

Industrialism as Progress

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Tableau

On the 15th of September 1830, the world's first passenger railway carried its very first passengers from Liverpool to Manchester—among them such dignitaries as the Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel. A correspondent for the *Times* called the inaugural procession “most delightful,” and was especially impressed by the “crowds which have lined almost every inch of our road” along with the “flags and banners, and booths and scaffoldings, and gorgeous tents, which have enlivened even the dullest parts of our journey” (“Dreadful” 3). There was much to celebrate, and the correspondent continued to effuse for a few sentences before bowing to the demands of tragedy: “I am obliged . . . to defer the description as comparatively uninteresting owing to the fatal accident (as I apprehend) that has befallen Mr. Huskisson.” Along the way, William Huskisson, MP for Liverpool and longtime champion of the railway, was crushed to death by an engine called the Rocket. Strolling the tracks during what was supposed to be a brief stop, Huskisson found himself in the path of an oncoming train, and owing to a combination of panic and hesitation, he was unable to save himself: “. . . the wheel went over his left thigh, squeezing it almost to a jelly, broke the leg, it is said, in two places, laid the muscles bare from the ankle, nearly to the hip, and tore out a large piece of flesh, as it left him.” Summing up the decidedly ambivalent experiences of the afternoon, the *Times* struck a note of mechanical fatalism: “I need scarcely repeat what has been already said by others in this account, that the dreadful accident which most probably will deprive the country of so eminent a statesman, was owing to no fault of the machinery.”

I am not the first to offer these events as a parable of industrialism. John Sterling did, in his 1842 review of Alfred Tennyson's *Poems*, and George Eliot did as well, on more than one occasion. Even at this late juncture, though, I want to argue that Huskisson's death still has something to tell us about the experience of industrialism, provided we shift our perspective a bit. What is required is a less lugubrious look, a willingness to set the gains of the day beside the losses, just as contemporaries did. This first railway journey was not, after all, unremmitingly tragic; it was widely, if delicately, celebrated. Yes, a great public figure had died, but strictly speaking, the *Times* correspondent was surely right: his death was not in any obvious sense the “fault of the machinery.” There was no mechanical failure, and no flaw in the engineering or the materials. Huskisson died because the railway engine operated precisely as planned, traveling at a speed so rapid that it baffled human comprehension and outpaced one man's motor-response. And that itself was still a technological triumph, regardless of the human cost.

The results of the day crystallize, with a clarity rare for historical events, one of the most fundamental experiences of early industrialism: the entanglement of progress with pain. It is not a matter of taking sides, of fixing a moral stance and choosing between “The Death of William Huskisson” and “The Triumph of the Railway” as the proper headline for a newspaper article. Those things were thought to be inextricable: tragedy and triumph, suffering and innovation. It was understood that industrialism would often be destructive, and sometimes even fatal. But contemporaries nonetheless felt—in fact, felt more strongly—that it was making progress possible. It was enhancing human power and increasing human welfare in ways that history had never before allowed. Stray victims, like Huskisson, were something more than regrettable side-effects; they were integral to human improvement, the

unfortunate but still worthwhile price society had to pay for greater happiness.
Besides, if you tried to interfere, you might get run over.

Introduction - Revisiting Industrialism

A generation has now passed without a thorough reexamination of the relationship between industrialism and literature.¹ Indeed, the whole issue is taken as more or less settled—an old story of classes and factories, specialization and alienation, steam-engines, spinning jennies, and novels by Disraeli and Gaskell. There are, however, two fundamental problems with this old story. First, it no longer comports with what we know about the history of industrial change. And second, it never did justice to literature's many, and varied, engagements with industrialism itself. How could it? Is it really possible that an event which historians have long recognized to be among the greatest social and economics transformations in millennia found its surest literary reflection in the minor subgenre we call the industrial novel? That, truly, would be a damning indictment of literature, a sign that the whole enterprise was overwhelmingly unfit for its own most pressing historical context.

A number of writers have, indeed, tried to pursue this indictment, arguing that not even the greatest literary figures of the 19th century could vie with the energy of industrial change. Here, for instance is the future poet laureate Alfred Austin, speaking in 1869:

How do we note the past ages? We speak of the age of Homer, the age of Dante, the age of Shakespeare. Can anybody in his senses imagine posterity speaking of our age as the age of Tennyson? Posterity will be too kind to do anything so sardonic. It will speak of it as the age of Railways, the age of Destructive Criticism, or the age of Penny Papers. (Tennyson, Hallam 146.)

For Austin, nineteenth-century literature has lost its status as the embodiment of the age and become a kind of secondary, if not atavistic, product. All of the real energies of the moment are bound, instead, to railways and mass journalism: new technologies on the one hand, and new modes of discourse on the other. A few years earlier, J. A. Froude penned a subtler version:

From the England of Fielding and Richardson to the England of Miss Austen—from the England of Miss Austen to the England of Railways and Free-trade, how vast the change. (rpt in Briggs 3)

Where the 18th century is “the England of Fielding and Richardson,” and the turn of the 19th still “the England of Miss Austen,” the Victorian age is once again not “the England of Tennyson.” It is instead “the England of Railways and Free-trade,” as if such developments had left the resources of literature far behind. Once upon a time (as Austin and Froude might say), writers provided the clearest expression of their historical moment; but then, with the coming of the railways, all that changed. Literature found itself unable to reckon with the speed and power of the industrial world.

There is some truth to this, but it is a shallow truth, built on a mistaken idea about the relationship between literature and industrialism. Despite the fact that literature did, to some extent, keep its distance from the machinery of industry—such descriptions being concentrated in those few famous subgenres—its deepest engagement lay elsewhere, having less to do with railways, free-trade, and penny papers and more to do with the acceleration of

economic history. Ultimately, that is, industrialism means something more than the “age of machinery” or the “England of railways and free trade”; it names a kind of economic tipping point, before which there had been virtually no change and after which there might be endless improvement. Not only did industrialism alter the mode of production; it inaugurated a new era of advancement, an era defined by the thrilling but still ambivalent experience of moving violently towards a rich but uncertain future. And it was here that literature found its hold. The basic argument of this book is that: 1) industrialism made economic growth possible; 2) the experience of growth inspired—as its closest ideological partner—a new, more haunted conception of progress, and; 3) this haunted idea gave writers their greatest purchase on the strains of industrial change. In short, it was the new caste of progress—rather than the machinery of industry—which enabled literature’s broadest engagement with the great though conflicting energies of industrial life.

Progress and Industrialism

The prevailing approach to these questions has been the one pioneered by Williams and Gallagher, where attention to the social implications of industrial change (the rise of class, the factory system, the reduction of all human relations to cash-relations) is matched by a sharp focus on those few literary works which explicitly feature them. Those works which are well classified as industrial novels, or social problem novels.²

In Williams’ pathbreaking book, *Culture and Society*, the list of such works is in some ways quite broad. It includes not only the canonical industrial novelists—Gaskell (*Mary Barton*, *North and South*), Dickens (*Hard Times*), Disraeli (*Sybil*), Kingsley (*Alton Locke*), or Eliot *Felix Holt*—but also essayists like Burke, Mill, and Ruskin. Anyone whose work could be said to sustain aspects of the old, pre-industrial way of being (or structure of feeling, to use Williams’ famous phrase) against the merely transactional relationships that increasingly governed social life under industrial capitalism.³ At the same time, though, the choice of texts depends on an extremely literal mode of reading. For an essay to count as a response to industrialism, it needs to deal explicitly with economics or industry; if it’s a work of literature it should be a novel and it should include a factory. Little space is made for other kinds of figural engagement.

I don’t mean to dismiss the enduring power of Williams’ work (not to mention its impact on my own); I only want to suggest that it has left us with a kind of tunnel vision. When thinking about the relation between industrialism and literature, we dutifully reach for industrial novels; and when we seek to expand our inquiry, we incorporate a range of other, non-literary works. But what of the rest of literature? Novels without factories? Poetry?

Catherine Gallagher’s seminal book, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form* introduced a whole new way of thinking about the shifting dynamics of industrial life (beyond Williams’ culture/society divide). But what it did not do—not even attempt to do—was expand the scope of industrial literature. As Gallagher herself put it, “The works most immediately affected were those we now call the ‘industrial novels,’ Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, Charles Kingsley’s *Alton Locke*,

Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, and George Eliot's *Felix Holt*" (xi).⁴

And as I say, those critics who have sought to look beyond such works have done so chiefly by incorporating non-literary materials. Mary Poovey's *Making a Social Body* treats novels alongside sanitary reports and the writings of government reform advocates. Joseph Bizup's *Manufacturing Culture* brings together writings from William Babbage, Edward Baines, Henry Cole and others to reveal a forgotten facet of 19th century culture, a "a new proindustrial rhetoric that crystallized in the second quarter of the nineteenth century around the specific and defining goals of aestheticizing automatic manufacture . . ." (13-4).

Despite their wide orbits, neither of these can be said to expand our understanding of the relation between industrialism and imaginative literature. They are after something different, something more like culture than literature. Which leaves us with a kind of missing middle. Great work has indeed been done tracking industrialism's narrow impact on the industrial novel and, from the other side, its diffuse effect on culture at large. But what of its importance for the specific cultural practice that is imaginative literature, with its poems and stories and romances and realist novels.

This issue almost never arises, and when it does—as in Carolyn Lesjak's *Genealogy of the Victorian Novel*—it is quickly winnowed down. As Lesjak knows: "Domestic fiction, the *Bildungsroman*, Victorian aestheticism: traditionally these genres and cultural movements have not been viewed with an eye toward industrial labor" (2). But even this framing implies a kind of narrowing, from industrialism in general to just that last quoted word, labor. That is where Lesjak focuses her attention—on "the presence of new forms of labor under industrial capitalism" (1). And the cost is any real effort to match the epochal changes wrought by industrialism with an equal change in the writing of imaginative literature.

Recent years have seen a new approach to some of these old questions, under the loose heading of new economic criticism. Its ambit is actually far broader than anything like industry or industrialism, but it is worth discussing because it offers a new lens through which to view the interaction of economics and culture in the 19th century.⁵ And, what is more, it has carried with it a number of our leading voices, including those of Gallagher and Poovey.

Poovey's more recent *Genres of the Credit Economy* emphasizes what she calls "the breakup in the continuum of writing" (3). Prior to the 18th century, she argues, there was no rigid distinction between economic writing and literary writing; they participated equally in the effort to understand the creation and circulation of value (economic, social, or otherwise). Over time, however, these two modes became increasingly differentiated—even opposed—which has helped to mask their deep and important affinities. As she says, it "has erased the *historical relationship* between these two sets of genres; it has effaced the common function that once linked them and the historical process by which they were differentiated and ranked" (4).

The aim of Poovey's book—and indeed one of the central aims of new economic criticism more generally—is to denaturalize this difference. To place economics and literature side by side as genres of writing, and in that way to make visible a dense network of mutual influence. It is an idea that has issued in a number of important studies, among them Regenia

Gagnier's *The Insatiability of Human Wants*, Philip Connell's *Romanticism, Economics, and the Question of 'Culture'*, Kathleen Blake's *Pleasures of Benthamism*, and Catharine Gallagher's *The Body Economic*. I am going to discuss all of these, at various points in the course of this book, but for now I want to focus on the Gallagher—not just for continuity's sake but because she, too, treats the industrial era.

“How,” Gallagher asks in her opening sentence, “did political economy come to have such a bad odor among the most prominent literary figures of the early nineteenth century?” And odor is a nice metaphor here, because even bad odors are hard to keep out, and part of Gallagher's point is that political economy found its influence despite every distaste. Especially so in the case of the mid-Victorian novel. What is peculiar, though, is the ease with which Gallagher covers this historical terrain. On the economic side, her most prominent figures are Jeremy Bentham and Thomas Malthus, one the father of what Gallagher calls somaeconomics (the economics of work, pain, pleasure and happiness), the other of bioeconomics (the economics of life, death, fertility, and population). On the literary side, meanwhile, her chief figures are Dickens and Eliot (each the subject of two chapters.) Yet, there is a great disconnect here. Some 50-70 years separates these pairs of writers. Dickens and Eliot belong to the middle of the nineteenth century. Bentham and Malthus to its beginning. Indeed, the problem is not just that these two early-century economists might as easily be made the great, forgotten fathers of Romantic literature; it is that they are so crowned, in Connell's *Romanticism, Economics, and the Question of 'Culture'*.

And really the issue is more pressing than that, because the years that separate Bentham and Malthus from Dickens and Eliot are not just any years. They are the very years of intensest industrial change. To be fair, it's not that Gallagher wholly ignores the developments of these intervening decades. She talks about Ricardo and Mill, and later Jennings and Jevons, but the whole structure of her book depends on this idea that Romantic-era economic theory set the parameters for Victorian literature. Here, for instance, is how she concludes her account of the economic debates of the period before 1830: “Even the seemingly intractable controversies we've been examining over the competing *varieties* of 'organicism' helped establish its ubiquity and laid the basis for many of the distinctive traits of Victorian literary realism and social science” (34). What Gallagher argues, in other words, is that the economic preoccupations of the Victorian novel were shaped chiefly by early-century economic theory. As if this story could be told without reference to the industrial transformations which accelerated in-between.

The bigger problem with Gallagher's argument, though, is that it leaves material history out altogether. There is virtually no reference to industry or industrialism, and no account of changing labor conditions or shifting social structures. Instead, there are accounts of accounts of such things. Interpretation of various writers' views of economic life, rather than interpretations of economic life itself. Which has its value, to be sure, but which is ultimately inadequate to the task of understanding industrial literature. Not least because there's no guarantee that the writers' views of economic life bear any relationship to the reality. Indeed, part of what I'm going to be arguing moving forward is precisely that they don't. That the economic theories of the era (whether of Bentham and Malthus, or Smith

and Ricardo) were actually quite far removed from the underlying conditions of industrial life. Which of course means that they can't be taken as proxies.

Part of the appeal of new economic criticism is its intimation of a shortcut around the old Marxist problem of base and superstructure, its suggestion that the complex relation between economic life and cultural expression might be understood in terms of the simpler relations between economic thought and cultural expression. But this simplification will not do. Or, it would only do if economic thought were in fact the direct or intimate reflection of economic life—and it is not. It is distorted in the same way as all other ideological expressions. One more of those “phantoms” in the human brain which are really “sublimates of their material life-process” (*Marx-Engels Reader* 118).

What this means, for new economic criticism of the sort that Gallagher offers, is that while it can provide much useful information about the hidden relation between economic and literary writing (and it does); it can't bring us much closer to understanding the cultural impact of real economic changes, including those revolutionary changes wrought by industrialism.

The only way to appreciate the full, literary impact of industrialism is to face it head on, to revisit the realities of the era and shake off that timeworn story which Arnold Toynbee first told in his 1884 lectures and which still shapes even sophisticated cultural criticism like Elaine Freedgood's *Factory Production in Nineteenth-Century Britain*:

Toynbee's description of the main components of this “revolution” has held up very well. He notes first of all a sudden upsurge in population growth in the mid-eighteenth century, followed by improvements in equipment used in the manufacture of cotton, the development of better and safer steam engines, and the expansion of communication and transportation networks, especially railroads. . . . Factories employed a newly enormous number of workers, including women and children. Technological innovation occurred at a quickened pace, and new developments—the spinning jenny, the power loom, the puddling of iron, improvements in the steam engine—made for greater productivity, and often greater social unrest, as they caused waves of unemployment, underemployment or changes of employment.

If this account has “held up very well,” it is mostly because of inertia. Not that it is entirely wrong—population growth, factory expansion, technological innovation, and structural unemployment were all quite real—but because it is extremely partial. These things are aspects of what we might call the “revolution in industry.” But among economic historians, the phrase “industrial revolution” has come to mean something different, something both more dramatic and less tangible. Not just a change in the mode of production but a new dynamic of economic life. The term industrialism, in other words, actually comprises two very different phenomena: the revolution in industry (strongly associated with the factory system and ably described in Toynbee's) and also the arrival of real, distributed economic growth. And though these two things have come to share a name, they are far from identical. In fact, they don't even seem to have taken place at the same time. While virtually

all of the technologies associated with the factory system were developed in the late 18th century—including the steam engine, the water frame, the large-scale division of labor, and of course the organization of the factory itself—widespread economic growth didn't begin until the first half of the 19th century.

More to the point, it is this second, later aspect of industrialism which was, ultimately, the more revolutionary. As the economic historian Joel Mokyr puts it: “The ‘classical’ Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century was not an altogether novel phenomenon. In contrast, the second and third waves in the nineteenth century, which made continuous technological progress the centerpiece of sustainable economic growth, were something that had never before been witnessed and that constituted a sea change in economic history like few other phenomena ever had” (84). No one doubts that the 18th-century saw remarkable innovations and increasingly efficient practices of production. But the real “sea change” happened well after. And if we want to understand what, exactly, it entailed—if we want to know what most distinguished the industrial world from the pre-industrial world, and nineteenth-century England from every other nation on the globe—we need to look away from industry and focus instead on the new dynamic of economic growth.

As an index for just how revolutionary industrial growth really was, here is the opening diagram from Gregory Clark's *A Farewell to Alms*, plotting per capita income against three thousand years of world history.

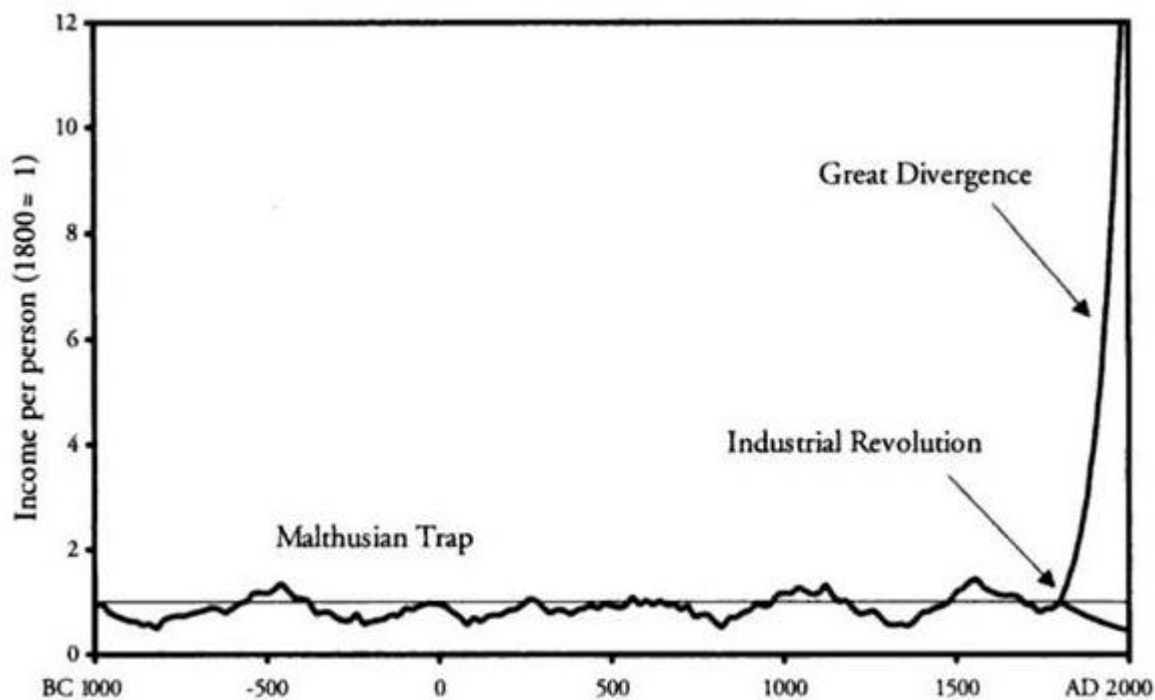


Figure 1: World economic history in one picture

For 2800 years, there was basically no change in the welfare of average people. Pre-

industrial Englishmen earned, essentially, the same income as 15th-century Frenchmen and 2nd-century Romans. As Clark says “even according to the broadest measures of material life, average welfare, if anything, declined from the Stone Age to 1800. The poor of 1800, those who lived by their unskilled labor alone, would have been better off if transferred to a hunter-gatherer band” (2).⁶

The name economists have given to that millennia-long stagnation is the Malthusian trap, in homage to Thomas Malthus, whose extremely influential *Essay on the Principle of Population* first demonstrated this awful paradox: that economic growth was a boon to no one. Whatever gains were wrested from the earth or the factory would be used, instead, to feed an ever-growing population. Which is not to say that there would be no gains. As Malthus well knew, there had been tremendous technical advancement over the centuries; the windmill, the printing press, the mechanical clock and numberless other innovations appeared in the time between the ancient Babylonian world and the 18th-century European one, and each made possible new efficiencies and new levels of productivity. What Malthus suggested—and what Clark more rigorously demonstrates—is that none of these managed to change per capita income or increase the welfare of human beings. In each case, all of the gains were absorbed by demographics. Technological change did spur economic growth, but that in turn spurred population growth, which swiftly negated any improvements in human welfare. To cite the ready shorthand form adapted from Ecclesiastes: “if riches increase, they are increased that eat them” (Froude, *Eclectic*).

At least, that was true until around 1800. At which point, everything changed. Per capita income exploded upwards, breaking free from its long Malthusian sleep and inaugurating a new era of economic possibility that forever altered humanity’s relation to its environment. The arrow that Clark labels “Industrial Revolution” points to the very moment when economic history turned and “incomes per person began to undergo sustained growth” (Clark 2). From 1819-1851, the real wages of working class Britons increased by nearly two percent per year, as opposed to the zero percent annual increase over the previous half-century (Williamson 688). And in those same years, the population grew by over fifty percent (Mokyr 281). Under Malthusian conditions, that surge of people would have nullified any real gains, but in the new world of industrial growth, even this exploding populace felt the benefit. What followed is a cascade of effects so familiar as to seem cliché: the rise of class, massive urbanization, a growing division of labor, new gender relations structured around the divide between public and private, etc.

It must be said that Clark’s version of the story is among the more optimistic, but even so the space for pessimism has shrunk considerably in the face of recent data. There is contrary evidence, for instance, to suggest that the first part of the 19th century involved what Robert Allen calls “Engel’s Pause,” a period of increasing inequality, as wages stagnated and wealth accrued mostly to the already-wealthy. But even Allen concedes that by mid-century this pause had ended, making possible both rising incomes and increasing wages for virtually every class of people, from the disreputable poor to the disreputable rich.

Which is not to say that industrialism was somehow all sweetness and light. There were harrowing declines in public health—life expectancy in the city could be as low as 25-27

years (Mokyr 455)—and there were also those many, less tangible losses of person and place that Karl Polanyi taught us to recognize. These things are real, and they can't be waved away with talk of economic growth. Neither, however, can they be allowed to hedge into a general argument about industrial immiseration. Because whatever else it was—alienating, dehumanizing, dislocating, etc.—industrialism was not immiserating. It was economically emancipating. Talk of the “desperation of the masses” (vi), “starving-in-the-midst-of-plenty” (vi), or “the reduction of hundreds of thousands of workers to pauperism” (v) is no longer tenable. Not because those things didn't happen—they did, and these phrases which I draw from Richard Altick's description of the hungry 40s are perfectly just—but because they don't effectively capture the arc of the whole. Overall, industrialism made starvation and pauperism less acute, and wages more sustaining.

Despite ongoing disagreements about timing, then (with optimists preferring some date around 1800 and pessimists some time closer to 1850), most every scholar now acknowledges that industrialism not only introduced a wholly new economic dynamic but enabled—for the first time in history—real, population-wide gains in social welfare. That was its revolution.

What is more, it was a British revolution. Not only, in other words, was industrialism a dramatic moment in world history, it was a dramatic moment in British history. Industrialism may have become, over time, a global phenomenon, but it was first native to England and parts of southern Scotland. Right up to the end of the 19th century, only Britain achieved a velocity sufficient to escape from the Malthusian trap.⁷ And this simple fact has enormous implications for how we think about the movement of literary history. In particular, it gives Victorian literature a strange kind of priority, as the first moment when writers had to grapple with the economic system which would eventually span the globe.

The question of why England was first is still the subject of a great deal of investigation and debate. Does it have to do with political institutions? Natural resources? Free trade? Colonialism? Cultural evolution? Conflicting arguments have been made for each of these factors—and others—but one thing they share is a growing recognition that there is more to industrialism than the rise of industry. There were many factories in France, and ample machinery in the United States—not to mention the far earlier technological achievements of China and India. And even if England's industrial sector was larger than most, it was hardly pervasive. England was still a predominantly rural country until 1850, and at that late point one in four Englishmen over twenty years of age worked in agriculture (Thompson 26, Mingay 1). Even in textiles, one of the most machine-intensive industries, less than half of all laborers actually worked in factories (Valenze 98).

In this story about industrialism, industry is only one player among many. Clark himself has gone so far as to say that “there is nothing inherently *industrial* about the industrial revolution” (193), and though this construction may sound perversely counterintuitive, as we will see it turns out to be vital to our attempt to recognize the full scope of industrial literature. For now, though, the important thing to recognize is that industrialism does not simply mean “the rise of industry” or “the rise of the factory system.” It refers—also and perhaps more fundamentally—to the emergence of a new economic order characterized by rapid growth, open-ended development, and new possibilities of social organization and social welfare. This

is not to say that industry itself was irrelevant to the emergence of a post-Malthusian world. It was a key, contributing factor. It helped make industrial growth possible, and it deserves a prominent place on any list of the most important preconditions, alongside England's liberal political structure and the cheap resources from colonial exploitation. But it can no longer remain the object of greatest attention. What was most revolutionary about industrialism—what made it a truly unprecedented historical occurrence—was something other than this new mode of production. It was the new horizon of economic and social life outside of the Malthusian trap. Plenty of 19th-century societies made use of machines and the division of labor, but only England had crossed that Rubicon.

To some, this may seem like a reason to drop the word industrialism altogether. Why speak of industrialism if we are no longer speaking of industry? If our real interest is the shift from Malthusian to post-Malthusian economics what reason is there to think that industrialism is the best term available? Surely there are other candidates—or, if not, perhaps it is time to invent one. I'm sympathetic to this critique, not least because I recognize the obvious difficulty of trying to strip the word industrialism of its many-lettered connection to industry, but I also know that it has another, equally deep connection with the experience of radical change. From the beginning, that is, the word industrialism has been used to describe a specific, widespread, economically-driven and society-wrenching revolution. And the reason I choose to keep the word is precisely because I am still speaking of that same revolution. My subject, here and throughout, is not some recently-discovered historical pattern; it is that widely-recognized and obsessively-investigated transformation in economic life which unfolded in the 19th century.

Even if I'm wrong about this, however, I don't think it affects the broader argument. Let's say industrialism is not the right word. That it bespeaks, too clearly, its identification with the rise of industry and is thus ill-suited to any reappropriation. We still have to deal with this unnamed event, this eruption of growth that marks the most dramatic change in millenia of human life. Call it what you will, we still need to understand the specifically literary ramifications of this eruption of economic growth.

Industrial Progress

Before we can move from industrialism to literature, we need to return to an issue that I raised earlier, namely the issue of ideology. We have to do what I said the new economic criticism refused to do: try to untangle the relation between material history and perceptual history. We need to know something more than what industrialism entailed (namely, the breaking of the Malthusian trap and the arrival of modern growth); we also need to know how it was understood by those living through it. After all, literature is shaped by both of these things: the material conditions of its production and the way writers and readers understand those conditions.

And the writers of the 19th century couldn't have understood industrialism in the way I've described (things are more complicated for the modernists, but we have to build up to that). They didn't have access to these graphs or statistics; they didn't know how fast

earlier societies had grown, nor how quickly their own economy was expanding. They had, it is true, their own powerful, popular, and fast-developing discourse of political economy, but as I suggested before, in some ways 19th century economists were especially insensible to the changes around them. As the Cambridge geographer Tony Wrigley puts it:

The most fundamental defining feature of the industrial revolution was that it made possible exponential economic growth—growth at a speed that implied the doubling of output every half-century or less. This in turn radically transformed living standards. Each generation came to have a confident expectation that they would be substantially better off than their parents or grandparents. Yet, remarkably, the best informed and most perspicacious of contemporaries were not merely unconscious of the implications of the changes which were taking place around them but firmly dismissed the possibility of such a transformation.

When revolution happens, expertise becomes a kind of liability—because the rules of the past don't apply (or, better, because it's impossible to know which old rules are still sound and which have been swept away). The bounds that classical economists had learned to accept (Wrigley refers specifically of “Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, and David Ricardo”) were no longer applicable. But the only people who could see this were the non-specialists, those who had no reason to disbelieve their own experience. Ordinary men and women recognized the improvements taking place all around them, and they came to expect that these improvements would continue. Meanwhile, the political economists—“the best informed and most perspicacious of contemporaries”—denied such improvements because they were incompatible with their well-wrought models

Malthus's model of economic stasis (where all growth is absorbed by a growing population) we have already touched on. Smith and Ricardo saw things differently, to be sure, but they too thought there was a wealth-limit, beyond which no further growth would be possible. Smith argued that for each country there existed a maximum state of development, a “full complement of riches which the nature of its soil and climate, and its situation with respect to other countries, allowed it to acquire.”⁸ Such a country could simply “advance no further.” Ricardo, for his part, foresaw a kind of profit death-spiral, which worked in the following way: over time, as more and more of the land was cultivated to feed a growing population, the premium on land would increase, driving profits down and blunting the kind of investment which is necessary for real growth. “This,” as he says, “will necessarily be rendered permanent by the laws of nature, which have limited the productive powers of the land” (126).

