had lost the ability to cope with the world in an adult fashion. The Darwinian awareness of an evolutionary timescale, however, made it possible to make such claims not only at the level of historical maturation that we saw in earlier chapters, but also at the level of the species. Maturity might be explored on every scale, from the history of the planet to the individual cell. The anxiety about bio-potentiality and the desire for a glorious future for humanity can be connected to Fascism itself, as Nazi eugenic fantasies celebrated the virility and bio-potential of the race. But discourses of evolution also supported the possibility of advocating a humble species maturity, describing an individual and a species whose conscious and unconscious relationships to the past secured a less restless, and correspondingly more ethical, condition of maturity.
Conclusion: Modernist Maturity

T. S. Eliot’s interest in maturity tends to permeate the literary criticism of his time. Drawing on his example, F. R. Leavis virtually sorts authors into the categories of “mature” and “immature” and recommends the moral strain of “the Great Tradition” for its imparting of a serious, sober maturity. Filtered through Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot, Leavis’s defence of “culture” is only mildly different from those of the 18th century proponents of Bildung, such as Humboldt; both Leavis and Humboldt see culture as a way to avoid the narrow specializations of the modern age and allow for the development of an integrated mindset. But as influential as they were two generations ago, no literary critic today employs Leavis’s and Eliot’s terms of praise. When I started this project, colleagues often told me that “maturity” was simply not a term in literary studies.

I have no room here to chart the massive shift in the terms and interest of scholarly discourse between the 1960s and today. But I want to conclude by suggesting that modernist maturity is a term of some relevance. The chauvinistic elements of Eliot’s conservatism redirect us by contrast back to the other models of maturation I have charted, which were notable above all for the fact that they did not use the position of “maturity” as Eliot sometimes does, as a platform from which to look down on others. The open-ended growth processes of the modernists, like the family party at the conclusion of The Years, leave room for plurality, including various forms of subjectivity and contradictory ideas in a chorus where no one is forced to sing in unison. Maturity, these authors assert, can mean increasing openness to the world—a determinate openness, that takes its shape not from the vagueness of youthful naïveté, nor from the aggressiveness of ambition, but rather from the concrete shape that a subject takes on
from having experienced specific losses and failures. While it is certainly the case for
most people that aging involves some amount of hardening into habit, this is only one
facet of aging. The mature person can also engage with things in greater detail and with
less self-absorption. As we can ask better questions about a topic we know well, our
maturity might provide a more thorough path for transformation because the prolonged
contact with experience allows for an immersion in otherness that is less aggressive and
self-serving. We are rarely transformed by an acquaintance.

How might the ethical import of modernist maturity fit in to the contemporary
discursive terrain? The possibilities for transformation and personal growth, though
latent in many strands of literary theory, did not tend to be emphasized during the period
when “theory” was most aggressively pursued in literary studies, but they have been
making a return. As I noted in my introduction, the recent “turn to ethics” has
emphasized the extreme respect for otherness, casting reading itself as a self-binding
experience. I have emphasized throughout this project that for the modernists, it is often
mature subjects who engage in a sustained way with both other people and the
“otherness” of the unconscious mind, because they have been shifted to a state of
impotentiality by the failure of early ambitions and the inappropriateness of the norms
which they were taught in their youth. Without the experience of impotentiality, a mere
critique of Victorian restrictions actually tends to lead to cynicism or consumerism.
Peggy Pargiter’s critical awareness is caustic on its own, without her aunt Eleanor’s
selflessness. Chad Newsome might be able to enjoy the “otherness” that is, from his
perspective, the female body, but only Strether is really immersed in the Parisian
experience and profoundly changed. The deeper sense of mortality and the humbling of
the ego that comes with the loss of faith in one’s potentiality is the beginning, rather than the end, of transformation and ethics. Respect for otherness is something we learn, and over time we become in varying degrees the kind of people who do or do not know how to respect other people. Ethical relationships are often the result of a kind of personal growth, rather than the result of a moment of arrest before the face of the Other, and this is partially because our responsibility to the other person includes coming to understand her unconscious desires and investments. So if we are seriously interested in the Other, we should be interested in something like modernist maturity.

Obviously, when I claim that ethics result from maturity, I do not mean that adults are always more ethical than children; this is patently false. It is certainly possible for adults to rationalize away doing harm to others in a way that is difficult for children to do. And that is precisely when the process of maturation has failed, or has become a kind of ideological parody of itself. A person with what I am calling modern maturity would certainly know she could learn a lot from children. As the examples of Eliot and Leavis remind us, however, maturity can also be a weapon. In some circumstances, of course, “maturity” is precisely an empty and ideological goal, based in successfully moulding oneself so that one speaks and acts “like an adult” taking up an authorized perspective from which to look down on others. But I do not believe that this is all maturity is, and the difficult work of aging well is precisely the endeavour to age into openness rather than into judgment—to avoid using the fulcrum of one’s own experience to discount the perspectives of others. The dismissal of the young by the old is just as much a failure of maturity as any form of egotism, presenting the precise inverse of ambition in a perversely proud bitterness. Youth obviously has its virtues, and my
emphasis on impotentiality and “failure” does not entail a rebuke of youthful idealism; Sarah Burton remains an idealist at the close of *South Riding*, but becomes less invested in herself. The modernist maturity I have described is a mode of selfhood that attempts to escape both the restless potentiality of youth and the temptation to issue conventionally authoritative judgment that so often accompanies adulthood.