These economists were indeed among “the best informed and most perspicacious of contemporaries,” and their theories among the most sophisticated and elaborate of the time. But they were calibrated to explain the world that had always been, the life of Malthusian entrapment that had governed all settled societies. And because they trusted these models, they couldn't see—or couldn't believe—the new world of growth that was developing around them. Regenia Gagnier has argued, convincingly, that it was the later theorists of marginal utility—Jevons and Menger above all—who altered economic theory to fit the contours of

the advancing, industrial world. That, however, was in the 1870s, not just well after the onset of industrialism but well after the reality of industrial growth had been recognized in other domains (not least of all, in literature).⁹

Which is not to say that, elsewhere, the new reality of industrial growth was immediately recognized and understood. No, it came to consciousness slowly, beginning in the early Victorian period. And even then it was indirect and distorted, as much felt as known.

For instance, one thing the Victorians clearly felt is that they were living on the far side of a great, historical divide, that theirs was a unique and unprecedented historical moment. As John Stuart Mill put it: “The conviction is already not far from being universal, that the times are pregnant with change; and that the nineteenth century will be known to posterity as the era of one of the greatest revolutions of which history has preserved the remembrance, in the human mind, and in the whole constitution of human society.” Now, it is true that Mill was thinking more immediately about political reform, and not industrial growth, but the point of his essay is to express the sense—more general than any one event or occasion—that he and his contemporaries live in the land of the new. That their times are “distinguished in a very remarkable manner from the times which preceded them.”

Thomas Carlyle, himself a great contributor to the genre of Victorian self-diagnosis, summarized the situation with a near-perfect quip: “works of that sort are a characteristic of our era” (Kaplan 297). It was, in other words, characteristic of the era to be consumed with characterizing itself. And the most basic reason for this was that the Victorians really did stand alone at the far side of a historical divide—the one wrought by industrialism and the collapse of the Malthusian trap. They may not have had the statistical details that we have today, nor known the exact cause of their distinction, but they rightly understood themselves to be separated, in some fundamental way, both from the other nations of the world and from their own past.

Even more cannily, they understood that all this change was somehow moving them forward: that it was improving people’s lives and increasing the opportunities for human fulfillment. Sometimes, this feeling expressed itself in grand hyperbole, as in Macaulay’s claim that “the history of England is emphatically the history of progress” (rpt in Spadafora 405). Other times the statements were more cautious, as when Mill argued that “the general tendency is, and will continue to be, saving occasional and temporary exceptions, one of improvement” (Mill 379). But however the particular formulations may have varied, the general consensus was that theirs was an era of progress—that society had moved, was moving, and would continue to move in a desirable direction. “At the present moment, we may certainly pronounce the contest is virtually decided. Progress is King;” So said *Chambers’s Journal* in 1861. In his own comments “On Progress,” just a few years later, Froude seconded that judgment: “Amidst the varied reflections which the nineteenth century is in the habit of making on its condition and its prospects, there is one common opinion in which all parties coincide—that we live in an era of progress” (671).¹⁰

These quotes may sound, at first, like willful overstatement—the kind of thing Victorian liberals were wont to say about their own beliefs. But in this case it is difficult to find competing views even well outside the liberal fold. The leading critics of Victorian society—

the Engelses and Morrisises, like the Chadwicks and Mayhews—may have sought to redirect progress in one way or another, but they too imagined the future as a place of greater happiness. (The keepers of nostalgia, like Ruskin and Carlyle, might seem a more problematic case, but one of the things I show in the chapters that follow is that, for the Victorians, even nostalgia was recast to serve progress.) Here, for instance, is William Lovett, describing the many benefits of the people’s charter: “it will afford the people general and superior means of instruction; it will awaken and concentrate human intellect to remove the evils of social life; and it will compel the representatives of the people to redress grievances, improve laws, and provide means of happiness in proportion to the enlightened desires of public opinion” (13). As thorough and grandiose, in its own way, as anything Macaulay could imagine, Lovett’s vision of the future includes a better-educated populace, more responsive governance, and a brand of happiness fully equal to “enlightened desires.” What distinguishes Lovett, and the other great social critics, is that they felt some dramatic action was necessary, today, in order to reach that glorious future, but for them, as for the more whiggish, there was always a grand historical trajectory just waiting to usher society into a wildly-improved future.

Surprisingly little attention has been paid to these Victorian visions of progress. The last major study was Jerome Buckley’s 1966 book, *The Triumph of Time*, which included a chapter on “The Idea of Progress” and another on “The Recession of Progress.”¹¹ Not surprisingly, Buckley’s study bears the hallmarks of its age: a general indifference to material conditions, a tripping cadence through intellectual history, an over-narrow confidence in the integrity and impermeability of the Victorian—if also an inhumanly broad knowledge of Victorian characters, and their competing thoughts. The greater problem, though, is the arc of Buckley’s story: “By the time of the Exhibition faith in a Macaulayan progress had engendered a confident complacency, which was to persist in some quarters, though more and more seriously challenged to the end of the century and even beyond” (36). In other words, his is the old story of rise and fall: at the beginning of the period, faith in progress soared; by the end, it had soured. And this isn’t really right—at least not in any obvious way. Early Victorians, like Mill or Tennyson, were believers in progress—to be sure—but they were also uncomfortable with their belief, and quite far from “confident complacency.”

At the risk of getting ahead of myself, let me say that this discomfort was constitutive: part of what made Victorian ideas of progress distinctive, and one of the clues that these ideas were profoundly shaped by industrialism. What I’m going to be arguing, in fact, is that progress was the screen through which the Victorians came to understand, and negotiate, the new reality of accelerating, industrial growth. It gathered its shape and gained its newfound ideological resonance from the material fact that industrialism was, for the first time, making economic growth possible.

Of course, belief in progress was hardly unique to the Victorians—though neither was it especially pedigreed. Earlier societies had certainly been interested in the metaphysics of change (think of Heraclitus), the complexity of movement (consider Zeno), the structure of becoming (see Augustine), and the possibilities of self-improvement (so central to early Protestantism). But progress is something different from these, at once more expansive and more specific. Its clearest definition is still the one that J. B. Bury offered in his 1920 *The*

Idea of Progress, namely the belief that society “has moved, is moving, and will move in a desirable direction” (2).¹²

The virtue of this definition is that it manages to be broad without losing focus. For Bury, progress is about movement, and more than that it is about directed movement. Wandering does not count, only movement towards the “desirable.” Though it must be added that the term “desirable” is left entirely open. That, itself might seem like a problem. What, after all, makes a state of society more or less desirable? Or, more to the point, who decides what qualifies as desirable or undesirable? Is it more desirable to have increased incomes or increased freedom? Greater access to work or more time for play? One way to deal with these sorts of conflicts would be to distinguish between various types of progress: economic, scientific, moral, or political and in that way to develop more precise definitions of the desirable. Bury certainly doesn’t do that; he prefers to leave his definition vague, an approach which has its risks but also its virtues. The vague term, “desirable,” captures something that no more precise term could, namely the vague promise of progress itself. Progress attracts adherents by offering them everything and specifying nothing, allowing them to project their own particular fantasies into its indefinite ideal. Ultimately, that is, the idea of progress is more like a grab-bag of awkwardly related hopes than a precise philosophical concept, and part of the strength of Bury’s definition is its ability to reflect that imprecision.

His only other qualification is that progress is a social phenomenon, not a personal one. It’s about social improvement, not self-improvement. And these things have to be kept separate. Not because they are entirely distinct—I myself am going to make use of their connection at certain key moments, as in my reading of Tennyson’s “Ulysses”—but because they have separate histories and because they do different kinds of cultural work. There are narratives of self-improvement whose interest in progress is mostly occasional, as for instance *Oliver Twist*; or, *The Parish Boy’s Progress*. And there are stories of self-improvement which predate belief in progress by centuries, if not millenia.¹³

What Bury’s definition establishes, then, is a baseline, a minimal test for an idea of progress: it must involve some notion of directed, social movement. And vague though this may seem, there are staggeringly few examples before the 18th century. Depictions of change, improvement, and becoming can be traced to antiquity, but the community-wide, upward-stretching movement we call progress is far more rare and far more modern. Only in the last few centuries did people begin to conceive of history as the unfolding of ever-more-desirable conditions of collective life.

And yet even in these few recent centuries, there has been a great deal of variation. A host of competing visions of social progress, whose differences can be traced not only to the politics or temperament of individual thinkers but to the historical context more broadly, in ways that make enlightenment visions of progress recognizably distinct from Victorian ones, and those from modernist incarnations. This doesn’t mean that every era produces one, and only one, defining Idea of progress, but it does mean that at any given historical moment ideas of progress are likely to have common features. And the reason is that progress is something more than an idea; it is an ideology, the distorted image of real, material phenomena.¹⁴ As

those historical materials slide beneath, so too does the image shift above, and though the lines of influence may be complex, they are nonetheless essential.

One reason that the notion of progress took such deep root in the 18th century was because of the unmistakable advance of scientific understanding in those years. Real, reproducible and patentable innovations inspired a grand belief in the measureless advance of society as a whole. And, more to the point, that grand belief had a decidedly scientific tint. Speaking of posterity, the great English enlightenment champion of progress, Joseph Priestley, argued that “there is the greatest certainty that they will be wiser, and therefore the fairest presumption that they will be better than we are” (302). And in the same vein, his French counterpart, the Marquis de Condorcet, asked: “may it not be expected that the human race will be meliorated by new discoveries in the sciences and the arts, and, as an unavoidable consequence, in the means of individual and general prosperity” (211). For both, progress was essentially a matter of knowledge; it was propelled, above all, by growing “wisdom” and new “discoveries” which flowed outward along some elaborate causal matrix to produce “general prosperity” and a “better” humanity.¹⁵

In some ways, this scientific 18th-century notion of progress was brighter and more vigorous than the Victorian versions. “The unfettered progress of truth is always salutary,” wrote William Godwin. “Its advances are gradual, and each step prepares the general mind for that which is to follow” (138). And no less an expert on decline than Edward Gibbon saw the same genial process: “We may therefore acquiesce in the pleasing conclusion that every age of the world has increased and still increases the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue, of the human race” (410). These views of progress involve no trade-offs; reason, happiness, knowledge and virtue all walk hand-in-hand into the future. Which is not to say that enlightenment philosophy was unreservedly optimistic. It certainly was not. Malthus’s own essay testifies to the strength of anti-progressive thought, as the full title makes abundantly clear: “An Essay on the Principle of Population, as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and Other Writers.” The Malthusian trap was conceived, explicitly, as a critique of enlightenment progress, a salvo for the same skeptical attitude that inspired Voltaire’s *Candide*.

All through the 18th and early 19th century, in fact, progress was just one of a number of competing philosophies of history.¹⁶ Indeed, it is fair to say that the reason enlightenment thinkers tended to envision progress in such benign terms was because there were many other ways that anxieties about the future could find philosophical expression:

- There were those, like Rousseau, who thought that history was not advancing, but declining. They mourned the loss of a more primitive purity which had been sullied by the corruption and luxury of modern life. For support, they drew on either the Christian idea of a fall from paradise or the classical lost golden age.¹⁷
- There were others, like Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke who accepted that society was progressing, but who thought such progress was temporary and would eventually be undone. They invoked Machiavelli or the fall of Rome to argue for

an endless cycle of change “from barbarity to civility, and from civility to barbarity” (Spadafora 14).¹⁸

- As we’ve already seen, in the case of Smith and Ricardo, it was even possible to accept that society was advancing, disclaim any notion of historical cycles, and still deny that progress would continue. It might offer some gains today, but soon enough it would lead you to a maximal state. And far from considering this maximal state Utopian, Smith himself thought wages would be “barely sufficient to keep up the number of labourers” and “the ordinary profit as low as possible” (197).

These are just a few of the many anti-progressive positions in the lively enlightenment debate about the future of human society.

With the transition to Victorianism, however, this debate simply dissolved. All of the various elaborate and well-established alternatives to progress were absorbed into the progressive world view, which became not only the dominant but practically the only *Weltanschauung*—the “King,” to quote again from *Chambers’s Journal*.¹⁹ For the Victorians, progress certainly was king, and virtually unchallenged in its reign.

Which is not to say that all Victorians conceived of progress in the same way. Not at all. As we will see, there were any number of competing visions of the improving future. Some thinkers, such as Herbert Spencer, thought progress virtually inevitable. Others, like Carlyle and Lovett, imagined it as fragile and uncertain. Samuel Smiles and the champions of self-improvement spoke of it as a grand, human undertaking, while Dickens, J. R. McCulloch, and others feared it might be serving a different master altogether. Victorian conceptions of progress differed widely, and in another context it might be useful to chart such differences across the various axes of Victorian life: gender, class, age, political affiliation, and otherwise.²⁰

The trouble is that these divisions obscure as much as they reveal. The most distinctive feature of these Victorian ideas of progress is not their internal divisions but their general ascendancy. Why, at this moment, should all philosophies of history be narrowed to philosophies of progress? What happened to stem the force of rigorous pessimism? Or shake the ancient hold of stoic conceptions of fortune and stasis? That is what must be explained, and understood.

That, and one thing more. It is strange and distinctive enough that expectations of this sort should be so widely distributed—as I say, it is unlike any other moment in the history of progress—but there is something else that distinguishes Victorian ideas of progress, something else that makes them recognizable artifacts of their moment. Beneath their many surface differences there is a striking consistency of perspective, a kind of common ground which girded even the most discrete accounts. We can think of it as a shared structure of imagination, a core pattern of thought, which takes the form of a shadowing—unique to the Victorians—of optimism by anxiety. All of the fears and doubts that had fueled the anti-progressive voices of the 18th and early 19th Century moved inside of progress itself, never quite undermining its optimism but leaving it far less benign and far more troubled. Unlike Condorcet’s notion of progress, or for that matter Godwin’s or Priestley’s, Victorian ideas of

progress were darker and somehow haunted, as if weighed down from the inside.²¹ They still deserved the name progress, because they still met Bury's basic criteria: that general belief that society has moved, is moving, and will continue to move in a desirable direction. Only now they included a second, distinctively Victorian criteria: that the great improvements of tomorrow would come entangled with new requirements of sacrifice and suffering.²²

There's a kind of analogy, here, with one of the more intractable issues in Victorian political economy: namely whether the desire for happiness could be reconciled with the need to work. According to utilitarian principles, happiness was the ultimate measure of the value of human activity; but there was always a tension between this celebration of happiness and the need to store up happiness for the future. If everyone took, at one time, all the opportunities for satisfaction stored up throughout the economy—all the tea and silver and train rides—there would be much less satisfaction available tomorrow. Perversely, that is, our future happiness depends in large part on our willingness to forgo happiness today. Toil now, enjoy tomorrow: that is the infinitely recursive demand at the heart of this political economy. And one way to think of Victorian ideas of progress is as amplifications of this same demand. They elevated deferred gratification from a problem of economic life to the engine of world history.

To appreciate just how different the Victorian conception of progress really was, it is worth comparing Shelley's 1819 poem "Julian and Maddalo: a Conversation" with Tennyson's "The Two Voices," written just two decades later. In Shelley's poem, the argument between progressive and anti-progressive is still vital. Shelley's speaker, Julian, is brimming with optimism and eager to take his stand "against despondency" (48). Humanity need not be burdened by poverty and suffering, he argues. "We might be all / We dream of happy, high, majestic" (172-3). His friend Maddalo, however, is casually unmoved. "You talk Utopia" (179) is his dismissive response. Perhaps we could be high and happy, he goes on, "if we were not weak" (177), but unfortunately we are and so we are barred from any real improvement. With some derision, Julian calls that "the darker side" of the argument, but for Maddalo it has the minor virtue of being true.²³

Tennyson's speaker, like Julian before him, is eager to believe that progress will make humanity better. "Each month," he says, "is various to present / The world with some development" (74-5) But there is no skeptical Maddalo in Tennyson's poem, no one who would reject progress in the name of human weakness, original sin, or historical cycles. The second voice in Tennyson's poem is as certain of progress as the first; it is just that he thinks it is as much a curse as a blessing. After all, he says, if the world is forever improving, then we must always be disappointed by our inability to see the great change that lies, forever, beyond the horizon:

'Will thirty seasons render plain
Those lonely lights that still remain,
Just breaking over land and main?

'Or make that morn, from his cold crown
And crystal silence creeping down,
Flood with full daylight glebe and town? (82-7)

The “lonely lights” that seem, today, to be breaking into “full daylight” will seem precisely the same tomorrow and every day for decades to come. Progress never ends, never stops, and never rests. It works ceaselessly to breed further progress, ensuring that there will always be new lonely lights, new promises of knowledge and happiness flickering seductively in the distance. The problem in Tennyson’s poem is not that progress is untrue, but rather that it is unsatisfying. At every step, its achievements are outrun by its allure, which keeps us looking ahead towards a future we can never reach.²⁴ This is not an anti-progressive idea—in the way that Malthus’s fertility trap certainly is. It accepts that progress is only too real, so seductive and so limitless that it makes people endlessly hopeful and therefore endlessly restless. Where Shelley’s poem encapsulates in dialog the 18th and 19th century debate over progress, Tennyson’s reflects the new, and characteristically Victorian, ambivalence. For the Victorians, there truly was no alternative, no vital counter-model. But there was still ample room for unease, anxiety, and peril.

Confidence, flanked by disquiet. That is the structure of Victorian progress, and you can see it, just as clearly, in the following passage from Mill:

Hitherto it is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day’s toil of any human being. They have enabled a greater population to live the same life of drudgery and imprisonment, and an increased number of manufacturers and others to make fortunes. They have increased the comforts of the middle classes. But they have not yet begun to effect those great changes in human destiny, which it is in their nature and in their futurity to accomplish. (Principles 469)

What makes this passage so arresting is its sudden and unexpected pivot from radical critique to confident encomium. Industrialism, Mill begins, has done nothing to ease the burdens of working class life; it has only increased the number of people that must endure them. And therefore, he concludes, we need to be patient and keep waiting. He might have concluded—with at least an equal claim to logic—that we should therefore resist industrialism: sabotage those “mechanical inventions” and rethink the whole economic system. But of course he doesn’t, and the reason he doesn’t is because for him the promise of industrial progress still outweighs the “drudgery and imprisonment” of industrial life. There is suffering all around him, but that suffering is not a reason to doubt the work of progress; it is simply the cost which must be borne—at least until “futurity” arrives with its “great changes in human destiny.” Progress creates pain as part of its necessary work.

This ambivalence—in Mill, Tennyson, and beyond—was a reflection, in its distorted way, of industrialism itself: it captured something of the excitement that came with industrial growth and also something of the unease wrought by growing pains. For there were growing pains, even in this story of industrial progress. Not that there is anything exactly tragic about economic growth. For the first time in thousands of years, it was possible for the economy to expand and for each individual to benefit from that expansion, just as it was possible for the population to expand without the risk of plague or starvation. That surely counts as a good. But as the innovations and expansions of industrialism began to accrue,

a strange kind of problem arose—a worry that they would go on accruing, even perhaps indefinitely. Where, one had to ask, was industrialism driving us? Would it eventually lighten the “drudgery and imprisonment” that Mill saw all around him? Or did it have its own, different designs? Could we lead it where we wanted? And what if we decided we had had enough? Would it ever be possible to stop growing, and just rest? Add to these the widespread feeling among Victorians that their experience had no precedent and it is easy to understand why those 19th-century Britons who found themselves churning through the new, industrial landscape were both riveted by the signs of improvement and still deeply concerned by the lack of stability and the uncharted nature of their industrial future.

The surest proof, then, that the new, darkling idea of progress was inspired by the advent of industrialism comes not just from their historical coincidence (their near-simultaneous arrival), nor indeed their geographic coincidence (the fact that the new, ambivalent idea of progress was as unique to England as industrialism itself), nor even from the fact that they were habitually spoken of in the same breath. It comes from their remarkable homologies, the specific ways that the ideological shape of Victorian progress was distorted to reflect the material ground beneath. This is what I mean when I speak of “industrial progress”—as I will, throughout—I mean this vision of progress which girded the Victorian era and which was, in fact, the distorted, ideological image of industrialism itself.

A sequence from Dickens’ *Dombey and Son* shows the full, tortured path from industrialism to progress and then to disquiet. We begin with a description of Staggs’s Gardens, a London neighborhood in the throes of industrial turmoil:

The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighborhood to its center. Traces of its course were visible on every side. Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up; buildings that were undermined and shaking, propped by great beams of wood. Here, a chaos of carts, overthrown and jumbled together, lay topsy-turvy at the bottom of a steep unnatural hill; there, confused treasures of iron soaked and rusted in something that had accidentally become a pond. . . . In short, the yet unfinished and unopened Railroad was in progress; and, from the very core of all this dire disorder, trailed smoothly away, upon its mighty course of civilization and improvement.
(78-9)

What had been (one is invited to presume) a poor but still orderly community becomes a chaos of mangled and indifferent fragments: demolished houses, broken streets, jumbled carts, and “enormous heaps of earth.” A new railway line is the apparent cause, but coming upon the scene at this moment, the effect of destruction seems so overwhelming that it is hard to read the phrase “mighty course of civilization and improvement” with anything but the heaviest irony. Until, that is, some six years and 150 pages later, when *Dombey and Son* returns to the once-ruinous construction site:

The miserable waste ground, where the refuse-matter had been heaped of yore, was swallowed up and gone; and in its frowsy stead were tiers of warehouses,

crammed with rich goods and costly merchandise. The old by-streets now swarmed with passengers and vehicles of every kind: the new streets that had stopped disheartened in the mud and waggon-ruts, formed towns within themselves, originating wholesome comforts and conveniences belonging to themselves, and never tried nor thought of until they sprung into existence. Bridges that had led to nothing, led to villas, gardens, churches, healthy public walks. (244-5)

In this light, the great changes at Staggs's Gardens do seem to reflect a "mighty course of civilization and improvement." To be sure, this new landscape is not without its problems, most notable among them the excessive concentrations of wealth implied by "villas," "rich goods" and "costly merchandise." But there are also "wholesome comforts and conveniences," along with "gardens," and "healthy public walks." Progress, in the form of those real, material benefits that industrialism made possible. With the railway comes not only a "great earthquake" of disruption, but a host of improvements in economic efficiency and social opportunity.

As ever with industrial progress, however, these real improvements invite a new set of concerns—having once again to do with the fear of endlessness, a concern that even this beneficial change will cause us to suffer under a restless drive for further change and unyielding progress:

Crowds of people and mountains of goods, departing and arriving scores upon scores of times in every four-and-twenty hours, produced a fermentation in the place that was always in action. The very houses seemed disposed to pack up and take trips . . . Night and day the conquering engines rumbled at their distant work, or, advancing smoothly to their journey's end, and gliding like tame dragons into the allotted corners grooved out to the inch for their reception, stood bubbling and trembling there, making the walls quake, as if they were dilating with the secret knowledge of great powers yet unsuspected in them, and strong purposes not yet achieved. (245-6)

The railway has remade everything in its own image. Not only do the trains rush to and fro, but so too do the "crowds of people"—even the houses seem inclined to follow. There is no stopping this fermentation, and no telling what its ultimate byproduct will be. That, at least, is what the railway-dragons of the last lines would suggest. If they dilate with the "secret knowledge of great powers yet unsuspected in them" it is because they know, only too well, that someday they will cease to be railways and metamorphose into automobiles or airplanes or rockets or spacecrafts. Something faster, more powerful, and ever-more-promising. At that point, a new phase of fermentation will begin, as we follow those faster vehicles on more rapid trips along shifting routes until it has become utterly impossible to stop, rest, or find even a moment of calm. Industrialism doesn't just remake neighborhoods, in other words, it remakes people, leaving them addicted to the perpetually unsatisfying arrival of the new and the ever-newer.

In each of these examples—from Dickens, Tennyson, and Mill—progress is at once beneficial and disconcerting. There is no choosing between these possibilities, and no need to

deny the gains of industrialism in order to be troubled. One could admit the gains (as virtually everyone did) and still worry that they were coming too quickly or too haphazardly, that they might stop, or that they might never stop. In fact, this ambivalence is one of the hallmarks of Victorian ideas of progress, one of the things that separates them from all previous ideas of progress and bespeaks their entanglement with the uneven unfolding of industrialism itself.

Not surprisingly, then, the same ambivalence also filtered into the work of Herbert Spencer, who devoted several of his early works to expounding what he called the fundamental “law” of progress—which for him meant the expansion of complexity (*Illustrations* 1). The more intricate something was, the more complex it was, and the more complex the more advanced. Progress was the process by which systems developed “from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity, to a definite coherent heterogeneity,” taking unformed stuff and elaborating it into ever-more sophisticated arrangements (*First Principles* 396).²⁵ For Spencer, this kind of progress was not just possible but inevitable, the result of a fact so basic that its power had never been properly recognized: “every cause produces more than one effect” (*Illustrations* 32). The engine of progress was nothing more complicated than that. Each single cause has multiple effects; those effects then become causes which produce their own, multiple effects, and the resulting cascade contributes to the growing complexity of all aspects of life. Now there are obvious problems with this definition. Even if it is true that individual causes produce multiple effects, why should those effects be intricately arranged, rather than random? And how, more particularly, could such a process explain the especially rapid economic progress of one particular island nation? But the important thing to notice is just how abstract this vision of progress really is. It has no predetermined endpoint, no ethical bearing, and no strong relation to the workings of human life. It transforms things—cells, cities, ecosystems—without any regard for the integrity or specificity of those things. Indeed, it is essentially blind to all considerations except one, complexity, which it generates with a resistless single-mindedness. If it merits the term progress at all, it is not because it promises future happiness or future virtue but only because it guarantees that things will be more intricately arranged.

It may be worth pausing for a moment because we have stretched the notion of industrial progress quite far and I want to make perfectly clear that it has not broken. That Spencer belongs with Mill and Dickens and Tennyson in this same, central category. In the first place, his ideas still fit the basic definition of progress that we took from J. B. Bury; they still involve a notion of broad, social (indeed planetary) movement towards a more desirable destination (a world of greater complexity). They also, however, show the same persistent shadowing, itself the sign of industrial influence. Living through an era of material growth, Spencer envisioned progress in terms of base, material transformations, a blind relentless force which might increase the welfare of society, but which was utterly indifferent to that society’s own interests.

It’s in this last sense that Darwin, too, deserves to be counted among the great theorists of Victorian progress. Admittedly, Darwin himself was loath to use the word progress; he understood, better than most, that evolution was about fitness, rather than improvement (a

point we will come back to in the chapter on Morris).²⁶ Survival, alone, was no proof that a species was better, only that it was better fitted. And the many species that didn't survive couldn't be explained away by reference to an overarching Telos; because of course there was none. In another era, these would be reasons to drop the term progress altogether, but they are precisely what makes Darwin's theory of evolution such a prototypically Victorian theory of progress. A dark progress, which might speed the world towards ever-more-desirable states (in this case, with ever-better-fitted species) but which is really just a weakly serendipitous arrangement of accidents, violence, and stark physical laws—far removed from the transcendent power of Reason or Providence. This suggests a rather different way to think about the oft-discussed relation between Malthus and Darwin: where Malthus saw a bioeconomic trap that precluded all progress, Darwin saw one that made progress strangely inevitable.

Darwinian evolution is a universal, ineluctable force that increases the richness of the natural world without any regard for the welfare of its inhabitants. Spencer's progress is a merciless fact that increases the complexity of human life without even distinguishing the human from the cellular. Both evince that same structure of imagination that we have been tracing through Victorian ideas of progress. That imbalance between one great hope and many smaller fears: the one hope of an evolving future cast against the fears of moving too quickly, of having no control, of being subject to an abstract and merciless agent, of trusting too completely to an empty future. And, as ever, the many fears—though many—are all slightly outweighed by the one hope. (Working in the other direction, I argue in my last two chapters that the degenerationist clamor of the fin-de-siècle, and the emergence of modernism depend precisely on the dissolution of this uneasy balance).

Perhaps the clearest account of this new, imbalanced vision comes not from Tennyson, Spencer, or Darwin, but from a lesser public intellectual, Frederic Harrison, who is today remembered chiefly as the leading British positivist but who spread his interest across the fields of economics, politics, law, history, philosophy, and literature. All of the elements we have been tracing—about the speed of progress, its abstract inhumanity, its lack of direction, and its uncertain future—came together in an 1882 public lecture he delivered, with the modest title “A Few Words About the Nineteenth Century.”

Heterodox though he was in some ways, Harrison did not attempt to deny the advances of industrialism; in fact, he insisted that “the last hundred years have seen in England the most sudden change in our material and external life that is perhaps recorded in history” (415):

For twenty thousand years every fabric in use has been twisted into thread by human fingers, and woven into stuff by the human hand. Machines and steam-engines now make 10,000 shirts in the time that was formerly occupied in making one. For twenty thousand years man has got no better light than what was given in pitch, tallow, or oil. He now has gas and electricity, each light of which is equal to hundreds and thousands of candles. Where there used to be a few hundred books there are now 100,000; and the London newspapers of a single year consume, I dare say, more type and paper than the printing presses of the whole world produced from the days of Gutenberg to the French Revolution.

(414)

This is just a sample of what amounts to a page-long encomium to the achievements of the 19th century, from railways and steam-ships to telegraphs, cities, and the general affordability of all manner of commodities. Each, on its own, is a triumph, and together they reveal the undeniable fruits of what he calls “the mechanical glories of the last hundred years” (413).

There was, however, another side to the ledger, and certain as Harrison was of the many gains of industrialism, he was equally certain of its costs, beginning with the plague of poverty:

What is the good of carrying millions of people through the bowels of the earth, and at fifty miles an hour, if millions of working people are forced to live in dreary, black suburbs . . . ? What is the use of electric lamps, and telephones and telegraphs, newspapers by millions, letters by billions, if sempstresses stitching their fingers to the bone can hardly earn fourpence by making a shift, and many a man and woman is glad of a shilling for twelve hours’ work? . . . And what if we can make a shirt for a penny and a coat for sixpence, and bring bread from every market on the planet, what do we gain if they who make the coat and the shirt lead the lives of galley slaves, and eat their bread in tears and despair, disease and filth?” (423)

There is a kind of bleak symmetry in Harrison’s account: for every railway, a dreary suburb; for every appliance, a starving seamstress; for every coat or shirt, an industrial slave. Each triumph of the industrial world finds its partner in poverty, despair, disease, and filth.

Yet, for Harrison as for so many Victorians, the most troubling aspect of industrial growth was not the poverty but the inhuman speed. Newness and bigness seemed to spread at a rate far faster than at any previous time, and too fast to be readily assimilated to the human experience:

Science, philosophy, education, become smothered with the volume of materials before they have learned to use them, bewildered by the very multitude of their opportunities. Art, manners, culture, taste, suffer by the harassing rapidity into which life is whirled on from old to new fashion, from old to new interest, until the nervous system of the race itself is agitated and weakened by the never-ending rattle . . . Rest and fixity are essential to thought, to social life, to beauty; and a growing series of mechanical inventions making life a string of dissolving views is a bar to rest and fixity of any sort. (424)

You can hear something of the anxiety of Tennyson’s “The Two Voices” and Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* in Harrison’s description. Industrialism seems to be driving so insistently towards the new and the newer that it bewilders thought and prohibits rest. Ever-new fashions and ever-new interests surface continually in a whirling process that strains the nerves nearly to the point of breaking. And behindhand, all the bits of accumulating knowledge pile up faster than we can master them. There may be more science, more knowledge, and

more culture than ever before, but there is no way to organize the whole and nothing to give meaning to this growing mass of materials. Harrison, himself, would have counseled rest, except that rest was exactly what progress would not permit.

In the end, however, Harrison was no skeptic, and his was hardly a Benjaminian critique of the expanding chaos of life under progress. Even though he thought that industrialism had deepened poverty and even though he worried that it might damage the “the nervous system of the race,” he still believed in its promise of future advancement. That, in sum, is what makes Harrison’s talk such a revealing document. It shows the strange willingness of Victorian intellectuals to embrace those same forces which they knew had “dehumanized members of society” (426) and driven the whole “dancing mad” (425).

The railways, the factories, the telegraphs, the gas, the electric wonders of all kinds, are here. No latter-day sermons or societies of St. George can get rid of them, or persuade men to give up what they find so enormously convenient. Nay, the case is far stronger than this. These things are amongst the most precious achievements of the human race, or rather, they will be, when we have learned how to use them without all the evils they bring with them. (425)

Harrison is actually making several different claims in defense of industrialism—and they fit together rather awkwardly. It is fruitless, Harrison says at first, to try to erase what is already done; industrialism has happened, and it can’t be made to un-happen. Fortunately for us, he also thinks that we needn’t try to make it un-happen, because in fact it has brought great benefits. “The railways, the factories, the telegraph,” he continues—these things either *are* “amongst the most precious achievements of the human race” or they *will be*. The sentence is designed to imply both of these things, and to make it difficult to distinguish between them: industrialism is precious, and industrialism will be precious. Or, more accurately: industrialism is precious *because* progress will one day make it precious. It is the promise of industrialism, rather than the accomplishments, which is paramount, and it is the association of industrialism with progress which makes it valuable. Despite the dreary black suburbs and the endless restlessness, Harrison holds to the idea that society has moved, is moving, and will continue to move in a desirable direction—even as he acknowledges the terrible costs (material and psychological). Both were crucial to the notion of industrial progress, and always in this same, imbalanced way. For the Victorians, progress may have been an ambivalent idea but it was still a minimally trustworthy one, a resistless force which needn’t be resisted. Pain and progress were inseparable partners, but they were never equals.

Industrial Literature

We are now, finally, in a position to say why, precisely, the notion of progress is so crucial for understanding industrial literature. First, because it was reshaped, in the 19th-century, to match the mixed experience of industrial growth. Second, because Victorian literature—and then modernism too—seized on this epiphenomenon in order to grapple with the underlying changes of industrialism itself.

We might be tempted to ask, at this point, why writers took this approach—why they preferred to view industrialism through the lens of progress rather than in some more direct fashion, but the first response to this must be to say that their approach was, in fact, quite direct. Industrialism, remember, means something more than the intensification of industry. It refers also to a break in economic history, when the long Malthusian sleep was finally ended and real, distributed growth first became possible. And it follows, as a kind of literary corollary, that writing about industry is not the surest way to write about industrialism. Scenes of factories and labor riots do not an industrial novel make, because such sequences do not in fact touch upon the most revolutionary aspect of industrial life. That requires something else: a far broader engagement with the radically new possibilities of growth and, beyond that, with the promise of progress that came smuggled alongside. The first reason, in other words, that writers approached industrialism through the medium of progress was because progress brought them closer to the heart of industrial change than any direct representation of class or railways ever could.

The second reason is that by approaching industrialism through progress—rather than through machinery—these writers were exploiting the native resources of their craft. Progress was something more than a useful idea; it was in some sense a literary idea, an idea perfectly suited to the strengths of literature itself. It made aesthetic and intellectual demands that literature was particularly equipped to fill. One of those demands had to do with figural language, progress's strange affinity for elaborate metaphors and grandiose images. There are countless examples of this, not least among them Marx's concise phrase from *The Communist Manifesto*: "All that is solid melts into air." The power of this line comes precisely from its ability to distill the complex anxiety of progress into a perfectly mixed metaphor, and you can find similarly mixed metaphors throughout Frederic Harrison's lecture.²⁷ At one point, in three consecutive sentences, Harrison manages to describe his fellow Victorians as "a-tiptoe with hope and confidence," "on the threshold of a great time," and certain that "great things are in the air" (415). My point, here, is not to deride these confused phrasings, but to show how considerable was the need for new figural resources when progress was being discussed. The future, industrialism seems to promise, will be better than the present: richer, more complex, happier. But since we have little control over where we are headed, we can know very little about what that future will actually look like, how it will be organized, or who, precisely, will get to live there. Figural language offers the boon of indirect description, gesturing towards the greatness of tomorrow without specifying the details. Progress, in some sense, cries out for figural language, and literature—which is so adept at figuration—found it easy to answer.

In addition to this affinity for figural language, there was another aspect of progress that suited it for literary appropriation: its ambivalence, which mirrored literature's rare ability to hold in suspension a variety of competing ideas and feelings. This talent, which Keats called negative capability and Wolfgang Iser "the simultaneity of the mutually exclusive" (273), is a defining resource of literature in all its forms. And it matched, perfectly, the deep, unsettled ambivalence of industrial progress. With due respect for Harrison's lecture, it was easier for a poem to do justice to this ambivalence than an essay, and easier for a narrative than a

philosophy (the effect is so strong, in fact, that even fierce cultural critics, like Carlyle and Morris, who flirt with anti-progressive positions in their essays still make progress a guiding force of their fictions.) The great Victorian writers, and also the modernists who followed them, learned to exploit literature's facility with ambivalence in order to fix some compound perspective on the mix of excitement and unease which characterized industrial progress; and they gained, in that way, a kind of representational authority over industrialism itself.

Recognizing this—simply noticing how profoundly the literary response to industrialism was shaped by progress—allows us to see the full cultural reach of industrial change, not only its impact on the industrial novel but on genres as diverse lyric, Romance and spiritual autobiography.

Just as important, it helps us answer a crucial, if much-ignored question about modern literature, namely why a roughly similar experience of industrialism should have issued in literary movements as different as Victorian literature and modernism. For in many ways, these movements did share a common context: the context of urban industrial capitalism. And only in one case did the historical experience of shock and alienation produce an aesthetic of shock and alienation. The Victorians found a different path through the wilderness of industrialism, less tortuous and less tangled. And the reason they pursued this other, more even path was not because their experience of industrialism was less intense or less profound—to the contrary, it was in some ways more profound, being first and alone. The reason is that their experience of industrialism was still intimately connected with progress. For the Victorians, industrialism may have had its terrible aspect, but there was always this slight imbalance, the minimal excess of faith over fear.

By the time industrialism slipped England's shores and crossed into Europe, however, that excess had eroded, worn down by decades of frantic activity and failed promises. The greatest difference between the first, Victorian phase of industrialism and the second, modernist one, in other words, is simply that one was first and the other second. The Victorians had no framework for judgment, no experience they could use to evaluate the changes that were reshaping their lives. The modernists, in contrast, could look back on the full history of Victorian England, and when they did they saw a less than reassuring pattern: urban poverty stubbornly entrenched, a daily pace unsuited to rest or calm, the narrowing of human life into economic life and of man into *homo economicus*. As a consequence, the once-firm pairing of industrialism with progress came unglued. What looked, even to the Victorians, like a railway driving frantically forward looked, to the modernists, like a railway that had run off the tracks. The great promise that had inspired so much of Victorian literature and culture was simply overwhelmed by the modernists' greater experience of industrial pain, and one of the consequences was a new approach to literary experimentation and literary politics.

I mention literary politics, in particular, because it is one of the defining differences between modernism and Victorian literature. It is also a difference that becomes immediately comprehensible in light of this change in the status of industrial progress. Modernism's commitment to formal radicalism as a mode of political radicalism—and its insistent effort to make radical art the model for radical change—derives precisely from its disenchantment

with the kind of sequential, path-dependent improvements that progress entails. By contrast, the Victorian distaste for political and literary radicalism finds its very warrant in the still-ascendant vision of progress as a plodding agent of amelioration. One thing the comparison between modernism and Victorianism reveals, in other words, is that Victorian literature is not only the less political of the two but also less political than is usually imagined or argued. And ultimately, that should not be surprising. Those who trust to progress leave themselves little room for politics; they hold to the hope that progress itself will take care of the future, without any need for active engagement. The characteristic response of Victorian literature was, for that reason, not political but rather fictive. Unlike the modernists, Victorian writers rarely aspired to incarnate a new idea of the subject or a new model of society; they wrote in order to keep alive, in fiction, some treasured ideas that they knew they could not implement and dared not try.

The chapters that follow make these claims concrete and vivid by showing how various authors framed their relation to industrialism around the vanishing point of progress.

- A First Look: Carlyle
- Looking Ahead: Tennyson
- Looking In: Baudelaire
- Looking Back: Eliot
- Looking Out: Morris
- A New Look: Joyce

They are bound together, moreover, by a host of recurring tropes and shared preoccupations. The figure of Ulysses, for instance, which we see in Carlyle, Tennyson, Baudelaire, and Joyce. The feeling of homesickness, so prevalent in Tennyson, Eliot, Joyce, and Morris. And as a first, brief example, the effort to reconcile progress with closure and, even more so, with death.

At some point, each of these writers turns to Death as a resource against the endless openness of progress. Death's fixity, its finality, its irrevocability helped them to concentrate, in a single image, their sense of progress' ultimate inhumanity, its indifference to the natural rhythms of human life. For centuries, the rise and fall of civilizations had been metaphorically linked to the growth and decline of individuals, the ages of the world aligned to the ages of man.²⁸ Industrialism disabled that analogy, creating a dismal tension between the endlessly improving world and the inescapable end of each mortal.²⁹ But in this tension, there lay also a bleak kind of comfort, a reminder of the essential needs—for rest, for fulfillment, for ending, for death—that limitless progress simply could not fulfill.

For the remainder of this introduction, though, the feature of industrial literature I most want to emphasize is not its flirtation with death but its obsession with agency, or rather the enervation of agency in the landscape of industrial progress. Because the simple idea that history itself was driving towards a brighter future had a profound impact on the imagination

of human activity. What was left for people to do? Steer? Prepare? Get out of the way? We have already seen some of the ways this problem gets figured: in Huskisson's resonant death, Spenser's abstract law, and Dickens's trembling engines. But these are just a few, and the threat of human impotence is one of the great touchstones of industrial literature.

What follows, then, is not a series of chapter summaries but a selective path through the whole, a first agency-inflected glimpse at the unfamiliar topography of this new industrial literature, with Baudelaire beside Tennyson, and Joyce close to Eliot (George, that is). There are, to be sure, still ways to find the old footing: the Victorianist can begin with the Introduction, move through Carlyle, Tennyson, and Eliot, and then finish with Morris; the Modernist, by contrast, can jump from the introduction to Baudelaire, and again to the Morris before ending with Joyce. There is a certain logic to each of these routes; they correspond, roughly, to two parts of my argument: 1) that the Victorian conception of progress provides a new framework for understanding the relation between industrialism and literature; 2) that this same framework makes the association of modernism with modernity untenable and compels a new approach to modernist style. The trouble, however, is that some of the most interesting questions have, instead, to do with the crossing of these arguments. If the Victorians stood on the shifting ground of industrial modernity, why isn't their literature more appropriately unstable? Or, from the other direction, why should modernism have Paris as its home if England was always the more modern place? To make it more concrete: why should Baudelaire have sent one of his few presentation copies of the *Fleurs du Mal* to an English poet he had never met, Alfred Tennyson.

If we are going to answer these kinds of questions, we have to abandon any expectation of easy chronology. Any hope that the discourse of industrial progress might begin—in some incipient way—with Carlyle, gather force through the Victorian period, and finally break down into modernism. Not that this is altogether wrong, but neither is it not right enough to do much historical work.

Focusing on agency makes the inadequacy of such an approach immediately clear. Because far from being partial, initial, or in any way preparatory, Carlyle's call for heroic human action was as strident as anything that followed (just as his prose was as fully fractured as any modernism could wish). He was among the first to recognize the full, systemic nature of industrial change, and the very first to bring the word industrialism into English. But the real reason my first chapter belongs to him is because he was the first to make industrialism a problem for literature—not just industry, that is, but the full, frightful, and thrilling sweep of industrial growth. It is all there in Carlyle's one, great work of imaginative fiction, *Sartor Resartus*. And far from expressing the kind of arch reactionism so often associated with Carlyle, what *Sartor* offers is a qualified embrace of industrial progress. An embrace that comes with one grand caveat: let us have growth, but only if we can have agency as well. If we can take this engine of creative destruction which has done so much (and promised so much more) and turn it, adapt it, harness it so that it will produce not just material gains but spiritual ones as well. The same energy of improvement, only redirected by noble hands.

Carlyle himself thought Tennyson a kind of partner in this work. "I have just been reading your *Poems*," he wrote to Tennyson just after its 1842 publication. "I have read

certain of them over again, and mean to read them over and over till they become my poems . . . Truly it is long since in any English Book, Poetry or Prose, I have felt the pulse of a real man's heart as I do in this same. A right valiant, true fighting, victorious heart;" (I.82). Coming from Carlyle, this talk of a "real man's heart" counts as the highest praise. But, in reality, Tennyson was much less strident, less obstreperous, and less self-certain, at least in his poetry. Which is not to say that he was less sensitive to the workings of industrialism. He, too, felt its great promise, and he too worried about its terrible costs. But for Tennyson, the erosion of human agency was not something that could be heroically redeemed; it was instead something that had to be accommodated. Progress was a force too grand to be challenged—and too beneficial, in any event. What Tennyson's early poems offer, instead, is an expressly minimal kind of recompense, a hint of effective community which can serve, when necessary, but which is nonetheless weak and deliberately ineffectual. Not a robust model of collective agency but rather a social salve for collective impotence.

Tennyson and Baudelaire were not friends, the way Tennyson and Carlyle were. Indeed, the very suggestion can sound ludicrous—the *enfant terrible* and the laureate together. But Baudelaire admired Tennyson, and as I've already said, he sent Tennyson one of the first presentation copies of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. More than that, Baudelaire was a devotee of English literature. Indeed, what I argue in this chapter is that it was not Baudelaire's direct engagement with the experience of 19th-century Paris that made him the first modern poet; it was his distant relation to the literature and life of that more urban, more industrial, and more intensively capitalist place, England. His truest literary partners were English poets, and his allusions and borrowing, in particular, all came from what he considered his secret society of cursed writers toiling away across the channel. One of those whom he read carefully—and imitated freely—was Tennyson. The final poem of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, "Le Voyage," is a response to Tennyson's "Ulysses," building atop Tennyson's lines its own answer to the question of how to live without agency: cherish death. Even if we can no longer shape our unfolding lives, at least in death we can escape the compulsive force of progress and accomplish our own most personal destiny.

As compared to Carlyle, Tennyson, or Baudelaire, George Eliot's response to industrialism was far more oblique. She didn't scour the shifting present or face the glowing future; she looked to the past. Not for an answer—as if we might learn how to act, today, by seeing how it was once done—but as a kind of compensatory memory. Despite the fact that she didn't think of it as a happier or richer time, for Eliot the past retained a profound imaginative value as the repository of certain ideas and values which could ease our rattling journey into the distant, if still happier future. *Middlemarch*, in particular, shows us a pre-industrial world dotted with a few, noble actors—those Dorotheas and Lydgates. But what we see of them, ultimately, is their failure, their tragedy, their inability to accomplish what they had hoped. In that way, *Middlemarch* fulfills one of the great, paradoxical demands of the time: it provides a single image of agency which can stand both as testament to the nobility of human ideals and as warning against the futility of trying to enact them. This was Eliot's finely-tuned solution, a form of nostalgia strong enough to remind us of the living dignity industrial England had left behind, but still weak enough to check any more thoroughgoing

reactionism.

Not even Utopian fiction, in fact, could imagine a more vigorous kind of response. For fin-de-siècle writers—like William Morris, H. G. Wells, W. H. Hudson, and Oscar Wilde—Utopia no longer seemed vitally connected to action or revolution; instead, it required great foresight, long patience, and an extended period of waiting. What these writers were waiting for, moreover, was something new: not the fulfillment of progress but rather the boon of degeneration. By this point, declining economic conditions, heightened fears of urban-born disease, and the growing discourse of degeneration had blunted the appeal of industrial progress. These Utopian fictions therefore plot a different route into the gleaming future, where what is required is not complexity, but rather simplicity, and decline instead of development; only if humans become lesser beings can they find a richer community. The trouble is that this process takes time, long stretches of time. “Rise up today,” the slogan might be, “and someday in the distant future some people utterly unlike yourselves might be happy.” That attenuated promise is the only justification for radical action in these texts. But, when accepted, it makes Utopia possible and rescues something of the old Victorian ideal of the glorious future.

By the time of the Great War, even this final wager had been given up. As industrialism leapt the bounds of Britain and spread to new areas of the world, Victorian progress lost its force and Victorian England its primacy. My final chapter looks towards the new dynamic of experimental literature, timeworn progress, and international industrialism that drove high modernism. For the modernists, industrialism was still a fearsome fact, and its ability to produce economic growth still very much acknowledged, but the idea that this kind of growth should count as progress now seemed rather dubious, if not fully fatuous. Part of what makes James Joyce’s *Ulysses* so paradigmatic a modernist text is its easy dismissal of progress and its casual attachment to the not-yet-industrial. Joyce’s Dublin was a city that had been passed over by industrialism—once a leading European capital but long the site of acute economic decline. For Joyce, however, it is precisely decline which makes Dublin such a richly human city, a city of people whose little lives and little acts still matter. Against the entire tradition of Victorian literature and Victorian progress, *Ulysses* exemplifies a new, modernist vision which makes the trivial tremendous, the petty grand, and each everyday agent a figure of universal significance.

A First Look: Carlyle

Thomas Carlyle may have been one of the great prophets of industrialism, but he was hardly its greatest champion. Much of his life was spent declaiming the crass materialism of industrial life, and he is remembered today as much for his fustian reactionism as his early insight. Even in his own time, his name was all-but-synonymous with anti-industrial politics—as in the Frederic Harrison lecture we have already encountered. “Let Mr. Carlyle pronounce anathemas on the steam-engine,” says Harrison. “No latter-day sermons or societies of St. George can get rid of them” (425). Before industrial progress can be properly feted, the one person who must be refuted is Carlyle, and Harrison’s refutation has the pithy completeness of Johnson’s kicked stone; Carlyle, he says, is “all wrong about the nineteenth century” (415). And certainly Harrison himself is not all wrong to think so.

If we wanted to find examples of Carlyle’s overweening skepticism, we would not have to look far—either in his own work or the literary criticism it has inspired. In John Ulrich’s telling, Carlyle (along with Cobbett and Disraeli) saw around him “a historical disruption explicitly marked by the degradation of labor and the body”—the source of which was nothing other than “industrial capitalism” (4). Susan Zlotnick refers, as if in shorthand, to the “massive critique of the industrial revolution that is familiar to readers of ‘Chartism’ (1839), *Past and Present* (1843), . . .” (14).

But there is more to Carlyle’s politics than strident reaction; there is also an idiosyncratic engagement with the power and possibility of industrial life. And one reason this other, less nostalgic side of Carlyle has been so-long obscured is because of the narrow way industrialism has been understood. If by industrialism is meant machine labor and the conditions of factory work, then Carlyle was indeed a staunch critic. But when industrialism is more broadly identified with post-Malthusian growth and the discourse of progress, then Carlyle’s response looks far more equivocal. In his own way, Carlyle embraced the promise of industrial progress. Not always in those terms, and not without his own idiosyncratic reservations, but ultimately he too celebrated the vast potential of the future which industrialism had revealed.

In that sense, his response was not altogether different from Harrison’s or Mill’s, Dickens’s or Spencer’s. When Carlyle looked at the world of industrialism, he saw the same, uneven mix of pain and promise. But he saw something else as well: a new model for social and spiritual development (one that would later be called “creative destruction.”) More specifically, an opportunity to gather the energies of industrial change and redirect them towards the production of spiritual, rather than economic goods. Seizing this opportunity required something more than arch resistance to the age of machinery; it required a kind of oblique partnership. So that, ultimately, what distinguishes Carlyle from his contemporaries is not that he opposed industrialism but that he tried to claim it for his own ends.

This is true throughout his work, but it is especially true of his one book of fiction *Sartor Resartus* (the fact that it’s especially true of that one book is already telling; it speaks to the unique relationship between industrial change and imaginative literature which I described in the introduction).¹ For just this reason, *Sartor* will be my focus throughout. But, along the way, *Past and Present* will serve as foil, helping to distinguish what is unique to *Sartor* from what is general to Carlyle.

The Gospel of (Certain Kinds of) Work

Before we can really appreciate Carlyle's attraction to industrial progress, we have to understand which aspects of industrialism he did, in fact, reject. That is the aim of this first section: to delimit Carlyle's anti-industrial position so that, later, we can see beyond it.

Like everything else in *Sartor*, Carlyle's treatment of industrial life is filtered through the clothes-philosophy, which in its crudest form implies that the material world is nothing other than the manifestation of spirit or, as Carlyle's eminent alter-ego Teufelsdröckh repeatedly says, "the living visible Garment of God" (44). Spirit is the base and society the superstructure. That is the basic idea, but at different points in the text, the exact relation between base and superstructure does vary. The phrase I have just quoted, in which the world is made "the living visible Garment of God" is the strong, monist interpretation of Spirit, with the world as shadow and the divine as living reality. The obvious problem with this version, however, is that it is difficult to translate into an effective politics. If the problems of industrial society all point back, as it were, to God, then all attempts at redress spiral back to the question: what has happened to God that his reflection should be this rotted?

There is, however, another version of the clothes-philosophy, in which the world is not the shadow of the Divine but rather the shadow of humanity's relation to the divine. And this allows for a far more direct kind of politics. If the world we know is a reflection not of Spirit but of our own spirituality, then the problems of our world can be traced to faithlessness and unbelief. As Carlyle puts in *Past and Present*: "When a Nation is unhappy, the old Prophet was right and not wrong in saying to it: Ye have forgotten God, ye have quitted the ways of God, or ye would not have been unhappy" (32). Eras of great stability are, in this framework, eras of strong spiritual conviction; eras of social convulsion, by contrast, must be eras of spiritual decay. The industrial era, as *Sartor* imagines it, is not just spiritually decadent but truly dedicated.

For the last three centuries, above all, for the last three quarters of a century, that same Pericardial Nervous Tissue (as we named it) of Religion, where lies the Life-essence of Society, has been smote at and perforated, needfully and needlessly; till now it is quite rent into shreds; and Society, long pining, diabetic, consumptive, can be regarded as defunct. (176)

"Religion" is the word Carlyle uses here, but what he means is something less like organized churches and more like the incarnation of faith in everyday life. That kind of religion has, he believes, been suffering under a 300 year assault which has left it "quite rent into shreds." And with that shredding of religion has come the shredding of its shadow, society, which is now not only sick and consumptive, but truly "defunct."

The many machines of industrialism are not causes, but rather symptoms of this deeper disease. They are also its most visible symptoms, and for that reason an effective way to measure how far the disease has spread. One way, for instance, to demonstrate the spiritual rot of industrial society is by going to the market and looking for false clothing and sham wares:

But to ask, How far, in all the several infinitely complected departments of social business, in government, education, in manual, commercial, intellectual fabrication of every sort, man's Want is supplied by true Ware; how far by the mere Appearance of true Ware: . . . here truly is an Inquiry big with results for the future time, but to which hitherto only the vaguest answer can be given. If for the present, in our Europe, we estimate the ratio of Ware to Appearance of Ware so high even as to One to a Hundred . . . what almost prodigious saving may there not be anticipated, as the *Statistics of Imposture* advances, and so the manufacturing of Shams . . . gradually declines, and at length becomes all but wholly unnecessary! (86)

Here, it is the illusory character of commodities that makes the impoverishment of modern life precise and comprehensible—and they are overwhelmingly illusory. By Carlyle's estimate, only 1 in every 100 objects in the early Victorian world is a true one. The rest have the "mere Appearance of true Ware." That means that fully ninety-nine percent of everything he and his contemporaries see on a daily basis is a Sham—whether in business, government, education, philosophy, or literature. Only one percent is genuinely Divine, which gives a nice, round, numerical estimate of spiritual decay.

If we really want to appreciate the decline of spiritual life—and reach the roots of Carlyle's reactionism—we need to go beyond the market and follow, instead, the familiar Marxist path into the hidden abode of production. For Carlyle as for Marx, production is not just a crucial human activity, but perhaps the most fundamental one. It is the process by which men take immaterial thoughts and transform them into physical things.² Behind every piece of work is an Idea, something that exists in the mind and nowhere else; when we produce, we transform that Idea into a physical thing. This makes work the very hub of Carlyle's clothes-philosophy, the place where Spirit becomes matter and divine creation finds its truest human analog. As Teufelsdröckh says "Our works are the mirror wherein the spirit first sees its natural lineaments" (126).

And not only does work stand at the center of the clothes-philosophy, it also stands at the very climax of Carlyle's book, in the final paragraph of Teufelsdröckh's "Everlasting Yea":

I too could now say to myself: Be no longer a Chaos, but a World, or even Worldkin. Produce! Produce! Were it but the pitifullest infinitesimal fraction of a Product, produce it in God's name! 'Tis the utmost thou hast in thee; out with it then. (149)

Think of all the things that Carlyle could have written at this pivotal moment, but did not. He could have exhorted us to "Pray! Pray!" or "Worship! Worship!" or "Love! Love!" And in a book as committed as *Sartor* to privileging Spirit over materiality, any one of them would have made good sense. But instead of these he wrote "Produce! Produce!" and in that way he makes clear that redemption will require something more vigorous than thought and more palpable than feeling. "*Laborare est Orare*," as he says repeatedly in *Past and Present*.

Even then, there is something telling about “Produce! Produce!” It is not only different from “Pray! Pray!” and “Love! Love!,” it is even different from “Work! Work!” That word—work—is a much more generic term, a term which gets applied to all sorts of activities that do not involve the creation of new physical things. Produce is far more specific, and also much more closely connected to the pressures of industrialism. One way, in fact, to respond to Carlyle’s exhortation is by asking a simple, historical question: produce how? In the way that artisans and laborers had been producing for thousands of years? Or according to the radically new techniques introduced by Boultons and Arkwrights? These are very different modes of production, and it is not clear which, exactly, Carlyle has in mind—assuming he even acknowledges such a distinction. After all, he may not. At times, he does seem to promote the idea that all work is essentially the same, all of it good and all of it noble. “For there is a perennial nobleness, and even sacredness, in Work” (196) Carlyle tells us, in the opening sentence of a chapter from *Past and Present* called “Labour.” “All true Work is sacred,” he says elsewhere, “in all true Work, were it but true hand-labour, there is something of divineness” (202).