What would a subject look like who succeeded in the goals of modernist maturity? Would such a person look like Strether, renouncing romance to return to America? Like Lady Slane, quietly resisting? Like Eleanor Pargiter, having visions but then forgetting them? If maturation is a concrete process of opening oneself, each maturity would be somewhat different. In this sense, a model of modernist maturity might borrow from the stylistics of selfhood associated with the later Foucault: everyone’s maturity would be different, though some traits would clearly be considered preferable. Instead of dismissing unfamiliar ideas as juvenile, ethical maturity might involve just enough working out of a coherent selfhood to have the capacity to take everything seriously. So an account of ethical maturity must avoid being rigidly prescriptive; the paradox of modern maturity might be that if you accuse someone of lacking it, you still can’t stop taking them seriously.

The model of maturity at which I am aiming would certainly have to divorce itself from larger grand narratives of historical progress; we could not fall into seeing the people we are now—whomever “we” are (the West, democracies in general) as somehow the pinnacle of all historical motion. It would have to acknowledge the existence of the unconscious, and the fact that the subject will never fully know itself; its goal could not be complete self-knowledge or self transparency. It would also have to describe a critical
subjectivity, capable of having some distance on the social norms that gave birth to it. It would have to be a cultivation of otherness as much as selfhood—a relationship to otherness, and a capacity for dwelling with it.

I want to linger on the importance of dwelling. One can learn to dwell near strangeness or uncertainty, but also near one’s own anxiety. Inasmuch as the potentiality of the subject is also a deferral of one’s fears and anxieties into the future, modern maturity would involve confronting such things in the present. It would involve a certain willingness to be anxious. Jonathan Lear writes that “To live with human possibility, one has to tolerate a particular kind of theoretical anxiety: the willingness to live without a principle” (165). Such an acceptance is crucial; impotentiality is not a state of cynicism, but a release from restless striving, inviting us to shake hands with anxiety. The same logic can be applied to finitude. In his early Infancy and History, Agamben describes the “traditional” understanding of maturity as “an anticipation of death as the idea of an achieved totality of experience” (IH 26). This anticipation of death is not morbid; it is a release.\(^1\) It does not happen suddenly, however; Agamben casts such anticipation as the goal of experience because it happens by increments. On this model, experience is a confrontation with anxiety that aims at dwelling, in the Socratic sense that philosophy is a practice of dying (Phaedo 80e-81a). I have no expectation that anyone, at any age, will simply cease fearing mortality, but the acceptance of anxiety can release us from striving

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\(^1\) In an astonishing passage in The Idea of Prose, Agamben connects language with dwelling: “The angel of death, who in some legends is called Samuel and with whom it is said even Moses had to struggle, is language. Language announces death—what else does it do? But precisely this announcement makes it so difficult for us to die. From time immemorial, the entire duration of man’s history, humanity has struggled with this angel, trying to wrench from him the secret he restricts himself to announcing. But from his childish hands one can wrench only the announcement he had in any case come to bring. The angel is not at fault for this, and only those who understand the innocence of language likewise grasp the true sense of the announcement and may, in the event, learn to die” (128).
to master and overcome—trying to live forever in the abstraction of capital like Conrad’s millionaire Holroyd, or trying to eugenically control the future. The virtue of a selfhood that knows how to respect others is grounded in the ability to not subordinate those others to one’s own anxiety. If, as Gadamer says, experience is experience of human finitude, perhaps its fruit is to teach us how to dwell near our own mortality so that we don’t take it out on anyone else.

If the critiques launched by twentieth century continental philosophy have dismantled the self-presence of the subject, then self-knowledge might not be the prime mover of a new ethical maturity. Ethical maturity might involve abandoning the pretence of knowing everything about oneself—even everything important—and focus on something else. Dwelling might be a better aim than mastering. In his essay “The Thing,” Heidegger described the loss of the ability to dwell with things in the modern world:

All distances in time and space are shrinking. Man now reaches overnight, by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel. He now receives instant information, by radio, of events which he formerly learned about only years later, if at all . . . He puts the greatest distances behind himself and thus puts everything before himself at the shortest range.

Yet, the frantic abolition of distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance. (PLT 163)

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2 I draw this suggestion in part from Adam Phillips, a contemporary psychoanalytic writer, who has repeatedly stressed the goal of learning to live well with others rather than knowing them (see On Flirtation 41). My description of modernist maturity owes a debt to Phillips’s engaging description of sanity in the conclusion to his book Going Sane.
This lecture was delivered in 1950; the frantic abolition of distances has arguably grown much more frantic since Heidegger described it. This abolition is part of the assertiveness of the subject over the world of objects. If we live in the information age, we should perhaps remember that information is the kind of knowledge a subject has about an object. But Heidegger, despite his eloquence about dwelling near the Earth, could not neighbour himself; dreaming of becoming a philosopher king, he cast his bet for a time with the most aggressive and restlessly tyrannical of regimes. I am interested in the possibility of a new maturity because I think it would be a way of dwelling near other people with a little less restlessness. The virtue of ethical maturity might be described, in part, as the ability to live with dwelling and critique at the same time. For it is not just a question of making a radical critique of something—even the much maligned Cartesian subject could do that. You also have to wake up the next day and manage not to harm anyone with your anxiety.

Experience doesn’t just happen; it accumulates. And it may very well have satisfactions of its own, regardless of what future state it heralds. Might there not be some level on which finitude provides its own reward? And might these rewards, in their own way, not also be a kind of rejoinder to the galloping hopes of the subject of potentiality? If Holtby’s *South Riding* is perhaps just a little too strident in its assertion that one is only ready to teach when one has abandoned the hope of happiness, that novel is nonetheless one of the most evocative descriptions of the valley of impotentiality in which modern maturity dwells. One of the major contributions of the modernists to our contemporary ethical discourse is undoubtedly this—that while they were suspicious about progress, youth, and the self-transparency of the subject, they were optimistic
about the ethical agent who might grow out of seeing their old certainties so diffused into the world.
Works Consulted