What could it matter, then, whether you work in a factory or an office, as a spinner, a manager, or a writer? Each one is a kind of work; each frees us from idleness; and each brings us closer to worship and to God.

Except that it does matter—to Carlyle, I mean. It matters whether you are free to produce the way laborers have produced in the past or whether you are constrained by the workings of industry. Too often, this distinction has been overlooked by Carlyle critics.³ Breton, in his book, *Gospels & Grit*, accuses Carlyle of ignoring the real conditions of production and valorizing an idea of work that has no material existence. “Carlyle’s frequent failure to distinguish between labour and Work,” he writes, “suggests a refusal to acknowledge industrial working conditions” (40).

But, really, there is no such refusal, and no such failure. Carlyle does distinguish between labor and work, albeit not in those terms. For Carlyle, there is work and then there is “noble work”—a recurrent phrase in his writing. And little question where industry belongs:

All men, if they work not as in a Great Taskmaster’s eye, will work wrong, work unhappily for themselves and you. . . . Industrial work, still under bondage to Mammon, the rational soul of it not yet awakened, is a tragic spectacle. Men in the rapidest motion and self-motion; restless, with convulsive energy, as if driven by Galvanism, as if possessed by a Devil; tearing asunder mountains, –to no purpose, for Mammonism is always Midas-eared! (PP 207)

Or, again:

Your cotton-spinning and thrice-miraculous mechanism, what is this too, by itself, but a larger kind of Animalism? Spiders can spin, Beavers can build and shew contrivance; the Ant lays up accumulation of capital, and has, for aught I know, a Bank of Antland. If there is no soul in man higher than all that, did it reach to sailing on the cloud-rack and spinning sea-sand; then I say, man is but

an animal, a more cunning kind of brute: he has no soul, but only a succedaneum for salt. (PP 220)

For work to be noble, dignified, and human it must be done right. It must be done in the eye of the “Great Taskmaster” and not in the service of “Mammon”; and it must involve a kind of daily transubstantiation, the turning of an immaterial idea into a physical thing. Industrial work, with its “cotton-spinning and thrice-miraculous mechanism” is something else: devil’s work, undirected energy, mere animal activity. Work without soul, which may be better than idleness (everything is, in Carlyle) but which falls far below the level of real, noble work.

The same distinction is already present in Teufelsdröckh’s “Produce! Produce!” with the phrase “produce it in God’s name!” This is not a simple rhetorical flourish, for which any oath would do: “produce it I tell you,” “produce it you ninny,” etc. It implies, more literally, that some production is done “in God’s name” and some in the Devil’s. Regardless of how many pins he helps make, the factory hand is barred from fulfilling the call to “Produce! Produce!” because he produces in the wrong way.

And because this “wrong” work is so strongly associate with industry, machines serve as the governing metaphor of false production and barren existence in *Sartor*, the truest figures of our fallen state. A universe “all void of life,” as Teufelsdröckh puts it at one point, is like “one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb” (127). By contrast, true production—the kind that is done “in God’s name”—has a decidedly pre-industrial cast.

“Not so,” Kathleen Blake says, in her *Pleasures of Benthamism*. At least not “when the Philosopher [Teufelsdröckh] is in a better state of mind. “Elsewhere,” she insists, “he salutes Iron Force and Coal Force in a breath with the force of Man. He salutes magic in Watt’s invention of the steam engine” (97). And to back up her claim, she quotes the following passage from *Sartor*, which is indeed an encomium to James Watt’s invention of the steam-engine:

but cannot the dullest hear Steam-engines clanking around him? Has he not seen the Scottish Brassmith’s IDEA (and this but a mechanical one) travelling on fire-wings round the Cape, and across two Oceans; and stronger than any other Enchanter’s Familiar; on all hands unweariedly fetching and carrying: at home, not only weaving Cloth; but rapidly enough overturning the whole old system of society; and, for Feudalism and Preservation of the Game, preparing us, by indirect but sure methods, Industrialism and the Government of the Wisest. (92)

Unfortunately, though, this passage doesn’t prove what Blake wants it to prove. It doesn’t show Carlyle’s embrace of industry. To the contrary, it shows just how much work must be done to make Carlyle even remotely sympathetic. All the machine-workers must be swept away and only the machine-creator left standing. Watt, after all, is not a user of machines but a maker of them, not just one of the hands but one of the minds behind industry. This is what makes this “Brassmith” a truly noble worker: the fact that he took an idea and

turned it into a machine. Those who are condemned to use his machine, on the other hand, do no such thing.

This, incidentally, helps explain Carlyle's famous appeal to the "master-workers" and "Captains of Industry," in *Past and Present*—which should not be understood as a celebration of industry *per se*. Rather, it expresses a distant hope that certain, powerful figures in the world of industry might help to undo industry, or at least change it beyond recognition. It draws its force from Carlyle's lingering attachment to the notion that even within the world of industry there are still people who work like artisans; industrial artisans like Watt. And more, that these few—being artisans and industrialists both—are uniquely positioned to reshape the world of industry into a new kind of craftsmanship, with due purposefulness restored.

Even here, in other words, the ideal of work is still overwhelmingly a pre-industrial one, centered around the independent artisan-worker. And its real paragon in *Sartor* is not Watt but the great dissenter, George Fox. Fox appears in *Sartor* as a cobbler, rather than a preacher. And he is working, as the scene opens, simply to stave off hunger and satisfy his wants:

What binds me here? Want! Want!—Ha, of what? Will all the shoe-wages under the Moon ferry me across into the far Land of Light? Only Meditation can, and devout Prayer to God. I will to the woods: the hollow of a tree will lodge me, wild berries feed me; and for Clothes, cannot I stitch myself one perennial suit of Leather! (159)

All this piece-work, Fox realizes, is getting him nowhere. He is producing like a machine, following the endless circle of desire and fulfillment, want and wages. If he wants to reach the "far Land of Light," he is going to have to find a different path. And that means two things: first, a different spiritual path and then a different mode of production.

The spiritual path he chooses is the familiar one of ascetic simplicity and self-abnegation. No more shoe-making for shoe-wages; meditation and prayer, rather than tanned hides, will be his new life. Only there is one last thing Fox must do before he can start his new life: he must stitch a final piece of clothing, "a perennial suit of Leather" that he can wear for the remainder of his days. In this final act of workmanship, Fox finds a less mechanical method—and Carlyle finds his own paradigm for true production. This is how the scene closes on Fox. His new spiritual life we must imagine; his new mode of production we get to witness.

Let some living Angelo or Rosa, with seeing eye and understanding heart, picture George Fox on that morning, when he spreads out his cutting-board for the last time, and cuts cow-hides by unwonted patterns, and stitches them together into one continuous all-including Case, the farewell service of his awl! Stitch away, thou noble Fox: every prick of that little instrument is pricking into the heart of Slavery, and World-worship, and the Mammon-god. Thy elbows jerk, as in strong swimmer-strokes, and every stroke is bearing thee across the Prison-ditch, within

which Vanity holds her Workhouse and Rag-fair, into lands of true Liberty; were the work done, there is in broad Europe one Free Man, and thou art he! (160)

There is a touch of irony, no doubt, in a phrase like “Stitch away, thou noble Fox,” but most of that irony is smothered by Carlyle’s familiar brand of insistent masculinism. The tone of the passage is chiefly ecstatic, and the image of Fox overwhelmingly heroic. This is Fox’s apotheosis, and it takes place inside the workshop, rather than out in the woods. His escape from the prison of material life into the spiritual world of “true Liberty” is sealed by the very vigorous, very powerful labor of Fox’s final act of production. It is not his prayers that carry him into a higher realm but rather his jerking elbows and stroking arms. Here, Carlyle insists, is production at its most divine, with the cloth firmly in the hands of a craftsman (rather than a power-loom) and that craftsman just as firmly committed to an immaterial Idea.

The truest production, in this labour theory of God, is still pre-industrial production, and from there flows the great bulk of Carlyle’s reactionary sentiment. His real aversion to industrialism is best understood as an aversion to the spiritual degradation wrought by the new techniques of industry. Which was turning the one thing most noble and needful—work—into devilish mammonism and mere pointless activity.

Creative Destruction

This nostalgia, however, is only part of the politics of *Sartor Resartus*, and not the most important part. It may be that machine labor is, for Carlyle, degraded labor; and it may also be that craftsmanship constitutes, for him, a higher kind of production. But, as I argued in the introduction, industrialism is as much about the horizon of economic change as it is about industry. Machines do not industrialism make, and the distinction Carlyle develops between machine labor and workshop labor hardly suffices to compass his full reaction to the growth that industrial change unleashed.

To begin to understand how Carlyle reconciles his attachment to preindustrial craftsmanship with his investment in industrial progress, it is worth starting with just one of his many peculiar images, that of the penguin. Pens, themselves, are cherished tools for Carlyle, instruments of true production in much the same way as the awl, the pincer, or the paste-horn. Indeed, they may be the truest, and most divine of all instruments:⁴

Never since Aaron’s Rod went out of practice, or even before it, was there such a wonder-working Tool: greater than all recorded miracles have been performed by Pens . . . The Word is well said to be omnipotent in this world: man, thereby divine, can create as by a *Fiat*. Awake, arise! Speak forth what is in thee. (150-1)

Teufelsdröckh is thinking, principally, of the awkward translation of John 1:1, which begins “In the Beginning was the Word . . .” Just as God himself created the universe with a word, each time that man picks up his inky pen and writes, he imitates God’s creative power and becomes “thereby divine.”

In *Sartor*, however, pens come paired with a less-obviously divine instrument, penguins. And yet, despite the contrast, penguins too are cherished things in Carlyle. Sometimes, it happens that the best way to produce in God's name is not to make but to unmake:

In all the sports of Children, were it only in their wanton breakages and defacements, you shall discern a creative instinct (*schaffenden Trieb*): the Mankin feels that he is born Man, that his vocation is to Work. The choicest present you can make him is a Tool; be it knife or penguin, for construction or for destruction; either way it is for Work, for Change. (71)

By some divine instinct, Children seem to know that their foremost duty on this earth is to Work. But they also know something else, something that adults too often forget, namely that in the right circumstances, even destruction can be a form of production. "Breakages and defacements," too, are aspects of the "creative instinct": the "knife" as much a tool as the awl, and the "penguin" cousin to the "pen." Each works by helping to give material form to an immaterial Idea. The fact that sometimes this involves destruction, and other times creation, is a secondary distinction. Whenever human labor takes an Idea and makes it a reality, it furthers the cause of Spirit and promotes the divine in man.

For those who do not know, penguins are just what they sound like: guns made out of pens, usually of the simple air-gun variety. They are instruments of violence fashioned out of that most divine and miraculous of tools. And, for that reason, they might in other hands be emblematic of violence and the perversion of "the Word." But in Carlyle they are no such thing. There is simply no tension between the pen as tool and the penguin as weapon. Each, in its own way, is an instrument for creation and for work. Nor does this easy affinity of pen and penguin depend on the ineffectuality of the latter—the fact that a penguin is as much a toy as a weapon. Real guns are afforded much the same treatment. When Teufelsdröckh is threatened by a Russian smuggler, for instance, he heroically scares him off with his "Birmingham Horse-pistol." Even pure gunpowder is, for Carlyle, a force for good in the universe:

The first ground handful of Nitre, Sulphur, and Charcoal drove Monk Schwartz's pestle through the ceiling: what will the last do? Achieve the final undisputed prostration of Force under Thought, of animal Courage under Spiritual. (31)

Those of us born into a nuclear age might imagine a different conclusion to the history of violent explosions, and to be fair some of Carlyle's contemporaries winced at this naked celebration of force.⁵ But Carlyle's tolerance for violence was notoriously high, and what he is trying to suggest here is that there is a divine element to even the most destructive explosions.⁶ Gunpowder has helped exert his will on the dumb stuff of the material world, and its more powerful successors will only further the triumph of "Thought" over "Force" and "Spirit" over "animal Courage." As with knife and penguin, all that matters is that these destructive agents provide additional tools for giving material form to immaterial ideas.

There are, in other words, two different ways to produce "in God's name": one constructive and one destructive: the pen and the penguin; George Fox, with his vigorous and

sanctified workmanship, and Berthold Schwartz with his cascading explosion and his impaled pestle. The first type is grounded in artisanship and linked imaginatively with the master craftsman; the second thrives on breakup, dissolution, and disorder and might more closely be affiliated with the luddite. Despite the obvious differences, both are treated as modes of true production, and they are linked in a way that would have been totally foreign to even so close an intellectual counterpart as John Ruskin. As Catherine Gallagher has shown, Ruskin “ranged all activities on a continuum from death enhancing to life enhancing, or from negative to positive work” (66-7); or, to quote from Ruskin himself, “My principles of Political Economy . . . were all summed in a single sentences in the last volume of *Modern Painters*—‘Government and co-operation are in all things the Laws of Life; Anarchy and competition the Laws of Death.’” (202). Carlyle, obviously, did not. For him, the creative and the destructive were far more intimately connected, so intimately connected, in fact, that even the deadly could be leagued with the divine.

We might still ask, however, exactly how these things are related. Does *Sartor* envision some dualist, or even Manichean, relation between creation and destruction? Are they perhaps dialectic, paired in the name of an as-yet-unrealized *tertium quid*? Is the arrangement something new to Carlyle, an innovative philosophical construct? What I am going to argue, essentially is that the key to their relation is not philosophical, but historical. The play of destruction and creation in Carlyle reflects the mix of pain and promise which was so central to the idea of industrial progress—or, more accurately, it is what drives Carlyle’s own, adapted engine of spiritual progress.

Of course, if Carlyle needed to build his own engine of progress, he must have felt uncomfortable with the options on offer. Not, I should say, that he doubted the gains of industrialism; he recognized that his age was, in many ways, improving. Yet the dominant idea of industrial progress was too secular, too frenetic, and too arbitrary for his taste. Being propelled forward by an indifferent force towards an unknown but promising endpoint was not a scenario he could easily stomach. “Such a marching of Intellect is distinctly of the spavined kind; what the Jockeys call ‘all action and no go,’” he wrote, not in *Sartor* but in another essay of the early 30s. “Or at best, if we examine well, it is the marching of that gouty Patient, whom his doctors had clapt on a metal floor artificially heated to the searing point, so that he was obliged to march, and did march with a vengeance—nowhither” (Works IV.16). The personification of England as a sick patient was practically a cliché at the time, but the hot-footed marcher is all Carlyle. And it neatly captures his disdain for the pointless, misdirected marching he saw all around him.⁷

Still, there were things about progress that appealed to Carlyle: its future-orientation, for instance. Like virtually all of his contemporaries, Carlyle believed that “only in resolutely struggling forward, does our life consist” (Selected 83). And he thought that if there was going to be any kind of human fulfillment, it would belong to the future, rather than the past. In that regard, Carlyle’s nostalgia for the craftsmanship of Foxes and Watts was more lament than politics. He certainly saw in the past a lost kind of dignity, but he was still sanguine enough to believe that the future held something better. What *Sartor* shows, in fact, is that far from dismissing progress as a dangerous fantasy, what Carlyle wanted was to make

it real. He wanted to take the energies of industrialism and make them serve the spiritual needs of society. And that meant, among other things, intensifying that combination of pain and promise which was so central to the idea of industrial progress. For Carlyle, as for so many Victorians, progress was always dangerously mixed, but Carlyle sought to heighten the danger. He pushed the dark symmetry of industrial progress to its effective limit, making the pain more painful and the promise more absolute. Ultimately, what Carlyle envisioned was something more than the imbrication of advancement with unease; it was the complete economic, moral, political, and spiritual regeneration of society by way of the complete economic, moral, political, and spiritual destruction of society.⁸

Destruction and creation, in other words, combine to produce progress—though they are not combined in equal parts. In fact, they are constitutively unequal, sun and moon rather than yin and yang. To borrow one of Carlyle’s own phrases, the one is shadow, the other real substance (rpt in Sigman 217). Destruction serves creation, in ways that are central to Carlyle’s politics, his theology, and especially his vision of the future (everywhere, that is, except at the level of style, which is something we will have to bracket for a moment).⁹ The whole effect is beautifully captured by the paradoxical name of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, which means God [Dio] and Devil [Teufel], birth [genes] and shit [dröckh was originally dreck], the quest for truth [Diogenes] with the diuretic power of laxatives [Teufelsdröckh was a powerful laxative].¹⁰ Yet, despite being all of these things, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh is not all of these things equally. He is painted the hero far more often than he is painted the devil, and his quest is always far more prominent than his waste. However liable his infernal side may be to strike up and work a bit of mischief, it has a decidedly subordinate role to play. And the surest evidence of this is the ease with which critics and readers have associated Teufelsdröckh with Carlyle. Had he been more of the devil, he would have been less the champion of Carlyle’s views.

Pen and gun are imbalanced in much the same way. Explosions may be essential as a means for clearing the ground, but only for clearing the ground. The real work of creation happens afterwards, and its power is lodged in a completely different set of tools. If some things must be trodden down, they should be “trodden down, that new and better might be built!” (179). We destroy, so that we may enhance the possibilities of artisanship. The converse of this simply is not true. We do not produce so that we can better destroy, any more than Fox sews his suit in order to store gunpowder. To minimize creation and choose destruction as its own proper end is to misunderstand the importance of this imbalance. It is to become like Voltaire, Carlyle’s favorite example of an excessive destroyer: “Wilt thou help us to embody the divine Spirit? . . . What! thou hast no faculty in that kind? Only a torch for burning, no hammer for building? take our thanks, then, and—thyself away” (147). The torch, like the penguin, has its role to play, but it is a supporting role, something Voltaire failed to understand. Its value depends on how effectively it sets the stage for the pre-industrial artisans and their hammers.

The other place where this imbalance is important is Carlyle’s style—which comes with its own, matchless mix of chaos and meaning. Without question, Carlyle was one of his century’s most innovative prose stylists, a writer with a very distinct and very daring ap-

proach to the craft.¹¹ Few, however, have thought the results particularly admirable. George Meredith called Carlyle's "a style resembling either early architecture or utter dilapidation" and Matthew Arnold urged others to "Flee Carlylese as the very devil" (rpt in Tennyson 238). Speaking of *Sartor Resartus*, more particularly, J. Hillis Miller has called it "one of the noisiest books among the classics of English literature" (3). Others describe it as "so dense and chaotic as to be almost unreadable" (Elliot 432) and also so convoluted that readers "struggle as the fly in marmalade" (Tennyson 246). In Henry James's terms, Carlyle may have "invented a manner" but more often it seemed as if "his manner had swallowed him up."¹²

Why Carlylese should be so noisy and convoluted is a difficult, and longstanding question—a question that bedeviled even Carlyle himself. Writing to Ralph Waldo Emerson, he humbly claimed that it was "only the best that I in these mad times could conveniently hit upon" (VII.265).¹³ In *Past and Present*, he wrote more insistently: "Literature, when noble, is not easy; but only when ignoble. Literature too is a quarrel, and internecine duel, with the whole World of Darkness that lies without one and within one; rather a hard fight at times, even with the three pound ten secure" (107).

If we set that last metaphor (of writing as battle) beside Carlyle's account of pen and penguin, then we can begin to see our way to an explanation. You can think of the chaos of Carlylese as the remnant of a literary struggle. The pen crafts, the penguin demolishes, and the pen crafts atop—writing, striking, and writing in a way that might seem antagonistic but which is in fact joined under Carlyle's philosophy of disorderly progress. Even writing—noble writing—requires this energy of creative destruction; Carlyle's prose is either the proof, or the cost.¹⁴

There is no favored word or phrase in *Sartor* for this overarching vision of progressive destruction, but there are a host of competing descriptions. "Benignant fever-paroxysms" is one of the them. "Melodious deathsong" is another, along with "Baphometric Fire-baptism" (185, 129). Whimsical though these phrases may seem, their logic is quite rigid and quite consistent: only a "paroxysm," even unto "death" will produce a "benignant" and "melodious" result. Before you can end the reign of unbelief and sham wares, you have to kill the social body and shatter its corpse into myriad fragments. This is true, moreover, of every field of human endeavor. Of spirituality, for example, Carlyle writes: "first must the dead Letter of Religion own itself dead, and drop piecemeal into dust, if the living Spirit of Religion . . . is to arise on us, newborn of Heaven" (89). Of international relations, something similar: "All kindreds and peoples and nations dashed together, and shifted and shovelled into heaps, that they might ferment there, and in time unite" (135). In both cases, what exists must not only be killed but actually reduced to heaps of dust before it is ripe for spontaneous regeneration. "Creation and Destruction proceed together," Carlyle says of history in general, "ever as the ashes of the Old are blown about, do organic filaments of the New mysteriously spin themselves . . ." (185).

The entire universe, in *Sartor*, observes the life-and-death cycle of the mythical phoenix, and if there is a leading figure for this dynamic it is that self-immolating and self-reproducing bird:

Thus is Teufelsdröckh content that old sick Society should be deliberately burnt (alas! with quite other fuel than spicewood); in the faith that she is a Phoenix; and that a new heavenborn young one will rise out of her ashes! (180)

Teufelsdröckh believes that society “is a Phoenix,” and being also “old” and “sick” she must do what all old, sick Phoenix’s do: destroy herself so as to be reborn. To that extent, the analogy is perfectly clear, but there are other aspects of Carlyle’s Phoenix worth noting. For one thing, Carlyle gives new emphasis to the irreversibility and death and birth. There is not, and cannot be, a Phoenix birth-death. The Phoenix is a bird that lives for hundreds of years, dying and renewing itself at the end of that long lifespan. It is not a bird that lies dormant for hundreds of years, only to emerge and soar for one brief moment. It is easy enough to imagine a bird of this second type—one that comes to life so that she can immolate herself the more gloriously and spend centuries in ash-form—but she would be something other than a Phoenix, and she would no longer be fit for Carlyle’s philosophy.¹⁵ Carlyle’s phoenix does not live to die; she dies to live, in keeping with the imbalance that reigns throughout *Sartor*. Creation may rely, symbiotically, on the force of destruction, but it uses destruction for its own ends.

Even more important, however, the life-cycle of Carlyle’s Phoenix is no longer cyclical—and this Phoenix no longer fit to serve as a figure for the periodic rise and fall of societies or civilizations. She has become, instead, a figure of syncopated progress:

Find Mankind where thou wilt, thou findest it in living movement, in progress faster or slower: the Phoenix soars aloft, hovers with outstretched wings, filling Earth with her music; or, as now, she sinks, and with spherical swan-song immolates herself in flame, that she may soar the higher and sing the clearer. (187)

This Phoenix doesn’t “immolate herself in flame” so that she can be reborn. She “immolates herself in flame, that she may soar the higher.” There is a developmental crescendo at work, as each new Phoenix, emerging from its own ashes, finds itself not only rejuvenated but endowed with greater vitality, able to soar higher and sing clearer than ever before. Forever strengthening herself through destruction, this Phoenix enjoys something more than eternal life: eternal progress.

And that, essentially, is how *Sartor* imagines history: as a long, episodic, destructive, and violent process of improvement. Only the immolation and utter destruction of society can propel the future to new spiritual heights—after which the cycle can begin again, with further destruction providing the engine for further development. This is a far cry from the old, gradualist conception of progress—made famous in phrases like the march of mind or standing on the shoulders of giants—where each individual contributes his small part to the work of the whole, each generation builds on the accomplishments of the former, and each snowflake adds to the accelerating avalanche. It is the *ne plus ultra* of industrial progress, where development is always accompanied by distress and growth always shadowed by unease. If we are to cure the sick patient that is England, Carlyle insists, it is not by

stimulating him to work but rather by killing him, torching his remains, and then giving those remains time to flower.

It is worth adding, moreover, that this vision of history is fairly unique to *Sartor*; it is something Carlyle developed for his first, most fanciful work, but not something he held on to. Indeed, it's quite antithetical to the vision of history laid out in *Past and Present*. There, the guiding metaphor is not a Phoenix death-birth but the "LIFE-TREE IGDRASIL," which "has its roots down deep in the Death-kingdoms, among the oldest dead dust of men, and with its boughs reaches always beyond the stars; and in all times and places is one and the same Life-tree" (42). Continuity of past, present, and future—that is what the life-tree Igdrasil stands for. And one consequence is that in *Past and Present* the whole entanglement of creation and destruction settles back into duality. Either the tree will stand or it will collapse; those are the two possibilities. The idea that it might have to collapse in order to stand taller is gone. Thinking of his nation's future fate, for instance, Carlyle writes "Nature has appointed happy fields, victorious laurel-crowns; but only to the brave and true; *Unnature*, what we call Chaos, holds nothing in it but vacuities, devouring gulfs" (145). The people of England will find one or the other—not both.

That more tumultuous vision was limited to *Sartor*—for a reason I noted in the introduction: because works of imaginative literature were especially fitted to capture the energies of industrial progress. And that is very much where *Sartor*'s death-births and fire-baptisms come from: industrialism.

To be sure, there are a variety of other paths which might have led Carlyle to this same vision of history (as perpetual death and ever-higher rebirth.)¹⁶ The bible, which Carlyle knew well and trusted intimately, is full of stories which pair God's destructive and creative powers—as in the early flood or the late revelation. And Georges Cuvier's biblically-inspired theory of geological catastrophism—which posited, against gradualist and uniformitarian accounts, that the world had been shaped by a series of catastrophes and mass extinctions—offered a more scientific version of the same. To this list, we could add a far more contemporary catastrophe, the French Revolution, whose combination of destructive and progressive forces Carlyle so evocatively re-created in his later history of that event.¹⁷ And, from the philosophical side, we might adduce the German idealism that Carlyle absorbed during his long apprenticeship—whether of Goethe, Schiller, Fichte, or Schlegel—or for that matter the Saint-Simonian tradition which also attracted his youthful attention.¹⁸

More than any of these, however, the experience that most influenced Carlyle's conception of progress and most insistently wrote itself into the texture of his prose was industrialism. Even as Carlyle was writing, a whole world of social roles and economic relations was being dismantled in the name of a new, more volatile and yet more powerful one. It was well over a hundred years before Joseph Schumpeter actually coined the phrase "creative destruction," but from the beginning Carlyle recognized the power of this self-consuming and self-regenerating process which lay at the heart of industrial capitalism and which was so visible in fates like those of William Huskisson. Not only, in fact, did Carlyle recognize the imbalance, but he made it the central paradigm of his work. *Sartor Resartus* is built around an idea of creative destruction that Carlyle himself gleaned from the operations of industrial

progress.¹⁹

Industrial Spirituality

The test of this conclusion—as indeed of any theory—is its ability to make sense of that which, otherwise, does not make sense. And the otherwise refractory conclusion to Carlyle’s text will suit that purpose. Those chapters have long been a source of controversy among critics.²⁰ To many, they have seemed tacked on, and strangely disconnected from the whole. As I will show, however, they provide something like a case study of the relationship between industrialism, true and false production, creative destruction, and spiritual progress—welding together the pattern of figures and images that have been sewn through Carlyle’s text. The Dandies, Drudges, and Tailors who populate the final sections help to render, as allegory, the whole, elaborate mechanism for distilling spiritual gains from material ones: and the key, it turns out, is to let industry do the work of destruction and artisans that of creation.

Those Dandies, Drudges, and Tailors are something more than what the editor calls “Cloth-animals”; they are over-literal devotees of the clothes-philosophy, men who organize their lives around rituals of cloth-making, cloth-purchasing, and cloth-wearing. Teufelsdröckh, himself, likes to think of them as competing sects in the recondite world of clothes-religion, each with its own dogma and liturgy. The Dandies he characterizes as a cult of self-worshippers: London’s social clubs are their temples, fashionable novels their sacred books, and the trendiest among serve as ersatz priests. The Drudges—a.k.a. Poor-Slaves—are for Teufelsdröckh just another sect. Their muddy search for subsistence he interprets as veneration for the earth, their daily suffering becomes a vow of poverty, and their lack of finery a commitment to asceticism.

Even the usually myopic editor recognizes that there is something wrong with this analysis, something truly grotesque about confusing poverty with asceticism. And he concludes that “the Professor’s keen philosophic perspicacity is somewhat marred by a certain mixture of almost owlsh purblindness, or else of some perverse, ineffectual, ironic tendency . . .” (208). It is hard to say which of the two is more likely—myopia or irony—but the effect is actually the same. Watching Teufelsdröckh’s blindness turns out to be the best way to see what he cannot. His obtuse treatment of life’s depredations is so dazzlingly out of touch that it returns us quite jarringly to the level of materiality, reminding us—by its very indifference to this fact—that ours is not only a world of sects, beliefs, and practices but also a world of poverty, inequality, and industrial havoc. The more he insists that he is discussing transcendental homelessness, the clearer it becomes that what is at stake is more like poor law homelessness.

Nowhere is this more evident than at the end of Teufelsdröckh’s account, when he describes what looks to him like a bubbling religious conflict, but which can only look to us like a raging class war:

I could liken Dandyism and Drudgism to two bottomless boiling Whirlpools that had broken out on opposite quarters of the firm land: as yet they appear only

disquieted, foolishly bubbling wells, which man's art might cover in; yet mark them, their diameter is daily widening; they are hollow Cones that boil up from the infinite Deep, over which your firm land is but a thin crust or rind! Thus daily is the intermediate land crumbling in, daily the empire of the two Buchan-bullers extending; till now there is but a foot-plank, a mere film of Land between them; this too is washed away; and then—we have the true Hell of Waters, and Noah's Deluge is outdeluged! (216-7)

The metaphor here is rather confused: why a Whirlpool should become a hollow cone and a thin crust of land a mere film is hard to say. But it is difficult to deny the power of Carlyle's prose when he waxes eschatological, and this is one of his finer efforts. What Carlyle envisions—here, through the cloudy lens of *Teufelsdröckh*—is a class war between rich and poor, Dandy and Drudge. Not just a skirmish, either, but a conflict so violent that its destructive force will raze the earth and summon a flood whose only analog is “Noah's Deluge.” Bit by bit, every last speck of earth will be absorbed by the growing maw of these “two bottomless boiling Whirlpools.” Apocalyptic language runs thickly through the passage, from the “infinite deep” to “the true Hell of Waters,” but it is important to recognize that the catalyst of this apocalypse is human, not divine. God will not unleash this flood. Class antagonism will—precisely that antagonism that the rise of industry had so massively exacerbated. The destruction of the universe—and, presumably, its Phoenix-like regeneration—is not so much a spiritual as an industrial calamity. If the world must be destroyed before it can be reborn, it is class struggle that will provide the charge.

Charge, incidentally, is exactly the metaphor Carlyle has in mind. These twin whirlpools are but one approximation, and they are quickly get superseded by another, “better” image for the struggle between Dandies and Poor-Slaves, one with a more explicit industrial resonance:

Or better, I might call them two boundless, and indeed unexampled Electric Machines (turned by the “Machinery of Society”), with batteries of opposite quality; Drudgism the Negative, Dandyism the Positive: one attracts hourly towards it and appropriates all the Positive Electricity of the nation (namely, the Money thereof); the other is equally busy with the Negative (that is to say the Hunger), which is equally potent . . . The stirring of a child's finger brings the two together; and then—What then? The Earth is but shivered into impalpable smoke by that Doom's-thunder-peal; the Sun misses one of his Planets in space, and henceforth there are no eclipses of the Moon. (217)

This time, it is a grand explosion, rather than a biblical flood, that destroys the world. The earth is shivered into a cloud of dust—and the solar system deprived of its most fertile planet—by the sudden, overwhelming release of the blocked antagonism between rich and poor. Once again, in other words, it is class antagonism, stoked by the rise of industry, which ushers in the apocalypse and rends the world in two. Only this time, the driving metaphor has been replaced: the machine has returned to claim its rightful place as the

figure for all that is false, infernal, and inhuman in *Sartor Resartus*. In this, second version of the parable, the destruction of the planet is not only triggered by industry; it is imagined through industrial metaphors.

At the same time, the tone of this second parable is strangely softened. Gone are the insistent exclamation points, and in their place is a distant, ironically touching, and mildly condescending voice that seems to see the end of the world as little more than child's play. "The Sun misses one of his planets," is a rather sweet, and not particularly hortatory, piece of description. It is also a fitting piece of description, given that for Carlyle the destruction of the world is a sad, but still temporary event—soon to be followed by an even grander rebirth. If, that is, the shivering of the earth deprives us of our only planet, it also makes room for a new one; the fragments and shards of this shivered world will be seamlessly restitched: tighter, stronger, and more beautiful.

It is the Tailors who will do the restitching. Any good clothes-philosophy needs its tailors, those who would hem and weave the material world in the pattern of the Divine. And in the wake of industrial destruction, it is these tailors who complete the work of reconstruction:

... is not the fair fabric of Society itself, with all its royal mantles and pontifical stoles, whereby, from nakedness and dismemberment, we are organised into Politics, into Nations, and a whole co-operating Mankind, the creation, as has here been irrefragably evinced, of the Tailor alone? (219)

Irony and grandiloquence aside, Teufelsdröckh's point here is that Tailors not only make the mantles that make royalty and the stoles that make pontiffs, they make the fashions and symbols that shape whole nations and indeed the very "fabric of Society." Even more to the point, they do so in a decidedly pre-industrial way. There is more to this story of planetary breakdown and social regeneration than an final exemplar of creative destruction. There is also a new division of labor. What the arrangement of Dandies, Drudges, and Tailors shows is that for creative destruction to serve the interest of spiritual progress, the destruction must be of a certain type—machine-destruction—and the creation, by contrast, must be machine-free; what industry's machines destroy, tailors piece together in God's name. No power looms will be used in this process of retailoring—despite the advantages in speed, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness. For Carlyle, they are still the tools of false production, dehumanizing in their demands and deadening in their effect. No cost-savings can justify such a loss. The tailors will do the job, and they will do it in the right way—as artisans who employ simple tools along with large amounts of human power and human ingenuity to give material form to immaterial ideas. That is what makes them the ultimate emblem of divine creation and the real, spiritual counter to infernal industry.

It is also what most distinguishes Carlyle's idea of progress. Although he may have borrowed from industrialism the basic dynamic of creative destruction, he adjusted that dynamic to suit his own ends, setting industry on one side and artisanship on the other. And that is something novel. For the Victorians, more generally, industry seemed at the very least a necessary accessory to industrial growth (which is why those terms became entangled to begin with.) The same railway that kills can be the railway that innovates, just

as the machines that rends is cousin to the one that sews. Not so for Carlyle. In *Sartor*, Machines have one, strictly limited function: they undo. Electric machines, class warfare, and the other varied forces of industry have their role to play, but it is a limited role: they get to do the ground-clearing work of destruction and dissolution. Creation, for its part, remains solidly in the hands of independent artisans and craftsmen, like the tailor.

This different division of labor points progress towards a different goal. Much as Carlyle admired—and sought to emulate—the vigor of industrial growth, he distrusted the ends. And part of the ambition of *Sartor* is to introduce new ones, to take the energy of industrialism and make it generate spiritual, rather than material progress. “The commerce in material things,” he says in one of his essays, “has paved roads for commerce in things spiritual.” (Works 1.25). *Sartor* attempts to travel these newly paved roads, to redirect the real and irreversible force of industrial progress away from machines and towards Spirit itself. And what the final sections show is that this whole operation is underwritten by Carlyle’s association of true production with artisanship (whether industrial artisans, like Watt, or pre-industrial ones, like the tailors). Placing the responsibility for creation in the hands of workers who produce “in God’s name” is what turns progress in a divine direction. And however little we may be convinced by this solution—whether because we find it eccentric, apocalyptic, or unmanageably elaborate—it has the not inconsiderable virtue of being among the first to try to resist industrialism by redirecting its energies.

Looking Ahead: Tennyson

When Alfred Tennyson's collection, *Poems*, was published in 1842, one of the people tasked with reviewing it was Carlyle's good friend, John Sterling (later the subject of Carlyle's uncharacteristically gentle biography).¹ Sterling's review begins precisely where this book began: with the railway opening of September 1830 and the death of William Huskisson, which Sterling, too, reads as a parable. Surveying that event alongside other hallmarks of modern England—from "general elections" (387) to "London business" (388) and the "Exeter Hall meetings" (388)—Sterling sees the same mix of earnestness and absurdity, development and exploitation, progress and pain.

Being a literary reviewer, though, Sterling's chief concern is not to diagnose these ills but instead to find a poet who can capture them.

This is all the poet requires; a busy, vigorous, various existence is the matter *sine quâ non* of his work. All else comes from within, and from himself alone. Now, strangely as our time is racked and torn, haunted by ghosts, and errant in search of lost realities, poor in genuine culture, incoherent among its own chief elements, untrained to social facility and epicurean quiet, yet unable to unite its means in pursuit of any lofty blessing, half-sick, half-dreaming, and whole confused—he would be not only misanthropic, but ignorant, who should maintain it to be a poor, dull, and altogether helpless age, and not rather one full of great though conflicting energies, seething with high feelings, and struggling towards the light with piercing though still hooded eyes. (390)

The string of adjectives in the middle of the paragraph gives a good sense for what makes this review so distinctive. "Our time," Sterling says, is "racked," "torn," "haunted," "errant," "poor," "incoherent," "untrained," "unable," "half-sick," "half-dreaming," and "whole confused." It might pair nicely with Wordsworth's most dire vision of the city: an "unmanageable sight" of "blank confusion," or an "undistinguishable world," fed by a "perpetual flow of trivial objects" with "no law, no meaning, and no end" (210-11). Except that while Wordsworth finds, in the end, a steadier view—draws on his lifelong acquaintance with the "Spirit of Nature" to find the "ennobling harmony" beneath this "press of self-destroying, transitory things"—Sterling prefers a poetry of hubbub. In Sterling's estimation, all of the requirements for great poetry are present in the incoherent, confused, busy, and vigorous industrial world with its "great though conflicting energies"—not beyond or behind or beneath the press and confusion but rather within. And though it may come as something of a surprise, Sterling felt that there was one poet who stood out. "Mr. Tennyson," he wrote, "has done more of this kind than almost any one that has appeared among us during the last twenty years" (395). If you are looking for poetry that grapples with the vicissitudes of modern England, look no further than Tennyson's 1842 *Poems*.

Unfortunately, Sterling himself isn't very clear about what, exactly, made Tennyson such a distinctively modern poet.² But if we wanted to fill in the gaps, we could start by noting that Tennyson actually followed Huskisson on the train from Liverpool to Manchester. It was the 15th of September when Huskisson was killed; five days later, when the same train opened its doors to the paying public, Tennyson went aboard. And before he went aboard,

he waited dutifully on the platform for the train to arrive. I mention the platform because it was there that Tennyson composed a line that would later serve as the climax for his poem, “Locksley Hall”: “Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change.”³ “Ringing grooves,” he later admitted, was a mistake; in the darkness of that September night, he mistook the raised tracks for sunken grooves. As errors go, that seems innocuous enough. What is less obvious is why he thought of the wheels as spinning “for ever.” Trains, after all, do not spin for ever. Typically, they start in one place, end in another, and make regular stops along the way. Tennyson himself was going no further than 31 miles. But, to make its way into Tennyson’s poetry, this 31 mile trip had to become an endless journey. It fused, imaginatively, with his enduring interest in the continual, indeed endless forward motion of the world and became, in that way, not a figure of travel but a figure of progress.

In the words of one 19th-century critic, “No one so largely as Mr Tennyson, has represented in art the new thoughts and feelings, which form the impassioned side of the modern conception of progress.” (Dowden 325). And while more recent critics have fruitfully explored Tennyson’s self-described “passion for the past,” surprisingly few have followed his equal passion for the future, his conviction that “the far future has been my world always” (*Letters* I 174).⁴ As his letters and poems attest, Tennyson trusted to progress, trusted that it was having its desired effect, improving human welfare and propelling England towards a higher, richer, brighter world. And he took great pleasure in the imaginative act of looking ahead, of straining his poetic vision to glimpse the improvements that he knew he could not quite see.

At the same time—and like so many of his contemporaries—Tennyson also understood the darker side of progress: its too-rapid movement, its inhuman remoteness, its refusal to take direction. He was never as distraught or as desperate as his friend, Carlyle, and for that reason he was never as obstreperously political. But he was still uneasy, and his early poetry, in particular, explores some of the deep human needs that progress was proving unable to fulfill. Two above all: the need for finality and the need for community. Where, his poems ache to know, will all this progress end? And what, in the meantime, will it do to my community?

Ultimately, I argue that his poems offer an expressly minimal kind of answer, in the form of what I call communities-in-progress. Not stable, thriving, social bonds, but weak and partial forms of association that afford only the barest kind of comfort—which is some comfort, nonetheless. These communities-in-progress are not alternatives to industrial progress, competing visions of human fullness that might challenge an entire ethos (as Carlyle would want), but they are real, they are available, and they are crucial to Tennyson’s work.

Before we can appreciate their particular importance, though, we have to better understand Tennyson’s larger poetics of progress. And to that end my focus centers on a trio of poems whose prominence in Tennyson studies is well-established but whose place in the discourse of industrial progress—and whose importance for Carlyle, Baudelaire, Morris, and others—has never been fully appreciated: “Locksley Hall,” “Ulysses,” and “The Lotos-Eaters.”

Where Does Endlessness End?

“Locksley Hall” is a dramatic monologue—one of the many dramatic monologues that Tennyson was experimenting with, and co-inventing, in the 1830s.⁵ Its speaker is a spurned, bitter, angry, occasionally fulminating young man, whose interests whirl from young love to utopian politics, eastern langour, sex, and a great deal besides. It begins, though, as a wistful love poem, with the speaker recalling the happy days when his cousin Amy still adored him and all the pleasure of existence seemed to lie ahead:

When the centuries behind me like a fruitful land reposed;
When I clung to all the present for the promise that it closed:
When I dipt into the future far as human eye could see;
Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be.⁶—(13-6)

It is hard to imagine a milder, or less textured, vision of contentment. Practically nothing, in fact, is specified in these lines. In place of actual description, we find a series of indefinite, glowing adjectives. The past is fruitful, the present promising, the future full of wonder. But they are all equally empty of content. An idea of progress does hover in the air, turning the present into a mere “promise” and drawing our eyes toward the vision of the future, but it is innocuous enough to be untroubled by the equal claim of nostalgia and the lure of “centuries behind.”

Once spurned by Amy, however—this woman with whom he spent “Many a morning on the moorland” and “Many an evening by the waters,” whispering and kissing and doing all the things that young lovers do—the speaker finds himself searching for new comfort and a new path into the future. And he finds that comfort, surprisingly, by adjusting his recollection and exaggerating his former hope in progress:

Can I but relive in sadness? I will turn that earlier page.
Hide me from my deep emotion, O though wondrous Mother-Age!
Make me feel the wild pulsation that I felt before the strife,
When I heard my days before me, and the tumult of my life; (107-10)

This, we might say, is the speaker’s new memory of the future. Whereas once he felt himself poised in an easy balance of past, present and future, now, looking back, he remembers being wrenched by a tumultuous optimism. The nostalgic note is muted, and the shift towards the future is so pronounced that the very word “before” now means “after,” as in “When I heard my days before me.”

The word “progress” does not actually appear in these lines, nor does it appear elsewhere in the poem; in fact, it is not a word that Tennyson often used. Still, this poem, like so many others, is saturated with the idea of progress—progress understood not as a technical term for economic development, but as the vague Victorian notion of infinite promise and infinite restlessness that industrial growth had inspired. In a pattern that shows up repeatedly in Tennyson’s work from this period, the great, straining notion of progress becomes a kind of

refuge, an escape from the speaker's personal loss. Time and again in Tennyson, a personal, private, or domestic disappointment is soothed by the embrace of progress, which provides both a new point of interest and a strange, new kind of intimacy.⁷

The most vivid illustration of this pattern is also the most famous of Tennyson's dramatic monologues, "Ulysses"—a poem which gives new voice to Homer's great epic hero. Set well after the conclusion of the *Odyssey*, this later Ulysses has begun to feel that his nostos is terribly dull. In fact, he is as dissatisfied with his domestic life as the speaker of "Locksley Hall"—though their reasons are different. Penelope has not left Ulysses for another suitor; she has simply become boring, along with everything else. He feels himself, as he says in his opening lines, an "idle king" (1), bound to a "still hearth" (2), paired with an "aged wife" (3), and ruling over a "savage race / That hoard and sleep and feed, and know not me" (4-5). The adjectives—"idle," "still," "aged"—all reflect the dullness of this world, and even "savage," which usually describes something more vigorous, refers here to a people who do little but hoard, sleep, and feed.

In such company, Ulysses is decidedly uneasy, and as he thinks about how to move forward, he too, like the speaker of "Locksley Hall", first looks back:

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: all times I have enjoyed
Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone: (6-9)

This is Ulysses's memory of the future. What he wants, for tomorrow, is to reembark on the turbulent journey of yesterday, to chart a new life by the stars of his former one. You can see this in the verb tenses: he "will drink," in the future, in order to recapture the "times I have enjoyed," in the past. Again, this is not really a matter of nostalgia. It is not exactly the past that Ulysses yearns for; it is the future, as he knew it in the past. On the high seas, he both "enjoyed greatly" and "suffered greatly," struggling sometimes alongside "those that loved me" and at other times "alone." And what he wants now is the same tumult, the same energy that entwined his life with the greater life of the Ancient world and kept him, as he says in the following lines, "always roaming with a hungry heart":

I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honoured of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am a part of all that I have met; (12-18)

Much of the power of dramatic monologue lies in the sly influence that the poet wields over the words of his speaker, and "I am become a name" is a good example. It is a line that

Ulysses speaks, but not one that he controls. For his part, Ulysses seems to mean that he has earned a worldwide reputation, that his “hunger” has propelled not only his ship but also his fame. Yet, from behind his Ulyssean mask, Tennyson seems to be suggesting something much more disturbing: that Ulysses has become merely a name, a rumor without substance. Forever moving, forever traveling in search of new morsels to sate his unquenchable hunger, he has lost the ability to simply be. His identity has leaked slowly into the sea.⁸ The final line—“I am a part of all that I have met”—has the same duplicity. It is easy to misread it as saying “I am made up of all that I have met,” but that is actually the opposite of what the line says. “I am a part of all that I have met” means that Ulysses has dispersed his identity to the far corners of the globe. So much of him has been left behind, in fact, that when he finally comes home to Ithaca, he comes home empty, a true No-man.

No wonder, then, that he cannot bear his “aged wife.” When he is with her, he is not himself; he exists elsewhere, in the lands he has visited and also in the lands that he has not yet visited. In fact, as the poem’s next lines make abundantly clear, whenever he is at rest he is effectively dead:

Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
As though to breathe were life. (19-24)

Christopher Ricks has pointed out how odd it is that “to pause” and “to make an end” should be synonymous in that fourth line (62). Generally speaking, pausing is a way of stopping without ending, or hesitating before continuing forward. But, for Ulysses, they are indistinguishable. Every pause is also an end, because as he puts it, breathing alone is not enough; the only life for him is the endlessly active life.

So when Tennyson’s Ulysses utters what are perhaps his most famous words, “all experience is an arch wherethrough / Gleams that untravelled world,” he does not really mean “all experience.” He means “all genuine experience.” Some experiences are not arches. Breathing, for example. Or Pausing. Or being the King to a savage race and husband to an aged wife. These things do not count as experiences. The only thing that does count is traveling, and even then there is a caveat. Movement alone is not enough. It must be perpetual movement, a compulsive, endless movement which leads only to more movement and which is well captured by the phrase “For ever and for ever.” One “for ever” should suffice, just as adding infinity to infinity only gives you one infinity, but the redundancy of this phrase calls attention to the perversity of Ulysses’s unending journey.

What is more, all this endlessly endless motion must also be forward-motion, ever reaching towards the “untravelled world” that remains perpetually out of reach. This is what distinguishes his activity from mere restlessness, and his character from that of a Romantic hero.⁹ Ulysses yearns not just for something different but, as he says with all requisite vagueness, “something more” (27). It is the perfect phrase for his character. He wants

something—he knows that—but nothing in particular. And whatever particular thing he might find pales before his desire for the “more” and the evermore. It is optimism which drives him, rather than disappointment, and enthusiasm rather than spleen. He doesn’t move around so much as he moves forward, ever-forward in quest of the nameless satisfaction of that which lies ever-ahead.

In a word, the only experience that counts for Ulysses is the experience of progress; the experience of continual, directed movement.¹⁰ Ulysses’s purposefully frantic activity has all of the hallmarks of Victorian progress: it thrives on the same optimistic future-orientation, looking past every discovery and every accomplishment towards the gleaming horizon of further discoveries and higher accomplishments; and, from the other side, it turns life into a frantic, compulsive, endless quest for the New and the Next. Ulysses cannot pause, or rest, or find a spot of happiness in any single place. He is only alive when he is unsatisfied and on the move.

Admittedly, there is at least this one, great difference: Ulysses is a lone person, while progress requires the movement of an entire society. In the introduction, I warned against conflating these things: self-improvement and social improvement. They have very different histories (the idea of self-improvement goes back much further) and they perform different kinds of cultural work. Nonetheless, they are sometimes related. Sometimes, that is, the work of allegory stretches far enough to allow one individual to stand for his whole culture. And “Ulysses” is a good example. This is not a poem about the subjective experience of one, restless man. It’s about the archetypal experience of one mythic character, a character so literarily large that he can hardly escape being an allegory. The only question is: an allegory of what? And part of the answer must be: an allegory of industrial progress. Tennyson’s Ulysses shows us what happens to humanity when it commits itself unreservedly to this new idea.

Though we might still ask why Tennyson should want to make an ancient hero his great figure of Victorian progress. Sterling himself could not understand why “a modern English poet should write of Ulysses rather than the great voyagers of the modern world, Columbus, Gama, or even Drake” (402).¹¹ And even that does not go far enough. Following Sterling’s lead, we might well ask why Tennyson did not write about an even more contemporary hero, one of the modern giants that Samuel Smiles was chronicling, for example.¹²

One way to respond is simply to say that Tennyson didn’t choose an ancient figure: he chose a proto-modern one. For Tennyson, no less than for those most un-Tennysonian thinkers, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Ulysses is “a prototype of the bourgeois individual” (43). Ulysses was among the first to find the prospect of satisfaction more appealing than satisfaction itself. And now that progress has made that condition general, he can rightly be counted among us.

And even if that explanation still doesn’t seem sufficient, the more important thing to recognize is that Tennyson’s allegory worked. His “Ulysses” was understood as a contemporary poem, a poem about the perversity of modern life. By Sterling, by Baudelaire (as we’ll see), and also by Carlyle, who quoted (actually misquoted) from the poem in the following passage from *Past and Present*:

For though fierce travails, though wide seas and roaring gulfs lie before us, is it not something if a Loadstar, in the eternal sky, do once more disclose itself; an everlasting light, shining through all cloud-tempests and roaring billows, ever as we emerge from the trough of the sea: the blessed beacon, far off on the edge of far horizons, towards which we are to steer incessantly for life? Is it not something; O Heavens, is it not all? There lies the Heroic Promised Land; under that Heaven's-light, my brethren, bloom the Happy Isles, –there, O there! Thither will we;

There dwells the great Achilles whom we knew. (41)

Carlyle is manifestly not talking about the ancient world. Quite the contrary, his invocation of Tennyson is meant to capture something specific about the burdens of the modern: its need for spiritual regeneration and its dangerous indifference to the “Happy Isles” that await us in the afterlife. What is less clear, but for our purposes more important, is that Carlyle is borrowing more than a line or two from “Ulysses.” He is borrowing a whole conception of history, and with it a conception of progress.

Clearly, Carlyle's most immediate focus is eschatology, rather than history—hence the “eternal” sky, the “everlasting” light, the “Promised Land” and the “Heaven's-light.” And at the beginning, anyway, the scene itself seems to echo this preference. With the churning sea “before us” and the steady “Loadstar” lighting our way from the sky, we are in the pull of a classic, religious structure: where the material world is set on one, horizontal plane and the light of spirit projected into a dimension above. As I say, this is a familiar trope, but it's also a distinctly anti-progressive one—one of the hallmarks of anti-progressive thought, according to Herman Lotze (in this passage, which Benjamin singled out for his *Arcades Project*):

History, however it may move forward or fluctuate hither and thither, could not by any of its movements attain a goal lying out of its own plane. And we may spare ourselves the trouble of seeking to find, in mere onward movement upon this place, a progress which history is destined to make not there but by an upward movement at each individual point of its course forward. (479)

“Denial of the notion of progress in the religious view of history” is Benjamin's gloss, and it neatly captures Lotze's point: If history lies below, and God above, there is no straight path that will get us to him, only a sudden leap.

Carlyle's passage begins this way but then the arrangement shifts. Starting with “blessed beacon,” the light above becomes a light ahead, “far off on the edge of far horizons” like the gleaming, untravelled world in Tennyson (the twinning of “far” with “far” echoes the Tennysonian “for ever and for ever.”) At this point, the light and the ground no longer stand opposed; they meet at some imaginary end of history, some point which we can reach if we “steer incessantly for life.” The whole Lotze-arrangement, where history and God are forever separated into parallel planes, dissolves in a new triangulation, the two now brought together

at the distant, but not illusory vanishing point. To be sure, the religious implications have not disappeared—Carlyle is still talking about the “Promised Land”—but his relation to that promised land has been thoroughly reshaped by contact with Tennyson. Heaven has been moved from the heavens to the horizon, and in that way eschatology has been brought into line with the resistless, seductive, and possibly endless historical process inaugurated by industrial progress and well-captured by “Ulysses.”

One way to understand this shift in Carlyle’s paragraph, in other words, is as a response to Tennyson’s poem, a sign that what Carlyle took from Tennyson was not just a few useful lines but a whole historical framework.

How Can Poems End?

Occasionally, in Tennyson’s poems, progress does come to an end—though even when it does, there is still surprisingly little room for rest or happiness. If we return to “Locksley Hall,” for instance, we can see one of these unsatisfying endings, a fleeting vision of what the world will look like after progress is complete:

For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see,
Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be;

Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails,
Pilots of the purple twilight, dropping down in costly bales;

Heard the heavens fill with shouting, and there rained a ghastly dew
From the nations’ airy navies grappling in the central blue;

Far along the world-wide whisper of the south-wind rushing warm,
With the standards of the peoples plunging through the thunder-storm;

Till the war-drum throbbed no longer, and the battle-flags were furled
In the parliament of man, the Federation of the world.

There the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe,
And the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law. (119-130)

Leaving aside for the moment the baroque language of these couplets, the sequence is actually rather straightforward. Trade—here figured by “argosies of magic sails”—will expand until an unspecified dispute turns global exchange into global war, with “the nations’ airy navies” defending “the standards of the peoples.” Once ended, this global war will produce a lasting peace, which is like nothing so much as a well-earned sleep, “lapt in universal law.” This is what the speaker of “Locksley Hall” see when he dips into the future: a completed world of universal law and easeful rest.

Poetry is not social theory, to be sure, but still this utopian fantasy seems rather unimaginative—at least compared to some of the other visions of the day (those of an Owen or a Fourier.) What the speaker calls “universal law” looks very like an expansion of English governance: a “Parliament” of men run by the “common sense of most.” Add to

this the very undemocratic suggestion that the job of parliament is to “hold a fretful realm in awe,” and the whole thing starts to look a little suspect. The really grand gestures are poetic, rather than political. Some of Tennyson’s most flamboyant images find a home in these lines, e.g. “Argosies of magic sail,” “Pilots of the purple twilight,” “airy navies,” and “ghastly dew.” And the whole expanse gains a dubious grandeur by being elevated into the atmosphere. It is the heavens, Tennyson tells us, that have filled with commerce, just as the merchants at sea have become pilots of twilight and the navies are battling in the blue skies. The Utopian impulse of this passage finds a kind of fulfillment in the elaborate imagery, but if you look too closely, what you see is just an idealized England elevated several thousand feet into the air.

Of course, whether this vision seems satisfying to us, over 150 years later, is not really the issue. The greater difficulty is that it does not even satisfy the speaker of “Locksley Hall.” Having conjured this world, in all its airy splendor, he quickly dismisses it to return to his couplets of phlegm and acrimony. Somehow, that is, this glimpse of Utopian life is not fulfilling enough to soothe the speaker nor conclusive enough to complete the poem. Even after Utopia, there is a lot more ranting to do, a lot more heartache to suffer, and a lot more progress to cheer. And this is true more generally in Tennyson. Where you find visions of the end of progress—and there are more than a few—they are rarely allowed to stick. They provide, instead, a middling kind of resolution that is quickly overrun.

Nowhere is this more pointed than at the end of Tennyson’s poems. Bringing a poem to its conclusion somehow strengthened Tennyson’s need to bring progress to its conclusion.¹³ The end of the one seemed to call, in a strange way, for the end of the other. In fact, finding a way to reconcile the two—the end of progress and the end of a poem—was an abiding concern, something Tennyson struggled with in a number of works.

The basic demand of closure is a simple one, namely that the uncertainties activated by a text should be disarmed, or at the very least made to seem so.¹⁴ A great deal of valuable work has been done on the topic, but Henry James describes it nicely:

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so. (260)

The problem, as James sees it, is that fiction sets in motion a series of events whose effects might go on indefinitely. There is always something arbitrary about where stories end, and the “exquisite problem of the artist,” as James puts it, is to conceal this fact, to make the final page seem like a natural, and inevitable endpoint.

For obvious reasons, James is thinking of novels and novelists, but the burden for poetry is not altogether different. At least, Tennyson didn’t think it altogether different. It may not have been necessary for him to draw an absolute circle around the images and ideas released by his poems, but he still tried to fix those ideas within some stable pattern. And this proved particularly difficult when the poems dealt with progress, for the simple reason that closure and progress are themselves antithetical. Progress is above all about openness, the continual and perhaps endless development of society towards ever-more-desirable states.

Closure, on the other hand, is about the illusion of finality, about pretending that at some point development will reach a natural endpoint. Tennyson's peculiar solution was to have it neither way, to introduce a hint of resolution distinct enough to seem meaningful but faint enough to be readily bypassed. The conclusion of "Ulysses" provides a good example.

At the end of that poem, Ulysses returns to port to summon his mariners and embark on one final journey, one last brush with progress.¹⁵ "You and I are old," he says to them, "but something ere the end, / Some work of noble note, may yet be done" (49, 51-2). There is still time, in other words, for a final flirtation with the life of endless discovery. A new note, however, is also struck in these last lines: an intimation of finality and a strange suggestion that this, last voyage, will somehow satisfy the resistless compulsion to move:

Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew. (56-64)

There is a great deal of pathos in these lines, and it has led many critics to conclude that Tennyson's Ulysses has a kind of death-wish.¹⁶ That, certainly, would be one way to escape the thrall of progress, but in fact Ulysses's choice is rather different. At home, in Ithaca, he is already dead, condemned to merely breath out his days. To sail away is to escape this dull death and find a livelier one, where either "gulfs will wash us down" or he will reach the "Happy Isles." There is death in both cases, but in neither a real desire for death. Ithaca he wants to leave, and the "Happy Isles" he may one day reach—but not yet. The most telling phrase in this regard is "until I die." Ulysses may be heading towards death but it is not because death is his goal. In reality, he is sailing in search of "newer worlds" and he will continue to do so until he dies. That is what makes this his last voyage—not the fact that it is a suicide mission but the fact that he has given up on the idea of stopping. This final journey is final because it will go on as long as he does, which brings Ulysses up against one of the deep perversities of progress: even as it promises to lead us into a better future, it turns life into an endless wandering unto death.¹⁷

At the same time, the language of the passage—with its "sunset" and its "Happy Isles" does seem to offer at least some, distant possibility of comfortable ending. The poem wants, as it were, to suggest both things: Ulysses's undying commitment to wandering and his ultimate winding down. Contradictory though these may be, they both work their way into the final lines:

... that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. (67-70)

To the very end, Ulysses continues to rally his mariners to action, insisting that they have enough youth left in their “heroic hearts” to make one final raid on the indefinite. That last line, however—“To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield”—would seem to disagree. What is that “find” doing there? Ulysses is hardly interested in finding; striving and seeking are his main concerns. Yet, there it is, this unqualified “to find,” seemingly slipped into his final words.¹⁸

To demonstrate just how peculiar this really is, it is worth comparing Ulysses’s last words with another, nearly identical, Tennysonian line, this one from a section of “The Two Voices” where the skeptical voice is teasing his more optimistic partner about the impossibility of finding:

’Forerun thy peers, thy time, and let
Thy feet, millenniums hence, be set
In the midst of knowledge, dreamed not yet.

’Thou has not gained a real height,
Nor art thou nearer to the light,
Because the scale is infinite.

’Twere better not to breathe or speak,
Than cry for strength, remaining weak,
And seem to find, but still to seek. (88-96)

Several of the keywords from “Ulysses” appear in that last triplet—breathe, find, seek—and it is easy to imagine them being spoken to Ulysses, in a kind of spat between poems. You could sail onward for a thousand years, “The Two Voices” taunts, amassing knowledge and experience yet undreamed of, but you would still be no closer to the end, “Because the scale is infinite.” Finding is an illusion, a dream of fulfillment that the whole structure of progress disallows. The best you can do is to “seem to find.”

As a retort, Ulysses might say that this is fundamentally wrong, that the ‘infinite scale’ problem is spurious, and that it is entirely possible to gain, learn and develop even if we cannot ever reach a final port. Facing the other direction, he might say that it is fundamentally right, that he will never find anything, but that eternal frustration is actually the best that this world has to offer. As it happens, though, I do not think he says either of these things. He merely speaks around the problem, turning the stark opposition of “seem to find, but still to seek” into the facile friendship of “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

Though perhaps the more accurate thing to say is not that Ulysses speaks around the problem but that the poem itself does. I said earlier that dramatic monologues thrive on the sly interplay of speaker and poet, and “find” seems to belong as much to Tennyson as to his character. Finding, that is, may not be the kind of thing that Ulysses cares about, but it is the kind of thing that Tennyson cared about, and the reason it gets fitted into his 96th line is to satisfy a poetic demand that he felt quite strongly: the demand for closure. The

single misplaced verb, “To find,” allows Ulysses, and the poem, to finally rest, to complete that Jamesian circle which would give at least an illusion of completion.

Even as illusions go, though, this one is decidedly weak, a lone infinitive which may seem out of place but which can do no more than hint at the conclusive resolution that the poem never achieves. The idea of finding adds a note of completion to this work which is otherwise about ceaseless striving and endless seeking, but it is still a muted one: easy to miss and far too muffled to have any real reverberation. That’s not a poetic failing; it’s merely what happens in these poems which explore the power and burden of progress. There, the demand for closure is matched by an interest in endless openness, and the result is a resolution stiff enough to suffice, for a moment, but not sufficiently stalwart to interfere with the ongoing work of progress.

Tennyson’s endings often include elements like this. A final port is hastily found and made up to look like a real destination, but once we get there, it turns out to be too shallow to actually dock.¹⁹ If there is anything that makes the ending of “Ulysses” unusual, it is the absence of religious imagery. More often, what we find at the troubled end of Tennyson’s poems on progress is a turn from progress to Providence. The ceaseless voyage into the unknown suddenly becomes a spiritual allegory whose only possible end is a heavenly bastion. “Mechanophilus (In the Time of the First Railways)” is one such poem, and though it is certainly not one of Tennyson’s most sophisticated works, it remains one of the most revealing pieces he ever wrote about industrialism and progress. The great bulk of the poem is devoted to celebrating man’s newly developed capacity to shape the world to his will. “Dash back that ocean with a pier,” the second stanza begins, “Strow yonder mountain flat, / A railway there, a tunnel here, / Mix me this Zone with that!” (5-8). To industrial man, the earth has become a mere plaything—not divinely-cast life-world but molding clay awaiting its new shape. Hubristic though this notion may sound, there is very little irony in these lines. For the speaker, at least, this power to reshape the earth is an unmixed good, driving a process of development which is as endless as anything Ulysses ever imagined. “To those still working energies,” the speaker says, “I spy nor term nor bound” (19-20).

Something unusual happens at the very end of the poem, however. All of a sudden, in the final two stanzas, everything mechanical about this “Mechanophilus” disappears, in favor of a more traditional and less industry-riddled framework.

Meanwhile, my brothers, work, and wield
The forces of today,
And plow the Present like a field,
And garner all you may!
You, what the cultured surface grows,
Dispense with careful hands:
Deep under deep for ever goes,
Heaven over heaven expands. (29-36)

Industry is here displaced by agriculture: plowing and garnering, cultivating and growing have taken us far away from the world of mountain-flattening and railway construction. And

there is an even more crucial way that these last stanzas distinguish themselves from the rest of the poem: they make room for a power higher than man. Plowing and garnering are not just agricultural practices, they also have a strong biblical resonance, echoing as they do the famous reaping and sowing of Galatians. They point towards an order of meaning deeper and more fulfilling than anything possible through progress alone. In particular, they point towards the heaven of the final sentence: “Deep under deep for ever goes, Heaven over heaven expands.” At the end of the poem, there is a Heaven, and with it the suggestion that progress, properly understood, will lead us not only to Utopia but in fact to the city of God.

Just like “Ulysses,” that is, “Mechanophilus” ends by striking an unexpected note of finality. Also like “Ulysses,” however, this note is willfully muffled. In this case, the idea of Heaven as a place of eternal rest is checked by the lowercase “h” and the strange topography of “Heaven over heaven”—as if the word heaven might be spoken and unspoken at the same time, as if we might begin with “Heaven” and then casually construct the remainder of the line to make it mean nothing more than the sky. In so far as we must think of Heaven, when we read this, it is a peculiar kind of heaven, a Heaven which expands upward towards greater and greater heights. Beyond each heavenly iteration lies an even better, even higher heavenly plane, stretching out into an infinite expanse of Heavens beaming over other Heavens. If this sounds all-too heterodox, it is actually how Tennyson conceived of Heaven. “I can hardly understand,” he once wrote, “how any great, imaginative man, who has deeply lived, suffered, thought and wrought, can doubt of the Soul’s continuous progress in the after-life” (Collins 152-3). Even in the bosom of God, that is, Tennyson thought his life would be incomplete without some hope for progress. Restful satisfaction was not something humans could enjoy—not in this life and not in the hereafter (“Physical quietude and dull pleasure” Tennyson called it, “the mere physical happiness of breathing, eating, and sleeping like an ox” (*Letters* I.175)). Indeed, the only life Tennyson could imagine was the life of movement, the life of freedom, suffering, strife and development.

Still, there was something about endlessness that haunted him. However little he wanted to live in the world after progress, his poems occasionally reflect a desire to look ahead and see that completed world. Sometimes, as in “Locksley Hall,” this forward glance shows up in the body of his poems. More characteristically, it appears at the end. The work of ending seemed to cry out for a surer resolution and a more absolute kind of historical completion than progress would allow, and yet, the most his endings can do is hint at this completion—if hint is not already too strong a verb. A quick nod to “finding” or to “Heaven” provides only the coldest, most fleeting kind of comfort; it introduces a finality that the rest of the poem renders untenable. In Tennyson’s poems, the end of progress is something to be glimpsed and passed over, not something to be lived and experienced.

Is There Room for Rest?

If Heaven will not do, however, there is still another way out of progress: we can just give up on it, freeing ourselves from the pain by abandoning the thrill and the pleasure. Obviously, this is not something that interests Ulysses; for him, a life without quest is a life of mere

breathing. Yet, the speaker of “Locksley Hall” might feel differently. He has not yet given up on happiness, even if his efforts so far have proved unsuccessful. So in a last, desperate effort to find that happiness, he decides to start, as it were, from the beginning—without civilization, without love, and without progress.

It helps that he actually has a memory of life before progress, drawn from “Deep in yonder shining Orient, where my life began to beat” (154). Rather late in the poem, that is, we find out that the speaker was not raised in England but rather in India—first by his father and then, after his father’s death, by his uncle. His memories of that time are rather vague, and plainly tainted by the orientalist idea of the languorous east, but they are vivid enough to exert a lingering pull. It is not surprising, then, that one of the things he considers as part of his long search for comfort is a “retreat” to the Orient, where he hopes to find a truly sumptuous immobility (153):

Larger constellations burning, mellow moons and happy skies,
Breadths of tropic shade and palms in cluster, known of Paradise.
Never comes the trader, never floats an European flag,
Slides the bird o’er lustrous woodland, swings the trailer from the crag;
Droops the heavy-blossomed bower, hangs the heavy-fruited tree—
Summer isles of Eden lying in dark-purple spheres of sea. (159-164)

Instead of a future utopia, what we have is a past Eden; instead of tumult and activity, “mellow moons and happy skies”; and instead of heavenly commerce, a world without trade. The shift from “for ever” to “never” is especially revealing. One might easily describe this place as “for ever restful,” or “for ever changeless.” But the speaker chooses instead: “Never comes the trader, never floats an European flag.” Negation is what matters here. In the speaker’s eyes, these islands are defined not by what happens but by what does not happen. They are the kind of place where things do not happen, and where even those few things that do, mysteriously, manage to happen are still strikingly inactive. Verbs like “Slide” and “swing” have an air of playful inconsequence, while the more languid “droop” and “hang” lack the energy even for that. Without steamship, railway, and the march of mind, life succumbs to heat and gravity. To speak proleptically, everything here is *luxe, calme, et volupté*. More than that, it is a familiar kind of *luxe, calme et volupté*—familiar, that is, not from Baudelaire (who had not yet written his poem) but from an earlier work of Tennyson’s: “The Lotos-Eaters.”

“The Lotos-Eaters” is yet another Odyssean poem, a kind of negative of “Ulysses,” where the attachment to progress becomes resistance and the vigor fatigue. The Homeric episode on which the poem is based is brief, but justly famous. Ulysses’s men, stopping at an island on their rough route back from Troy, taste of the Lotos-Flower and become enthralled. And this experience, which Homer describes in a few brief lines, Tennyson dilates into a few hundred:

In the afternoon they came unto a land
In which it seemèd always afternoon.

All round the coast the languid air did swoon,
Breathing like one that hath a weary dream.
Full-faced above the valley stood the moon;
And like a downward smoke, the slender stream
Along the cliff to fall and pause and fall did seem. (3-9)

This is yet another place where things do not happen, where heaviness droops into immobility. Part of that effect is formal, built around the slow sonority of s's and f's and the rich, round-voweled rhymes. Adjectives like "languid," "weary," and "downward" contribute to the air of fatigue and, the extended last line of the alexandrine feels like pentameter dulled into excess repetition. But the centerpiece is the moon, which stands "full-faced above the valley" in the middle of the "afternoon." So exhausted is this world that the heavens themselves have stopped circling.

It is here, on this exhausted island, that Ulysses's mariners finally decide to rest. Being the ones who steer and stroke, and carrying as they do the full burden of endless movement, they are much less attached to progress than is their captain-King. To them, it seems like the futile work of "ever climbing up the climbing wave" (95). And though their pain is muffled in "Ulysses," where they merely toil and think, in "the Lotos-Eaters" they finally find their voice:

All things have rest: why should we toil alone,
We only toil, who are the first of things,
And make perpetual moan,
Still from one sorrow to another thrown:
Nor ever fold our wings,
And cease from wanderings,
Nor steep our brows in slumber's holy balm; (60-6)

They know their work is endless, their moan "perpetual," their wings never folded, their sorrows thrown one upon the next. What makes it worse is that they endure these things alone. Indeed, the word "alone" in the first line has a double meaning. "We toil alone" means, in the first place: only humans toil while other forms of life can simply breathe and be. But it also suggests a kind of overburdened loneliness. Even though they are all one crew, these men still toil in isolation, not all together but all alone.

The delicate lotos-flower brings all of this to an end. Finally, on this island, the overburdened mariners will stop, give up the perpetual search for the new, and take refuge in the rare stillness of their dreamy surroundings. Yet, much as the poem sympathizes with the mariners plight, it cannot sympathize with their solution.²⁰ What they find, to begin with, is not happiness but rather "mild-eyed melancholy," which makes the island seem more dolorous than merely restful. And there is another concern that has been less often noticed, one that surfaces most clearly in the new ending that Tennyson wrote for the second version of the poem. Originally, the end of the poem was rather unremarkable: it introduced a newly purposive rhythm but hewed pretty closely to the general themes. The revised ending,

on the other hand, shows the mariners in a new, and vastly more troubling, guise: not as content and resting souls but as callous gods:

Let us swear an oath, and keep it with an equal mind,
In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined
On the hills like Gods together, careless of mankind.

...

Where they smile in secret, looking over wasted lands,
Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and fiery sands,
Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying hands.
But they smile, they find a music centred in a doleful song
Steaming up, a lamentation and an ancient tale of wrong,
Like a tale of little meaning though the words are strong;
Chanted from an ill-used race of men that cleave the soil,
Sow the seed, and reap the harvest with enduring toil,
Storing yearly little dues of wheat, and wine and oil; (153-5, 159-167)

It is hard to say exactly which gods the mariners have in mind. They can hardly be Christian in origin, seeing as there are many of them, but they are also too impassive to be epic gods. In Homer, the gods are ceaselessly involved in human affairs, whereas these simply watch from their comfortable mountaintop seats as the vicissitudes of human life unfold below them. As a last alternative, Ricks suggests that the gods “are based on Lucretius’s account of Epicureanism” (Tennyson *Poems* 476n155-70), but their attraction to human sorrow has no analog there either.

Twice Tennyson tells us that “they smile,” and both times he hints at something sinister. It is “wasted lands” that provoke their first smiles, and then a “doleful song” which piques the second—in both cases, some kind of suffering is the necessary precondition. Whatever contentment these Gods have found, it is more like *Schadenfreude* than grace, a relative kind of happiness that comes from watching the toil of others and feeling oneself free from that burden.²¹ This is what being a god means to these mariners: not undivided happiness but exploitation and eternal disdain. For them, rest is only restful if you know that there are people beneath you, still “ill-used” and toiling, whose lives have little meaning except as traces of your former pain. If this is supreme happiness, it is the kind a rentier might imagine, where what matters about standing above it all is that you can exploit the suffering of those beneath you.

Moving back to “Locksley Hall”, it happens that the speaker’s fantasy of orientalist ease goes sour in a very similar way. The moment he turns his attention from the unchanging isle to its living inhabitants, he sees what the mariners-cum-gods see in mankind: inferiors who are fit, chiefly, for exploitation. “I will take some savage woman,” he says, in the couplet immediately following that drowsy one about the “summer isles of Eden.” And she “shall rear my dusky race” (168). This space where nothing happened becomes, suddenly, a place where barbarity happens, and where verbs like “slide,” “swing,” and “hang” get matched by others like “take.” Almost as quickly as it is uttered, though, the fantasy of a savage wife and a dusky family dissolves.

I, to herd with narrow foreheads, vacant of our glorious gains,
Like a beast with lower pleasures, like a beast with lower pains!

Mated with a squalid savage—what to me were sun or clime?
I the heir of all the ages, in the foremost files of time— (175-178)

What seemed alluring, for a moment, now seems wholly shameful. Not, of course, because exploiting others is wrong, but rather because it is degrading. It tarnishes the exploiter. The “savage” wife he imagined is something worse than coarse or uncivilized; she is degenerate, a mere beast when compared with his own evolved self.²² She belongs to an earlier species of human being, complete with narrow head and low pleasures. The speaker, by contrast, bears within him the “glorious gains” of his own culture, which he did not exactly learn but somehow acquired through long periods of development. The phrase “heir of all the ages” tells the whole Lamarckian story. All of history has conspired to produce this speaker, whose blood beats with the pulse of modern England and who stands at the very vanguard of progress, “the foremost files of time.”

Grotesquely racist as this is, it is also tragic—and not unfamiliarly so. It is the tragedy Freud described in *Civilization and its Discontents*, and that Adorno assailed in his reading of Ulysses bound to the mast: the tragedy of man cut off from his own most basic pleasures. These speakers have managed, only to well, to accomplish what political economists were urging people to accomplish: deferred gratification. This is something I touched on the introduction: the conflict between the desire for work and the desire for happiness. If we want to maximize our future happiness, we have to accept some pain today—for only in pain can we make the things that will satisfy us later. Yet, what these poems suggest is that if we follow this logic too far we won’t be able to enjoy that later happiness either. The disciplining of desire which is necessary to make progress happen has the perverse effect of making people unfit for satisfaction. Try though he might, the speaker of “Locksley Hall” can never enjoy a life of languorous ease; he is no longer that kind of human. Instead, he is the kind of human who must continually search for ever more glorious gains. He has so internalized the art of self-discipline that he cannot break it, even when he feels it would make him happier.

It turns out, in other words, that for Tennyson it is not only impossible to find rest at the end of progress, it is impossible to ever escape its orbit. Progress is not just something you live through, it is something that you carry with you, like a compulsion or a disease. The speaker of “Locksley Hall” has it, and it keeps him from enjoying the many seductive pleasures that he finds on those “Summer isles of Eden.” The Lotos-Eating mariners have it too. They may think of themselves as Gods, but they must keep close to the world of toil and strife, else they would lose the pleasure they get from watching others suffer. In both these poems, the attempt to escape from history ends in corruption, because even when we leave the world of progress behind, we can’t shake off our enthrallment. It stings us every time we lie down and haunts us every time we close our eyes. For anyone who knows its invasive power, there can be no real rest. Luxe, calme, et volupté will always be the precursor to ennui, mépris, and exploitation.

Must We Travel Alone?

If there can be no end to progress, and no way to escape its pull, then there is no choice but to accept perpetual movement and move forward. The only recourse left to Tennyson's personae is to treat the symptoms—the restlessness, the dissatisfaction, and the endless displacement—and to that end Tennyson considered a few kinds of palliatives: one sort for the dramatic monologues, and a wholly different one for *In Memoriam*.

I haven't dealt with *In Memoriam*, even though much of it fits within my chosen time frame (it may not have been completed until 1849, but it was largely written in the 30s and early 40s.) Obviously, it is not a dramatic monologue, but that alone is hardly a reason to exclude it. No, the bigger challenge is that its whole conception of progress is different: more traditional and less industrial; fitted to broader time frames, like evolution and eschatology; clinging to the old association of social improvement with self-improvement; and, most striking, still under the direction of human care and Divine Providence. Compare, for instance, the critique of "Ulysses" on offer in Canto CXIV with the one we have already seen in "The Two Voices":

Who loves not Knowledge? Who shall rail
 Against her beauty? May she mix
 With men and prosper! Who shall fix
Her pillars? Let her work prevail.

But on her forehead sits a fire:
 She sets her forward countenance
 And leaps into the future chance,
Submitting all things to desire. (1-8)

As before, we might imagine the poem as a kind of implicit rebuttal, as if beginning just after Ulysses has completed his appeal and a new speaker has stood up, eager to reply. "Who loves not Knowledge?" makes a nice entrée, with its sympathetic acceptance of Ulysses's own desire "to follow knowledge like a sinking star." And "Who shall fix her pillars?" completes the connection, invoking as it does the one word most associated with Ulysses's final journey—pillars, as in those world-ending pillars of Hercules which he would sail beyond.

With the second stanza, however, things begins to turn. "But on her forehead sits a fire," we learn, and with the closing rhyme discover that it is the fire of bottomless desire. The problem with Ulysses' view of Knowledge—familiarily enough—is that it drives us ever forward, always away from the solidly known and towards a "future chance." It shares the restless burden of progress, that same risk of the forever and forever which has shadowed progress throughout Tennyson's work. Except that unlike those other poems, this one has a model response:

A higher hand must make her mild,
 If all be not in vain; and guide
 Her footsteps, moving side by side

With wisdom, like the younger child:
For she is earthly of the mind,
 But wisdom heavenly of the soul. (17-22)

Wisdom, it seems, will temper Knowledge; if you accept wisdom's sober guidance, you will find your desire checked and the resistless lure of the New effectively blunted. Tennyson lets us imagine the process in an earthly form, as an older sibling guiding his incorrigible sister. But he also inspires us to imagine it in rather more elevated terms, nothing less than the "higher hand" of God himself, erasing the pain of progress and melting away the restlessness which Tennyson's other speakers could not shed. This is what I meant when I said that *In Memoriam* follows the older, enlightenment model of progress.²³

What would Ulysses say in response? I suspect it would be something like: 'I have tried the quiet way of wisdom and of God, and having tasted of knowledge I find I am no longer suited for it. I have become the kind of person who must live in progress, and whose comforts must be the hot comforts of that life.' There is, in other words, a fundamental difference in the way these speakers imagine progress. In Canto CXIV, the chief problem is that not enough people have learned the value of wisdom; in "Ulysses," and elsewhere, the greater concern is that we can no longer value wisdom, even when we find it. The speaker of "Mechanophilus" talks of heaven, but the only heaven he can stomach is a heaven of desire and expanding knowledge. In "Locksley Hall" and "The Lotos Eaters," progress is an infection rather than a choice, something deep inside us rather than something we might leave behind. What these other speakers feel—or know—is that if we give up the appetites of progress we lose everything that matters to our modern selves.

This same realization—that there is no choice but to embrace progress—propels "Locksley Hall" towards its conclusion and plants in the speaker's mouth the very line that Tennyson composed on the railway platform:

Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward forward let us range,
Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change.
Through the shadow of the globe we sweep into the younger day:
Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay.
Mother-Age (for mine I knew not) help me as when life begun:
Rift the hills, and roll the waters, flash the lightnings, weigh the Sun. (181-6)

"Not in vain the distance beacons" is a phrase composed half of assurance and half of bluster. It is entirely possible, and in fact quite likely, that the journey will be in vain, but since the speaker feels that letting the "world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change" is his last, best chance for happiness, he might as well muster some bravado.

If he is wrong there is still a kind of consolation in the return of the phrase "Mother-Age." We saw that phrase before, in a line from the early part of the poem: "Hide me from my deep emotion, O though wondrous Mother-Age!" It is the appeal he made when his leading lady first went off-script and the love story he was in began breaking apart. With no

prospects for a wife, he asked instead for a mother, and since no real mother was available, he embraced what he called his “Mother-Age.” Admittedly, it is a strange kind of appeal, but the fact that it returns later in the poem suggests its deeper importance. Indeed, in its second incarnation, the maternal side of the metaphor is even more forceful, thanks to the awkward parenthetical “for mine I knew not.” I call it awkward because, by all grammatical rights, the phrase “for mine I knew not” should refer to the age. But clearly it refers to his mother. Indeed, the whole thrust of the line pivots around the suggestion that the age he does know can replace the mother he never did. “Mother-Age (for mine I knew not)” is an appeal to the age, asking that it serve as a surrogate mother, sheltering him from the pain of his failed courtship and embracing him with a purer, less fickle kind of devotion. In its own way, the industrial age provides the speaker with a kind of domestic resource, a pseudo-mother, which the phrase Mother-Age neatly captures. And this ersatz domesticity is part of its appeal. It gives the speaker yet another reason to embrace progress. Not only is it the only choice on offer, but it provides its own brand of intimacy: call it community-in-progress.

We might call it domesticity-in-progress except that even in “Locksley Hall” it takes another, far less domestic form, namely that of his fellow soldiers. “Comrades, leave me here a little,” he says in the opening line, and though these “comrades” play absolutely no role afterwards, they are still there, a not-quite-present and not-quite-absent band of brothers.

More to the point, these communities-in-progress extend even to those characters, like Ulysses, who are not interested in domesticity. Ulysses has a perfectly traditional domestic life, complete with aged wife and blameless son—and he cannot stand it. He much prefers roaming the seas in search of new adventures. Yet, in some ways that contrast is not as stark as it would seem. Ulysses never really has to choose between intimacy and adventure. Even at sea, he is surrounded and supported by his faithful family of sailors. “My Mariners,” he calls them, “souls that have toiled, and wrought, and thought with me” (45-6). His is not some makeshift crew casually assembled at the docks; they are *his* mariners, kindred “souls,” who have not only “toiled” and “wrought” with him, but who have also “thought” with him, which is a rather surprising verb here. “Fought” would do just as well, in terms of sonority, and would seem more consistent with the division of labor aboard Ulysses’s ship. “Thought” is there to heighten the sense of kinship, to suggest that Ulysses values his men not only for what they do—steer the ship, grapple with monsters—but for what they think and say. Between him and his men there is a vital, fraternal bond which fills the role of his abandoned family.²⁴

It is worth noticing, moreover, that these can’t be the same, trusted mariners that accompanied Ulysses on his famous odyssey; all of those men died along the way.²⁵ So the obvious question is when, exactly, did Ulysses toil and work and think with these mariners, who could not have been with him in Troy? And the only possible answer is: in Troy. Tennyson’s poem tells us that these are the same men “that strove with Gods” (53) and that, as Ulysses himself says, actually knew Achilles (64). Which means, of course, that they must have gone to Troy with Ulysses and should have died during the return—at least in Homer’s version. In Tennyson’s version, they are still waiting at the port for their onetime captain. And the reason they are waiting at the port—the reason they have been brought back to life—is

because Ulysses needs them, Tennyson needs them, and progress needs them. They are the guarantors of community, and it is their job to make progress bearable. Just as the speaker of “Locksley Hall” finds a new Mother and a comforting kind of surrogate domesticity, Ulysses finds his own community-in-progress, this time a band of brothers willing to join his endless voyaging and share his endless burdens. And he will have this community-in-progress even if it means that Tennyson has to raid Hades itself.

Thinking of “The Lotos-Eaters” as a companion poem, though, we might wonder whether anyone bothered to ask these mariners if they wanted to be part of Ulysses’s community-in-progress. They might have preferred to remain dead, as Homer left them, or at least happily intoxicated by the taste of the lotos flower—anything rather than sail forever into the untravelled world as Ulysses’s shipmates. Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem that they have much choice. “Ulysses” will have them, and if Homer’s poem is any guide, their time on the island of the lotos-eaters is quite limited. At any moment, they are liable to be dragged back to the ship and put to work climbing up those climbing waves. Once again, though, there is some little recompense for this enslavement to endless progress, and once again it comes in the form of a hidden community. No single mariner speaks in “The Lotos-Eaters.” They all speak together, in what Tennyson calls a “Choric Song” but which is actually the poem’s controlling voice. Whether they are saying “let us alone” (88, 90, 93), “we have had enough of action” (150), or “let us swear an oath” (153), their focus is relentlessly plural, their shared voice a testament to the intimacy they have forged through common toil and collective intoxication. To be sure, none of this is enough to make them forget about the burden of their endless voyage. Yet, on this island, they have found a fellowship of the speaking “we” which they can carry with them up the climbing wave to make their toil somewhat less lonely.

In various ways, then, each of these poems produces its own community-in-progress, a minimal form of sociability that eases the burden of an endless and too-rapid progress. The post-Malthusian combination of accelerating growth and exploding population meant that the average 19th-century Englishman interacted with far more people than his grandfather did (probably by an order of magnitude), and likewise encountered far more information than could be managed by traditional, informal mechanisms like gossip. Social life had given way to something more like a social system, which undoubtedly had its own logic and cohesion but which was also—like so much else in industrial life—strangely inhuman, functioning at a level of abstraction difficult to cognize in human terms. Tennyson’s poems offers us a weak kind of compensation. In “Locksley Hall,” the new community is as minimal as a metaphor, a Mother-Age to replace a lost wife and absent mother. In “Ulysses,” it has a more traditional look, but its members are by literary rights already dead. And in “The Lotos-Eaters,” community thrives only during a fleeting moment of respite.²⁶ These are hardly the rich societies of the future imagined by Utopian dreamers; nor, looking the other way, are they the *Gemeinschaft* fantasies of those nostalgic for a stable, pre-progressive world. They are something else entirely: unstable, incomplete attachments that provide some comfort but nothing like a new home.

Home is a relic in this world of progress, a fading memory rather than a nourishing

presence. The lotos-eating mariners recognize this fact as well as anyone, being mostly family men distantly connected to the wives and children they have left in Ithaca. I mentioned before that Tennyson rewrote the ending for the second version of “The Lotos-Eaters,” but he also made one other major change: he added a long section about the mariners’ domestic ties:

Dear is the memory of our wedded lives,
And dear the last embraces of our wives
And their warm tears: but all hath suffered change:
For surely now our household hearths are cold:
Our sons inherit us: our looks are strange:
And we should come like ghosts to trouble joy. (114-20)

These mariners have not forgotten their wives and families, but they do feel that their love no longer matters. They have been away so long that the bonds of domesticity have come loose, and were they to return they would seem “like ghosts,” figures from a lost past dangerously intent on reasserting itself. So although they are not yet dead, from the perspective of their families they might as well be. The houses they left behind may still be there, but the homes are gone, the attachments thinned to oblivion. The mariners belong to Ulysses and his endless quest for progress, and it is there that they must find their community-in-progress.

The Speaker of “Locksley Hall” confronts the same loss, only he likes to pretend that it is something else. His home has slipped away from him, but to save something of his dignity, he prefers to imagine that he is doing the slipping:

Howsoever these things be, a long farewell to Locksley Hall!
Now for me the woods may wither, now for me the roof-tree fall.
Comes a vapour from the margin, blackening over heath and holt,
Cramming all the blast before it, in its breast a thunderbolt.
Let it fall on Locksley Hall, with rain or hail, or fire or snow;
For the mighty wind arises, roaring seaward, and I go. (189-94)

As I have already argued, Tennyson’s endings carry a peculiar burden: they have to hint at a final resolution and then quickly move past it. And these final lines from “Locksley Hall” manage this trick beautifully. The blackening storm of “rain,” “hail,” “fire,” and “snow” has a decidedly apocalyptic feel, as if to suggest that this is not only the end of the poem but also the end of the world. Yet, if it is an apocalypse, it is an oddly local one—nothing, for instance, like the death-birth that Carlyle was wont to imagine. It has enough divine firepower to destroy this one estate, but not much else—certainly not the speaker, who goes to follow Ulysses into the untravelled world. In fact, one could plausibly argue that nothing is being destroyed in these lines, in so far as the home and family that they putatively sweep away were, from the speaker’s perspective, already gone. So although the apocalyptic imagery may, for a moment, make the speaker’s defiance seem grand, the only thing he is rejecting is an ideal he had already lost, and the only reason he has the strength for this rejection is that he has found a new kind of community.

He may utter a lonely “I go,” in other words, but he is not exactly going alone. He has with him the imagined Mother of his Mother-Age, which is an admittedly weak, but not therefore insignificant, emotional bond. And somewhere nearby are his fellow-soldiers, kept largely out of the poem (and away from his intimate thoughts) but still waiting just beyond the frame. And this, in capsule, is what Tennyson’s poems from the 1830s express: the hidden fact that the appeal of progress depends not only on the open promise of ever-greater experiences but also on a new kind of intimacy.

Excitement and exhilaration alone are not enough, and before we give ourselves to the lure of tomorrow we need something more to balance the real and terrifying costs. Powerful and vital though progress may be, it is also remote and alien. In its wake, our lives—like those of Ulysses and his mariners—become an endless voyage, without hope of pause or end. We are taken away from everything that is stable and solid and enthralled instead to a future we can never actually find. What we gain in exhilaration we lose to a restlessness whose only possible end is our own death. And when, like the speaker of “Locksley Hall,” we try to escape this burden, we find ourselves entrapped, unable to conceive a lasting life outside of progress.

What makes all this bearable is the fact that there are countless others following the same tortured path, others who collectively make up what I have been calling a community-in-progress. If we cannot have a stable home, or any rest, we can at least temper the bitterness of that loss by forging a new, though less familiar, kind of community. In the end, that is, Tennyson’s poems show us something more than the alienating endlessness of progress; they show us the weak social consolation that progress itself is always forging. They offer visions of community that can to some degree ease the pain of alienation by replacing brothers with brother-mariners and a Mother with a Mother-Age. It may not be enough, this minimal community-in-progress, but it is all that remains and it as, at least, something.²⁷

Looking In: Baudelaire

Closing a chapter on Tennyson and opening one on Charles Baudelaire may seem a little jarring, rather as if there were some pages missing from the middle. As I see it, though, there are two very good reasons to place them side by side. First, because such a pairing would have seemed perfectly natural to Baudelaire, who often thought of himself in this English context. And second, because it allows us to test the soundness of a critically-vulnerable boundary. I've been insisting all along that Victorian England—not France—was the first nation to cross the industrial divide, and that English poets faced the mixed pain and promise of industrialism earlier than their French counterparts, often in more insistent and more pervasive forms. But Baudelaire poses a challenge to this whole line of argument. Isn't he, after all, the first great modern poet? And mustn't that mean that France, rather than England, was the first modern place?

From the beginning, the one term that has been most closely associated with Baudelaire's work is modern. Paul Verlaine said that Baudelaire represented "l'homme moderne" (Bandy 74). T. S. Eliot praised him for introducing "something universal in modern life" (234). Marshall Berman calls him the "first modernist" (133) and Jonathan Culler the "prophet of modernity" (Introduction XXXI). There are other characterizations of Baudelaire, to be sure, but none has the stature of this one: Baudelaire the modern poet, or, just as often, Baudelaire the first modern poet.¹ Of course, if people as politically and philosophically diverse as T. S. Eliot and Marshall Berman can be said to agree about Baudelaire's status as a modern poet, it may be because they are using the word "modern" in very different ways—rather as if we were to say that Tony Blair's commitment to labour was the same as Clement Atlee's, or Edmund Burke's conservatism the same as George W. Bush's. Ultimately, though, I do not think this is true in the case of Baudelaire. When Eliot invokes the idea of the modern, he certainly means something different from Berman, but not something so very different as to rule out any common ground. As applied to Baudelaire, the word modern has a fairly consistent set of meanings: Baudelaire is modern because his poetry reflects either the conditions of urban industrialism (cities, slums, commodities, crowds) or, alternately, the trauma of living in an urban, industrial landscape (shock, alienation, reification) These are two sides of the same coin, one the material, the other the psychic impact of a new stage of capitalism, and what makes Baudelaire's poetry modern, for all of these critics, is its engagement with one or both of these two sides.

If all of this is true, though, then we have a rather difficult circle to square. Why should the first modern poet be a French poet if urban, industrial capitalism did not begin in France? There are a few ways we might approach this question. We could, for instance, choose to strip Baudelaire of his title and install a British poet in his place (we might even follow Sterling's lead and nominate Tennyson). For my part, though, I am happy to let Baudelaire keep his title and begin, instead, by asking what it means to find the first modern poet in a place that is not the first modern place. If the first modern poet appeared in France, and if the conditions that made him modern had already existed in England for half a century, then that poet must have had a rather complicated relationship to English industry and English literature. And Baudelaire did. His attention to English life sharpened his representation of the modern, and his engagement with English poetry expanded the range of his own verse

(his relation to Poe, Longfellow, and American poetry is caught up in this as well, often in ways that make the “American” hard to distinguish from the “British”). Ultimately, if we want to better understand what made Baudelaire modern, we have to pay greater attention to his Englishness—and this means both the way he related to English literature and the way English readers recognized themselves in *Les Fleurs du Mal*. It is not only Paris that stands at the heart of Baudelaire’s modern poetry, it is also London, that other capital of the nineteenth century.

The Crystal Palace Project

The strong association of Paris with modernity, and of Baudelaire with both, draws a good deal of its force from the work of the German philosopher and social critic Walter Benjamin.² It was Benjamin who gave us the first, richest, and most detailed account of Baudelaire as the poet of modern life, and it was likewise Benjamin who made Paris the unofficial capital of the nineteenth century.³ As a result, it is tempting to think that these two parts of his account belong together, that everything we need to know about what made Baudelaire modern can be found in Paris. But in fact England, more than France, was the real locus of industrial capitalism, and London a rival claimant to the title “Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” It was London that provided Marx with the materials and the writing space for his magnum opus, just as the more fully industrial Manchester taught Engels the brutal laws of capitalist survival. For Baudelaire, too, it was not just France but England that provided the modern material for his modern verse.

Throughout the nineteenth century, England outpaced France in economic output and industrial entrenchment. As a proxy-measurement, the French railway system was less than one third the length of the British system, and it carried less than a quarter of the total freight (Mitchell 673-4, 684-6). At the same time, the population of England was already predominantly urban, whereas France was still an overwhelmingly rural place. London itself had nearly 3 million people, while Manchester and Liverpool each had over 300,000 (as did Glasgow), and Birmingham well over 200,000 (as did Edinburgh). Mid-century France could boast of only one city with a population over 200,000, and that was Paris. Bourdeaux, Lyon, and Marseille were all closer in size to Bristol than Manchester (Mitchell 74-6). Indeed, at that time a good swath of French life was still virtually untouched by industrialism—far from factories and inaccessible by railway—which is something that simply could no longer be said of England.

Beneath these quantitative differences, moreover, there was a more fundamental distinction. Only one of these countries had completed an industrial revolution and was experiencing the new economic and social organization that industrialism allowed. This is not to say that there was no industrial activity in France; in fact, there was a great deal. But, as I detailed in the introduction, industrialism is not a function of the number of people working in factories or the raw output of economic materials. It is better understood as a kind of tipping point which results in the emergence of a wholly new economic dynamic. Whereas pre-industrial societies are bound by the old Malthusian trap—with economic growth for-

ever offset by a growing population—fully industrial societies face no such trade-off. They produce growth rates sufficient to allow for real improvements in social welfare. Mid-century England could boast such a rate. Mid-century France was still trapped.

To be fair, this analysis tells us more about the two nations than their capitals. Neither Paris nor London housed a great deal of industry; that kind of activity tended to happen either at the outskirts of the capital or in other industrial centers. In fact, both cities were still home to large numbers of artisans and small workshops, along with slums, businesses, civic offices, and all number of formal and informal activities. And yet even here, where the differences were smaller, they were not insignificant. In the first place, London was a hub of international trade and a center for global finance, its wealth and stability conceived chiefly in commercial terms. Parisian elites, in contrast, tended to think of themselves not as businessmen but as rentiers whose wealth was guaranteed less by trade and more by the awkward compromises that held together the regimes of Louis-Philippe and Louis Napoleon (Lees). Second, while Benjamin was certainly right to emphasize the many contributions to consumer culture nurtured in Paris—from the department store, to the plate-glass shop window, to advertising photography, among others—it is also true that many of the phenomena he discusses in the *Arcades Project* were equally prominent, and sometimes more prominent, in England.⁴ The gas-lighting whose optical effects he describes in such penetrating detail was installed in London years before it was even tested in Paris; the rag-pickers thrived as fully in the pages of Henry Mayhew as they did in the Parisian slums; and, beyond these, we can only wonder what Benjamin might have made of some of the more local, British phenomena, like the stereoscope or the Great Exhibition.

There are, then, two ways to account for Benjamin's interest in Paris. Either he chose Paris as the exemplar of modern life because he didn't fully appreciate the greater advancement of England, or he did so precisely because it wasn't the place of greatest advancement. The evidence of the *Arcades Project* points, surprisingly, to the latter. If Benjamin looked to Paris, rather than London, to diagnose modernity, it was because Paris, in his eyes, was not quite the most advanced city and France not quite the leading nation. In the mid-nineteenth century, its development was still deeply uneven, its landscape rent between surging industrial innovations and lingering pre-industrial residues.⁵ Indeed, Benjamin's favored subjects tell us just how important this mixture was for him. The ragpickers and prostitutes that he so richly allegorizes, for instance, are hardly modern at all, being two of what we colloquially call the oldest professions. What makes them central, for Benjamin, is that they have been symptomatically altered by modernity. The modern prostitute has gained a new figural power by her uncanny affinity with the commodity itself, and the ragpicker, too, has a new capitalist function: "to subject even begging to exchange value" (Quoted in Benjamin IV 102).⁶ People had been selling sex and gathering trash for centuries, but in nineteenth-century Paris these activities were transformed in ways that revealed the force-field of capitalist development. For Benjamin, there was something about the lagging nature of French modernity that made it an especially rich philosophical mine. The problem with London was that it was too advanced, no longer allowing for the kinds of mixed phenomena that so defined the landscape of nineteenth-century Paris.

Of course, as any good urban history or for that matter encounter with Dickens will show, London was also a wonderfully variegated city, full of innumerable social and economic confusions. And, while it harbored advancements that the rest of Europe—and Paris in particular—couldn't match, it was also missing features that we tend to think of as paradigmatic of modern life. Bohemia, for instance, which was central to the French experience of modernity was utterly foreign to the English. Its characteristic ferment of counter-bourgeois attitudes was nowhere to be met in London, and the effect of this absence—on English art in particular—was profound. As Jerrold Seigel and Mary Gluck have both argued, Bohemian Paris nurtured a set of poses and practices that contributed to the formation of modernism and the later avant-garde. Not having a Bohemia, then, kept London at something of a distance from this strain of modernist practice. Yet, what this discrepancy between Paris and London reveals is something rather different than what Seigel and Gluck presume. It is not enough to say that modernity, writ large, gave birth to Bohemia, which then inspired a set of modern artistic practices. That circuit was never activated in England, and the reason has nothing to do with an absence of urban, capitalist incursions. To the contrary, Bohemian counter-culture emerged in France because the eruption of urban capitalism and the ascendancy of the middle-class had been too-long delayed and then too quickly realized. In France, the bourgeoisie assumed control not only of the market and the public sphere, but also of the still-lingering monarchical and imperial mechanisms of official culture, imposing their artistic standards in ways more direct and more authoritative than was possible in England—and provoking, for that reason, a subculture that was more defiant and more flamboyantly adversarial. The reason that London lacked a culture of Bohemia was not because it trailed France, but precisely because it had managed, over time, to accommodate and institutionalize both the new forces of industrial capitalism and the new powers of the middle class.⁷

Indeed, London's greater economic and institutional advancement was widely acknowledged by contemporaries—even, as we will see later, contemporaries from French Bohemia. There circulated in the nineteenth century an idea of England as the consummately modern place, a place, as it were, already at the end of history. The influence of this idea on Benjamin, in particular, is well illustrated by an example from the middle section of his *Charles Baudelaire: a Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*.⁸ Like so many of Baudelaire's readers, Benjamin finds himself drawn past the French poet and into the orbit of Baudelaire's favorite American writer, Edgar Allan Poe, whose "The Man of the Crowd" expresses, for Benjamin, one of the central dynamics of modern life: the need to penetrate and track the new social organism that is the crowd.⁹ Seated behind a café window, the narrator occupies himself in discerning the rank and position of every person who passes by, until he sees a man he cannot place, a man of "absolute idiosyncrasy" whom he follows around the city for twenty-four hours. Wherever they go, the two men, pursuer and pursued, "remain in the middle of the crowd" (IV 27), and the unfolding of the story, from Benjamin's perspective, depends less on their particular movements than on the dynamics of crowd-hunting and crowd-reading. Not all crowds are created equal, and Benjamin is convinced that Poe's crowd is very much a "London crowd" (IV 29), by which he means far more than that Poe's

story is set in London. As Benjamin sees it, this is the type of crowd that only London could produce:

The people in his story behave as if they can no longer express themselves through anything but reflex actions. These goings-on seem even more dehumanized because Poe talks only about people. If the crowd becomes jammed up, this is not because it is being impeded by vehicular traffic—there is no mention of vehicles anywhere—but because it is being blocked by other crowds. In a mass of this nature, *flânerie* could never flourish. / In Baudelaire's Paris, things had not yet come to such a pass. (IV 30)

In Poe's story, the crowd has expanded to encompass the entire city. There are no vehicles, only masses of people whose movements are constrained by other masses. Nothing like agency or autonomy can survive in the London crowd, only the "reflex actions" of dehumanized bodies subject to the whims of the agglomerated others. *Flânerie*, too, has died out, the space of ironic resistance being wholly absorbed by the stochastic movements of the mass. For Benjamin, however, Paris is a different story. The final line from this excerpt sums up the situation beautifully: "In Baudelaire's Paris, things had not yet come to such a pass." Benjamin's carefully phrased "not yet" tells us that this state of affairs cannot last, that Paris will eventually become what London already is. But for this moment—Baudelaire's moment in the mid-nineteenth century—Paris was a place of partial modernity, a place where *flâneurs* could still move about. It was a city peopled by what Benjamin calls, in the conclusion to "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century," "errant negotiators of the old and new" (Arcades 26).

As I said, this vision of the difference between London and Paris is exaggerated. Contrary to Benjamin's conclusion, there was plenty of room for *flânerie* in the London streets and plenty of places free from the tyranny of crowds. These misperceptions are part of the strange, but widespread, idea of a consummately modern London, a city of complete modernity which could also be a nightmare of fulfilled modernity. And yet this distorted idea still points, accurately enough, towards a profound historical fact. London—both in itself and as the symbolic center of England—was closer to fulfilled modernity than any other nineteenth-century place. Certainly, it had not reached the endpoint—if such a thing exists—but just as certainly it was at the vanguard. And Paris, with France around it, was not. Painting the difference between those two cities in bold, exaggerated strokes, as Benjamin does in his reading of "Man of the Crowd," helped to register this real historical difference, the fact that England was not only more urban and more industrial but that its rate of growth was accelerating more quickly, widening the gap with every passing year. To those on the near side, that gap could seem not just large but existential. And so Benjamin looked instead to Paris, where the shearing forces of urban capitalism were still in process and, thus, uniquely visible.

A Secret Community

There is yet another reason that Benjamin imagined Paris as the trailing echo of a consummately modern England: that is just how Baudelaire conceived it. He, too, saw England as the other, inescapable, redoubt of modernity, home to a kind of life that France, in its own advancement, could not help but echo. Moreover, the unmatched force of English capitalism had imprinted itself onto English art—marking it with the sign of modernity. That, at least, is how Baudelaire perceived it, and in fact the feeling was more general. Here, for instance, is his friend and fellow-poet, Théophile Gautier, after seeing an exhibition of English art:

Antiquity has no place in English art. An English picture is modern in the same way that a Balzac novel is modern; the most advanced civilization on Earth can be read in minute detail, in the sheen of the varnish, in the preparation of the panel and the colors.—Everything is perfect. (Hamrick 30)

For Gautier, English art is modern because its every detail—from brush-stroke to varnish—reflects the advanced state of English life. “Perfect” is the punctuating word—another version of the same Benjaminian fantasy of fulfilled modernity, only this time as fulfilled art. Sometimes, Gautier seems to suggest, French art can also be perfect, citing the example of Balzac, but it is important to note the imbalance in Gautier’s praise. On the one hand, every English picture is modern; on the other, not every French novel is modern, just the work of Balzac. When he refers, in the phrase that follows, to “the most advanced civilization on Earth,” there is no question as to which civilization he has in mind. There can only be one “most advanced civilization” and here it is clearly England. France is something else, a nation sufficiently advanced to give birth to the occasional piece of modern art—like a Balzac novel—but not so advanced as to bring a modern sheen to all French art.

Baudelaire never wrote about the varnish and colors of English art, but he penned a long piece of art criticism dedicated to an artist who wasn’t English but who chose to live and work there.¹⁰ That essay, “Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne,” is Baudelaire’s most famous piece of criticism, a celebration of the power and possibility of modern art. Its hero is Constantin Guys, a French artist who honed his craft as an artist-reporter for the *Illustrated London News*.¹¹ His work wasn’t varnished and perfect, in the way that Gautier admired; it was rough and impressionistic. Yet, for Baudelaire, Guys’ art was just as surely shaped by English modernity, its “*vélocité d’exécution*” specially fitted to the “*mouvement rapide*” of that most advanced civilization (II 686). Baudelaire may have been looking for something different in his paragon of modern art, but he too looked across the channel, and what he found there was yet another French artist enamored of England.

In Baudelaire’s case, grappling with modern art meant grappling both with England and the English language. Baudelaire had been reading English books since his boyhood, and the fluency he developed fed not only into his translations but also into his French poetry. The English word “spleen,” for instance, is one of the most vital words in Baudelaire’s oeuvre and also a very new word in French.¹² New enough, in fact, that not just the word but the feeling was still associated with England, as in the familiar phrase “English spleen.” No

less than four poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal* bear the “Spleen” title, as does the outsized first section of the book (“Spleen et Idéal”) and his later collection of prose poems (“le Spleen de Paris”). Part of the responsibility of Baudelaire’s work was to make room in French for this English word, to establish its contours and connect it to an increasingly prevalent modern mood—and this despite the fact that the French language already has a related word for this mood, namely *ennui*. The advantage of the word *spleen* is that it comes from English, bespeaking its connection to modernity in a way that *ennui* cannot. Not only, then, did Baudelaire find his paragon of modern art by looking across the channel, but he chose his most prominent word from the English lexicon.

As it happens, he also tried to get his poetry read across the channel, both by a general audience—offering review copies to several leading English journals and newspapers, including *Blackwood’s*, the *Edinburgh Review*, and even the *Times*—and by well-known writers—sending presentation copies to Longfellow, Tennyson, De Quincey, and Browning (Pichois 275). His poetic allusions and borrowings (“plagiats,” he called them) all flowed in the same direction. In one of his several attempts at a preface for *Les Fleurs du Mal*, he offered his readers a list: “Thomas Gray. Edgar Poe (2 passages). Longfellow (2 passages). Stace. Virgile (tout le morceau d’Andromaque). Eschyle. Victor Hugo” (I 184). We might want to add others to this list—Coleridge, for instance, whose “Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” almost certainly inspired “L’Albatross,” and also, as we will see later, Alfred Tennyson—but the important thing to note is Baudelaire’s indifference to German, Italian, and all other forms of European poetry. His debts and credits all flow in the other direction, away from continental Europe. When he is not looking backwards, to the far poetic past, his gaze is resolutely turned towards England and the U.S.

It is important to include both of those countries—England and the U.S.—because both were important to Baudelaire, and obviously they are not the same. There is something too easy about the way that Benjamin turns “Man of the Crowd” into a paragon of British experience when, of course, it is a work of American fiction. The differences between England and the U.S. in the mid-nineteenth century were legion, and any serious attempt at trans-Atlantic literary study would have to attend to those differences. But, again, the question for us is less the real nature of these differences than the fact that, for Baudelaire, the similarities were far more weighty. Poe, he knew, was an American author raised in an American milieu (several of them, in fact), but still he felt that what mattered most about Poe’s work was its un-Americanness, its poor fit with American life and letters. Poe, he says in “Edgar Poe, Sa Vie et Ses Oeuvres,” belongs with “les grands poètes” of “la poésie anglaise” (II 302). On its own, that phrase “la poésie anglaise” could refer either to English poetry (as distinct from American) or poetry in English (which would include American), but seeing as Baudelaire didn’t acknowledge any “grands poètes” in America before Poe’s time—not Bradstreet or Bryant—he must have meant the former. The pantheon to which Poe belongs is the one comprising Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Gray, and the other exemplars of British poetry. Poe is one of these, a poet defined not by his American roots but by his unsuspected place in the history of English, and specifically British, poetry. This is not to say that Baudelaire was blind to Poe’s real national context but it does suggest that he thought of America in a

peculiar way, as just another place where an English poet might flourish.

In his own poetry, Baudelaire made good use of the shared heritage of England and the U.S. “Le Guignon” provides an excellent example. “Guignon” was an important word for Baudelaire, a word that helped crystallize his thinking about the relation between art and society. As it is generally used, “guignon” refers to bad luck, but for Baudelaire it had a far more specific meaning: it named the curse faced by great, unappreciated writers.¹³ “Il y a dans l’histoire littéraire des destinées analogues, de vraies damnations, —des hommes qui portent le mot guignon écrit en caractères mystérieux dans les plis sinueux de leur front” (II 296).¹⁴ Baudelaire was thinking of Poe, in this passage, but Poe wasn’t the only artist who had the word guignon written on his forehead. Their numbers, Baudelaire felt, were increasing as the bourgeoisie increased its authority over aesthetic matters.

Baudelaire’s poem, “Le Guignon,” is a traditional French sonnet with octosyllabic lines. And if, as you read it, you think about its English resonance, you can get a good sense for what makes it so peculiar:

Pour soulever un poids si lourd,
Sisyphé, il faudrait ton courage!
Bien qu’on ait du coeur à l’ouvrage,
L’Art est long et le Temps est court.

Loin des sépultures célèbres,
Vers un cimetière isolé,
Mon coeur, comme un tambour voilé,
Va battant des marches funèbres.

– Maint joyau dort enseveli
Dans les ténèbres et l’oubli,
Bien loin des pioches et des sondes;
Mainte fleur épanche à regret
Son parfum doux comme un secret
Dans les solitudes profondes.¹⁵ (I 17)

It has long been recognized that most of the poem is, in fact, borrowed.¹⁶ Of the 14 lines, 4 come from Longfellow’s “A Psalm of Life” and 6 from Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” That leaves only 4 original lines by Baudelaire, but as is so often true with poems of this stamp, the interesting thing is not only what Baudelaire borrows but how he adapts these “plagiats” for his particular vision.

Longfellow’s poem is too long to quote in its entirety, but what interests Baudelaire is this single stanza:

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

It is rather an unusual stanza in Longfellow's poem—in terms of both its tone and its thematic emphasis. The piece, as a whole, is chiefly about defying death and achieving immortality in life. “Let us, then, be up and doing” and “Act,—act in the living Present” are representative lines and they illustrate the general, *carpe diem* appeal. In such a poem, the four lines that Baudelaire borrowed are decidedly out of place, being rather somber and almost bleak in their funereal emphasis. “Stout” and “brave” our hearts may seem, but their force is “muffled,” and the rhythms they beat out match our steps towards an inevitable grave.¹⁷

In Baudelaire, Longfellow's stanza is split in half and separated by two lines that add a timbre of isolation to what is already a death-march.

Bien qu'on ait du coeur à l'ouvrage,
L'Art est long et le Temps est court.

Loin des sépultures célèbres,
Vers un cimetière isolé,
Mon coeur, comme un tambour voilé,
Va battant des marches funèbres. (3-8)

Not only are the heartbeats muffled, “comme un tambour voilé,” but even if they were booming in Baudelaire's version you still couldn't hear them, isolated as they are “Loin des sepultures célèbres, / Vers un cimetière isolé.” The heroic notes of Longfellow's poem are buried deeper in the French, his soft “voilé” matched and darkened by a rhyming “isolé.” At the same time, Baudelaire's deeper fatalism is also a more specific fatalism, shifted from Longfellow's “our hearts” to Baudelaire's “mon coeur.” What were, for Longfellow, lines about the universal burden of mortality become, in Baudelaire, lines about the specific burden of cursed artists. In “Le Guignon,” it is not humanity at large but only the modern poet who feels the melancholy of his mortality, his heart beating out a muffled funeral march towards a grave in a forgotten cemetery. He is alone, isolated, walking silently towards death—not because he is human but because he is a *guignon*.

This same shift is already evident in the opening two lines. For Longfellow, “Art is long, and Time is fleeting” is a statement about life, rather than art.¹⁸ “Lives of great men all remind us,” he says elsewhere in the poem, “We can make our lives sublime.” If we work tirelessly and waste nothing of our few mortal days, than our lives can become as immortal as artworks. That is what he means by “Art is long, and Time is fleeting.” Baudelaire's version is an exact translation, but when he writes “L'art est long et le Temps est court” he is most assuredly thinking of aesthetics and the particular difficulties of making art. In particular, he is thinking of Sisyphus, equating the “l'ouvrage” necessary to create an “oeuvre” with the tireless work of that long-suffering king. This makes art something worse than long and closer to impossible. It does not actually matter how short Time is, as it will always be briefer than the eternity Sisyphus needs to complete his task. Time is short and Art is endless, in this case. Yet, for Baudelaire, there is still something heroic about attempting that endless artwork, something which is nicely captured by the exclamation point that completes the second line: “Sysiphe, il faudrait ton courage!” It is hard to tell exactly what sort of courage

is being celebrated here. Is it courageous, in other words, that Sisyphus persists heroically in the face of an impossible task? Or is it simply courageous for him to persist at all, to live on without hope of success? Whether we are in the major key of heroic persistence or the minor key of heroic subsistence is a question left for the tercets, which makes it a question for Thomas Gray.

The lines Baudelaire borrows from Gray are among the most famous, and indeed the most clichéd in English literature—though it is hard to know whether they would have seemed clichéd to an English-reading poet living very much outside of English public discourse:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

It was here that Baudelaire found his hidden gems and hidden flowers, as well as the parallelism of “Maint joyau” and “Maint fleur” (echoing Gray’s “Full many a” structure). But again, Baudelaire’s rendering fundamentally changes the context, shifting the burden from everyday life to modern art. Gray’s poem is set in a country cemetery, among the graves of rural England’s “unhonour’d dead,” for whom Gray imagines a kind of untapped nobility. Baudelaire has in mind something quite different. His “joyaux” and “fleurs” aren’t secretly heroic commoners but modern artists and *guignons*. And that basic change of emphasis filters down into a range of smaller, more focused changes. “The dark unfathom’d caves of ocean” become, in his hands, “les ténèbres et l’oubli, / Bien loin des pioches et des sondes.” Instead of the vaguely metaphoric “unfathom’d,” we have the far more literal, and more menacing, image of pickaxes and probes. In Gray’s poem, the jewels are unfathomed mainly because no one has bothered to look, whereas in Baudelaire, they are hidden because no one has yet been able to find them. It is not, in other words, that these artists and *guignons* have been forgotten or exiled to isolated cemeteries; they have sought out such cemeteries so as to live in peace. Unfit for a world of pickaxes and probes, they have hidden themselves in an oblivion that promises a kind of safety. Sleeping “dans les ténèbres et l’oubli” may be lonely, but for an artist alienated from an increasingly bourgeois public, isolation provides its own kind of consolation, or what the final tercet calls a secret sweetness.

There is a comfort, in other words, to be found in this isolation, a sweetness that can only be felt in loneliness. Baudelaire’s hidden flowers may “épanche à regret / Son parfum” but that wasted “parfum” is now “doux comme un secret.” It is the sweetness of secrecy itself, of that which is private and concealed, but also intimate and strangely communal. Secrets, after all, are often shared, creating a community of the knowing. If the perfume of this flower is “doux comme un secret,” it is not because of its isolation, but rather because of its guarded community. “Maint fleur” is how the stanza opens, just as “Maint joyau” opens the previous one. And the unusual combination of singular and plural that this construction allows stands in for the kind of secrecy, and the kind of community, that is at stake in this poem. It is not just one flower that wafts its sweet perfume, but many flowers, each doing so in secret. Each of them suffers in isolation and solitude, but they can share the sweet secret that they are not alone in being isolated.

They belong, we might say, to a secret fraternity of the *guignons*: a community of artists bound together by their estrangement from society, a host of Sisyphuses each with his own boulder to carry. There is a hint, moreover, that this secret fraternity of the estranged allows for occasional communication, faint poetic echoes that are too close to be called allusions and too free to be called thefts. Whatever you want to call them, though, they speak to the idea of a deep, though hidden, relation between artists. There is a brush of contact between Baudelaire and Gray, and another between Baudelaire and Longfellow. The connections are weak and one-directional, no doubt, but they constitute the only kind of community, and the only kind of sweetness, that is possible for modern, cursed artists.

In that sense, the secret community of the guignon is not entirely unlike the communities-in-progress that Tennyson's poetry imagines. Both are minimal forms of community, not living and thriving but makeshift and fragile. And both are communities of last resort, made necessary by the failure of any more sustaining relation. If anything, though, Baudelaire's vision is even more attenuated than Tennyson's, and certainly more tentative. There is nothing like the comradeship of Ulysses and his mariners, or the passionate embrace of an orphan for his "Mother-Age." Instead, there are borrowed words, translated allusions, and the sweetness of a shared isolation. It is a community of artists whose ties are limited to occasional literary echoes; and not even all artists are welcome, only those trapped in places modern enough to be cursed by the bourgeois indifference to aesthetics: Longfellow in America, Gray in England, and Baudelaire in France.

Not only, then, does "Le Guignon" imagine a minimal kind of community, but it imagines an embattled community, one whose secret is always under threat from "des pioches et des sondes." The sweet perfume of solitude may have a social aspect, but it also has to be guarded against the corruption of a larger, less worthy society. When that fails, as happens in the very next poem of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, secrecy ceases to seem sweet and becomes doubly burdensome:

J'ai longtemps habité sous de vastes portiques
Que les soleils marins teignaient de mille feux,
Et que leurs grands piliers, droits et majestueux,
Rendaient pareils, le soir, aux grottes basaltiques.

Les houles, en roulant les images des cieux,
Mêlaient d'une façon solennelle et mystique
Les tout-puissants accords de leur riche musique
Aux couleurs du couchant reflété par mes yeux.

C'est là que j'ai vécu dans les voluptés calmes,
Au milieu de l'azur, des vagues, des splendeurs
Et des esclaves nus, tout imprégnés d'odeurs,

Qui me rafraîchissaient le front avec des palmes,
Et dont l'unique soin était d'approfondir
Le secret douloureux qui me faisait languir. (I 17-8)

This next poem, “La Vie Antérieure,” is also a sonnet, though in the more orthodox 12-syllable alexandrine. And while there is a great deal to be said about the quatrains—from the rich play of history and memory, to the homophony of *antérieure* and *interieure*, or the images and sounds of what Baudelaire elsewhere calls “correspondance”—the deepest connections between this poem and “Le Guignon” surface after the turn.¹⁹ Traditionally, that would mean looking at the ninth line, but Baudelaire’s turn happens later, as we cross into the 11th line and meet the “esclaves nus.”

Nothing in the poem prepares us for this, and in fact a great many elements seem designed to heighten the shock. Deferring the turn certainly has this effect, as does the enjambed list, which begins by enumerating the “voluptés calmes” of “l’azur,” “vagues,” and “splendeurs” and then suddenly—and despite the innocuous “Et”—finds itself forced to accommodate the very different resonance of naked slaves. Whatever they are doing there, it is clear that they do not belong in this list, however much the poem strains to make them seem like just one more iterated item. Most dramatic, though, is the way their presence reverberates back through the poem, making us suddenly aware that there have been no other people in “la vie antérieure.” There are no citizens in the polis, no ships at sea, no friends with whom to share the glories of “correspondence.” Rich though the music of the quatrains may be, the speaker enjoys it very much alone. The only others who might join him are the slaves and they, as the poet tells us, have but one care: “d’approfondir le secret douloureux qui me faisait languir.”

It is a crucial line in the poem, but also a difficult one, and that difficulty is apparent even in the earliest translations. “La Vie Antérieure” was one of just a handful of poems to be translated into English in the years before 1880. Eugene Benson, writing in the *American Atlantic Monthly* offered a prose translation whose final line was: “to seek the painful secret which made me languish.” On the English side, Arthur Reed Ropes penned a verse version for the *Cambridge Review* which ended with the line: “to divine / the secret sorrow that could make me pine.” Both translators keep the word secret, and both draw attention to the special burden of this secrecy, which is called painful in one rendering and sorrowful in the other. What was, in “Le Guignon,” a source of sweetness is now a source of anguish. And there are two reasons for that. One, this artist seems to be truly isolated, cut off even from a hidden society of *guignons*. Two, interested society has found him out. If the slaves left the speaker alone, in other words, the pain of utter, unshared loneliness would already be bad enough. But of course they will not leave him alone. All of their time is spent trying to “approfondir le secret douloureux.” Benson and Ropes take “approfondir” to mean ‘try to find’ (“seek,” in the one case, “divine” in the other). That makes the slaves rather like the prospectors, only instead of pickaxes and probes they use palm leaves. “Approfondir,” however, also has another, more literal, meaning, which the translations failed to capture: it can mean to deepen or make deeper, and if that is the case than the work of the slaves is rather different. Their job would be to bury the secret, not unearth it—pushing it deeper and deeper underground to ensure that it never finds an outlet.

Baudelaire’s secret fraternity of *guignons* is caught, as it were, between these two meanings of *approfondir*, threatened at once by the possibility of being unearthed and by the

equal possibility of being buried alive. If the sweet, shared isolation that binds the artists of “Le Guignon” is broken, and the secret divined, then the sweet perfume becomes too diffuse and too diluted. If, on the other hand, their isolation is heightened, the artists further exiled, and the secret buried deeper, then the sweetness is trapped. What “Le Guignon” imagines, then, is a delicate and deliberate kind of community: bound together by the sense of a shared, artistic curse, communicating through occasional allusions, and thriving on the closely-guarded secret of its own collective isolation. It may not be what I called before the major key of heroic, Sisyphean persistence—the notes are too muffled and the contact too tenuous. But neither is it the minor key of mere subsistence. These artists don’t suffer passively in their march toward “un cimetière isolé,” and they don’t simply accept the burden of eternal failure. Rather, they go on forging the delicate links that sustain their secret community. In the most aggressive reading, these figures confirm Benjamin’s famous account of Baudelaire as a professional conspirator, planning in secret for the grand, defiant revolt which is to come. This gives a quite different meaning to the phrase “L’Art est long et le Temps est court.” Art is not just long, but patient. It bides its time, gaining solidarity through allusion and “plagiats” while the rest of the world goes about its narrow, utilitarian business.

Le Voyage à Tennyson

Thus far, I have talked a great deal about industrialism and modernity, but not about progress. That is not because the idea was foreign to Baudelaire. In fact, Baudelaire was one of the 19th century’s great anti-progressives, a committed skeptic who thought of progress as the worst kind of ideological nonsense. “Il est encore une erreur fort à la mode de laquelle je veux me garder comme de l’enfer.—Je veux parler de l’idée du progrès” (II 580).²⁰ Progress was a dangerous, if fashionable error, and it was also, as Baudelaire expressed elsewhere, the natural enemy of poetry: “La poésie et le progrès sont deux ambitieux que se haïssent d’une haine instinctive, et, quand ils se rencontrent dans le même chemin, il faut que l’un des deux serve l’autre” (II 618).²¹ I said, in the introduction, that this kind of skepticism was essentially absent from the English intellectual scene, the belief in progress having achieved an unquestioned ascendancy. But in France, where industrialism was still uneven and industrial progress a thing of the future, the debate was still vibrant. Baudelaire, himself, offered no shortage of reasons for disclaiming progress, not all of them consistent. In the first place, he felt that it made human beings too free: “[il] a déchargé chacun de son devoir, délivré toute âme de sa responsabilité, dégagé la volonté de tous les liens que lui imposait l’amour du beau” (II 580).²² He also argued that the idea of inevitable progress was an unjustifiable extrapolation. Even if we admit that there had been some real material advances in the past, what makes us think these will continue into the future. “Où est cette garantie? Elle n’existe, dis-je, que dans votre crédulité et votre fatuité” (II 581).²³

His sharpest language he reserved for a third critique. Even if progress is real, and inevitable, isn’t it as much an affliction as a boon?

Je laisse de côté la question de savoir si, délicatisant l’humanité en proportion

des jouissances nouvelles qu'il lui apporte, le progrès indéfini ne serait pas sa plus ingénieuse et sa plus cruelle torture; si procédant par une opiniâtre négation de lui-même, il ne serait pas un mode de suicide incessamment renouvelé, et si, enfermé dans le cercle de feu de la logique divine, il ne ressemblerait pas au scorpion qui se perce lui-même avec sa terrible queue, cet éternel *desideratum* qui fait son éternel désespoir? (II 581)²⁴

At every step, progress negates its own achievements, tantalizing us with the promise of a pleasure that it can never actually provide. Endless repeated motion is how Baudelaire imagines it, whether of the “suicide incessamment renouvelé,” or the “cercle de feu.” And what drives this cyclical movement is our own unquenchable desire, our hope for a “desideratum” which remains forever out of reach. Imagine Sisyphus, finally pushing his boulder over the summit only to discover a second hill on the far side, and beyond that an endless mountain range.

Alternatively, you could imagine Tennyson's Ulysses, voyaging endlessly to satisfy his own restless desire to surge into the unknown. So many of Baudelaire's concerns are already there in the Tennyson: the sense of fruitless, tortured motion, the idea of a progress forever negating itself, the confusion of development and suicide. Certainly, there are differences between the two. For Tennyson, progress was not a myth but a fact, something which might condemn us to restlessness but which still provides some real achievements. Baudelaire thought progress a bleak illusion, a facade behind which lay the truth of eternal self-torture. Real or illusory, though, both poets imagined the experience of progress in much the same terms, and this is something more than a coincidence. Baudelaire's ideas about progress came very much out of his engagement with Tennyson's poetry. We know that Baudelaire read and appreciated Tennyson, and there is ample evidence of a deeper indebtedness, particularly in the case of “Le Voyage,” the final, conclusive poem of *Les Fleurs du Mal*.²⁵ Written, as Baudelaire claimed, to “faire frémir la nature, et surtout les amateurs de progrès” (I 1098), that poem takes Tennyson's work on progress as its basic model.²⁶ The most direct evidence for this is its allusion to “The Lotos-Eaters” and the line “Venez vous enivrer de la douceur étrange / De cette après-midi qui n'a jamais de fin!”²⁷ Now, obviously, invoking the myth of the Lotos-Eaters need not be a Tennysonian homage. It might harken back to the Homeric original, except that in Homer there is no mention of a perpetual afternoon, an “après-midi qui n'a jamais de fin!” That image comes instead from one of Tennyson's opening lines: “In the afternoon they came unto a land / In which it seemèd always afternoon.” This, as I say, is the most direct allusion to Tennyson, but it is not the deepest sign of his influence.²⁸ That lies, instead, in the very framing of Baudelaire's poem, which repeats the fundamental conceit of “Ulysses,” taking the ancient, inveterate practice of sea-voyaging and recasting it as a figure for the uniquely modern perversity called progress. That was one of Tennyson's great innovations, and in “Le Voyage” it becomes one of Baudelaire's richest borrowings, one of the documents of Victorian industrial experience that he adapted for his own modern needs.

“Le Voyage” is not only the final poem of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, it is also the longest verse poem Baudelaire ever wrote. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end—all arranged along a

recognizable narrative arc (which is generally read as an allegory for life itself, moving from childhood in the opening lines to death in the final ones). What is more, the speaker is not the familiar Baudelairean “je,” but instead a more expansive “nous,” a poet speaking with the authority of a community and addressing a shared experience.²⁹

Pour l'enfant, amoureux de cartes et d'estampes,
L'univers est égal à son vaste appétit.
Ah! que le monde est grand à la clarté des lampes!
Aux yeux du souvenir que le monde est petit!

Un matin nous partons, le cerveau plein de flamme,
Le coeur gros de rancune et de désirs amers,
Et nous allons, suivant le rythme de la lame,
Berçant notre infini sur le fini des mers: (I 129, 1-8)³⁰

To the earnest child of these opening stanzas, the universe seems as vast as his own desire. It is full of all the treasures he has dared to imagine, and as he sets off he still hopes to find them all. This is what it feels like to be driven outward by the forceful wind of desire itself, that boundless yearning which enflames the mind and embitters the heart. The child's voice, however, is not the only one in these opening lines; there is another, more experienced and more cynical voice which looks backward rather than forward. “Aux yeux de souvenir,” it tells us, “le monde est petit.” The rhyming pair which connects these two perspectives is revealing here. If the child sees through the eyes of infinite desire, or what the poem calls his “appétit,” the experienced traveler sees a world which, for all its diversity, must always be “petit.” No matter its size, no world can accommodate the limitless hunger of anticipation.

The “nous” which grows out of these lines and governs the whole of the poem incorporates both these voices. It speaks for the sanguine child and the cynical adult. It ventures out, with the child, “le cerveau plein de flamme,” but it also retains a certain knowing fatalism, an awareness that the “fini des mers” cannot calm “notre infini.” Moving between these voices gives Baudelaire some of the same freedoms that Tennyson found in the dramatic monologue: the ability to speak from multiple positions, to plant words in the narrator's mouth or disclaim words that would otherwise be his.³¹ It enables Baudelaire to shift seamlessly between perspectives, speaking at times as the representative of what he grandly calls “L'Homme,” and at other times as its nemesis.

Comparing just the opening lines of sections II and III gives a clear sense for the range of this “nous.” Section II begins:

Nous imitons, horreur! la toupie et la boule
Dans leur valse et leurs bonds; (25-8)³²

The interjected “horreur,” and its accompanying exclamation point, leave no doubt as to the sympathies of the moment. Though he speaks as the “nous,” Baudelaire is nonetheless speaking against humanity; he is appalled by—and staunchly critical of—the restless bounding and stagnant, purposeless spinning of all those in thrall to progress. By the opening of the poem's next section, however, the “nous” has regained something of its credulity:

Etonnants voyageurs! quelles nobles histoires
Nous lisons dans vos yeux profonds comme les mers! (49-50)³³

There are no derisive interjections, here, and the exclamation points only reinforce the sense of captivation. At this moment, the speaker seems as enthralled as everyone else. Notice, too, that the “fini des mers,” from the opening lines, has become “vos yeux profonds comme les mers,” as if there were once again some hope that our desires and our experiences could be mirrored in a perfect correspondence. It is not that our speaker has changed his mind about progress or lost his sense of “horreur.” It is simply a matter of the malleability of the “nous.” In Tennyson, much of this work occurs in the gap between Ulysses’s voice and that of the poet. In Baudelaire, the plural subject is what allows the poet to speak with the freedom of different voices.

This drama of the compound “nous” reaches its climax at the end of “Le Voyage,” where it intersects with the various questions we have been tracing: about Baudelaire’s Englishness, his investment in Tennyson, his reputed modernness, and his imagination of community. Indeed, it is here, at the end, where Baudelaire establishes his own, distinctive difference from Tennyson—not by way of repudiation or disavowal, but simply by taking the materials of Victorian literature and recasting them for his own modern poetry.

We know from Tennyson that poems which deal with progress face a special burden as they close: they have to reconcile the end of the poem with the endlessness of progress. Tennyson, himself, struggled with that problem throughout his work, and Baudelaire’s “Le Voyage” faces a similar, though not identical, burden. The fact, in particular, that Baudelaire’s vision of endlessness is different means that so too are the possibilities for bringing it to an end. In Baudelaire, progress is not only conceived as a mad, restless movement; there is plenty of that, to be sure, but it is only half the problem—and the optimistic half at that. For Baudelaire, progress is not just an endless quest towards an impossible fulfillment; it is a painful quest as well. And it is important to recognize just how different this is from the Tennyson. Ulysses may be trapped in an endless cycle of deferral, but he really does enjoy the journey. To the end, he is excited about progress, perhaps even too excited: in thrall to his excitement. In Baudelaire, you have the very different combination of enthrallment and spleen.³⁴ The voyagers who set out with bitter hearts and inflamed heads find only further bitterness and greater dissatisfaction. They do not treasure the turbulence of their compulsive maneuvers, nor do they say, with Ulysses, “all times I have enjoyed / Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those / That loved me, and alone.” Instead they say:

Nous avons vu des astres
Et des flots, nous avons vu des sables aussi;
Et, malgré bien des chocs et d’imprévus désastres,
Nous nous sommes souvent ennuyés, comme ici. (57-60)³⁵

The blasé tone of that last line is perfectly pitched. We are often bored, no matter whether we are at sea or at home. Moving around cannot change that fundamental fact. As we travel, we do see things—stars, tides, sand—but we see them so regularly and with so little

variation that they cease to excite. And even when we encounter some more exciting “chocs” and “désastres,” they are still dull. No matter how “imprévus,” “Désastres” still sounds like “des astres”—the unexpected being no more intense or enlivening than the familiar. In Baudelaire, the lure of progress is vitiated by the fact of historical stasis. Every time we go in search of the New, we shipwreck upon the self-same.

That term—self-same—is Baudelaire’s own. It is an English compound that he first used to describe Poe’s relation to progress. Poe, he said, considered progress “comme une extase de gobe-mouches,” a frantic, futile flight from the truth that lay elsewhere: “à l’immuable, à l’éternel, et au *self-same*” (II 299).³⁶ In the world of the self-same, the only thing worth discovering is that there is nothing left to discover, that the New is always just the first phase of an eternal repetition:

Amer savoir, celui qu’on tire du voyage!
Le monde, monotone et petit, aujourd’hui,
Hier, demain, toujours, nous fait voir notre image:
Une oasis d’horreur dans un désert d’ennui! (109-12)³⁷

For all its richness and diversity, our world is, was, and will forever remain “monotone et petit,” a perfect reflection of our own desperately bored souls. This is what you might call the dark side of Baudelairean correspondence. Yes, humanity is in harmony with the world, only it is the harmony of banality. We are trapped in the self-same because we, ourselves, cannot change. Wherever we go, we see the stale image of our own restlessness and dissatisfaction.

What, then, is left for us to do? Should we follow Ulysses, embracing progress and traveling outward in search of things we know we cannot find? Or should we accept the self-same and try to rest as much as is humanly possible? This question, or this series of questions, marks the beginning of the end for Baudelaire’s poem. And the speaker’s initial response—“Si tu peux rester, reste; / Pars, s’il le faut”—is appropriately flip, given the utter insignificance of the answer (113-4).³⁸ If life will be full of boredom either way, there is no reason to take seriously these questions about which boring path to prefer. And yet, the poem does ultimately make a choice. Some ways of enduring the self-same are inexplicably better, and for Baudelaire pointless journeying seems strangely preferable to pointless stasis, dull travel to dull respite. To the question, ‘should I stay or should I go,’ the ultimate response of “Le Voyage” is: go. And this is never more true than at the moment of death, the moment when you are finally overcome by “l’ennemi vigilant et funeste, / Le Temps!” (115-6):

Lorsque enfin il mettra le pied sur notre échine,
Nous pourrons espérer et crier: En avant!
De même qu’autrefois nous partions pour la Chine,
Les yeux fixés au large et les cheveux au vent,

Nous nous embarquerons sur la mer des Ténèbres
Avec le coeur joyeux d’un jeune passager. (121-6)³⁹

When time catches up to us and puts his foot firmly on our chest, then our real journey can begin. Notice, in other words, what death is not. It is not a final, ultimate rest. It is not a peaceful escape from the endless, anxious, active ennui of life. It is more like a voyage to China, another stop on the same closed circuit we have been following throughout our lives—only with a revived hope for success.

Somehow, in death, our faith is restored. Something of the infinite anticipation of the child has been recaptured, and with it the renewed hope that we may at last encounter new experiences and find new kinds of satisfaction:

Entendez-vous ces voix charmantes et funèbres,
Qui chantent: “Par ici vous qui voulez manger
Le Lotus parfumé! c’est ici qu’on vendange
Les fruits miraculeux dont votre coeur a faim;
Venez vous enivrer de la douceur étrange
De cette après-midi qui n’a jamais de fin!” (127-32)⁴⁰

Two different Homeric moments are here packaged together in one irresistible offer. There are the sirens, singing with their “voix charmantes et funèbres,” but what they are offering are the flowers from the island of the lotus eaters, the “fruits miraculeux dont votre coeur a faim.” It is the fulfillment of desire and the freedom from desire all at once.⁴¹ That these two temptations actually belong together is something that Adorno and Horkheimer saw long ago, in a famous excursus from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Both sequences, they recognized, offer Ulysses a promise of satisfaction and then reveal, through the vigor of Ulysses’ resistance, his indifference to real happiness. Ulysses will neither eat of the lotos flower nor swim to the sirens and the reason he will not is because he cannot tolerate the idea of contentment.

Tennyson felt the same resistance, and to guard against the seduction of happiness he made his own “Lotos-Eaters” even less appealing. You can see something of that in the line that Baudelaire borrowed. “In the afternoon,” Tennyson writes, “they came unto a land / In which it seemèd always afternoon.” Seemed, to begin with, is a decidedly ambiguous verb, and the fact that it is lengthened into two syllables helps to draw attention to that ambiguity. The lazy repetition of afternoon has a similar effect, as if to suggest not only a kind of permanence but also a kind of incapacity, a breakdown in language. Tennyson’s words wink at us, with a knowing suspicion about the dubious value of this island of sweet intoxication. It may seem satisfying but any attempt to live that satisfaction leads to a kind of lazy degeneration.

Not so in Baudelaire. “De cette après-midi qui n’a jamais de fin!” contains no repetition and no “sembler,” only a newly earnest exclamation point. The line has been stripped of all its more ambivalent elements, allowing the lotos-siren temptation to appear as a gift, rather than a trap. Unlike the Homer or the Tennyson, something of real fulfillment is on offer in Baudelaire’s lines, and it is an offer that “nous” may finally be willing to take. In life, Baudelaire tells us, we are enslaved to progress, driven ever outward in search of new experiences, only to find that each experience reinforces the reign of the self-same. We are

forever captivated by a promise of happiness that continually escapes us, and so we spin in futile circles like a child's top. Then we die, at which point, we can finally enjoy the intoxication of the lotos flower and the pleasure of the sirens.

There is something very appealing about this reading, and it is certainly not without its textual evidence.⁴² It is also not without its problems, though. It is not just that we have to die in order to find happiness—generations of religious devotees have lived comfortably with that trade-off.⁴³ Rather, it is that the passage to this greater happiness looks suspiciously like all of our other failed, boring voyages. The final stanzas of “Le Voyage,” in particular, tell us that this death which seems to promise real fulfillment is like nothing so much as another voyage in search of the elusive New:

Ô Mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps! levons l'ancre!
Ce pays nous ennuie, ô Mort! Appareillons!
Si le ciel et la mer sont noirs comme de l'encre,
Nos coeurs que tu connais sont remplis de rayons!

Verse-nous ton poison pour qu'il nous réconforte!
Nous voulons, tant ce feu nous brûle le cerveau,
Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?
Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau! (137-44)⁴⁴

The perversity of progress is as pronounced here as it is throughout the poem. Death is a captain, ready to raise anchor and set sail. And we—the “nous”—are only too eager to follow, our hearts “remplis de rayons,” and our heads, as in the opening lines, burning with anticipation.⁴⁵ Magically, death has renewed our faith in the tortured promise of progress and given us new assurance that we will finally “trouver du nouveau” (and notice, here, that Tennyson's final “to find” has found a matching place in Baudelaire's last line). But of course, we were always confident that we could find something new; that is what drove our futile path around the globe to begin with. The only difference between this voyage and the others is that we call this one death and the other life. Our desires, our hopes, and our expectations are exactly the same in both cases. We merely repeat, in death, the same ritual we perfected in life.

The ultimate meaning of these final lines depends in large part on who is speaking. Is it the bitter, critical “nous” who might interject an “horreur!,” as in “Nous voulons, horreur!, tant ce feu nous brûle le cerveau, / Plonger au fond du gouffre.” If so, then these final stanzas are the most piercingly cynical of the entire poem. Even in death, this “nous” would suggest, we are enslaved by progress. We cannot imagine rest or fulfillment except as extensions of our own futile voyaging, and the consequence is that even in our watery graves we will be unable to sleep because we will be haunted by the promise of the New.

Then again, it might be the more hopeful “nous,” the speaker who moves forward with humanity and speaks for the power of human possibility. Him we might trust to tell us about the new potential of death and the real happiness that lies on that far side of that great divide. His final “trouver” might be something other than a feint, and something firmer than Tennyson would allow. What makes “to find” so awkward in the Tennyson,

remember, is that his Ulysses—like Adorno and Horkheimer’s—has no interest in finding; he lives to search. In Baudelaire, however, the possibility of finding seems more comfortable and more plausible, because the poem has already showed us what it would look like: the magical combination of sirens and lotos-flowers. Even if we repeat in death the compulsive activity of life, that repetition is no longer absurd, because in death there are actually new experiences to be found and new kinds of satisfaction to uncover—satisfactions intimated by those reworked Homeric allusions.

Unless, again, we have the tone wrong, in which case we are continuing the old pattern of sacrificing our lives to the hollow promise of happiness. Thus, round and round we go, inside the speaking “nous” whose position we cannot fix and therefore cannot trust. What was ambivalence in Tennyson has become vertigo in Baudelaire—the mix of enthusiasm and compulsion intensified to produce a new kind of poetic closure, not awkward and half-hearted as with “Ulysses,” but doubly insistent, equal parts passion and cynicism. It is a vicious interpretive circle, rather than a hasty detour, and that change is itself a reflection both of the very different temperaments of these two poets and, more important, of their very different communities.

The reason the end of Baudelaire’s poem seems so vertiginous is because there is truly nothing else to hold on to: no excitement, no discoveries, no fruits of progress to enjoy, and above all no community-in-progress to make the journey bearable. If the “find” of Ulysses’ last line seems artificial, we can happily dismiss it and still take comfort in the enthusiasm of our captain and the bonds of an incipient community. In Baudelaire, there is no such recourse and no such community. Despite the very deliberate and very unusual use of the speaking “nous” (“Le Voyage” being one of only two poems in the *Fleurs du Mal* governed by the “nous”), this “nous” does not seem to be a truly collective voice. It has its power and its flexibility, but what it does not achieve—perhaps does not even attempt to achieve—is any instantiation of a living, speaking community. There is nothing like the fellowship of Ulysses and his undead mariners nor indeed the communal, choric song of the lotos-eaters; instead, there is only this hollow plural signifier which stands, more than anything else, for the palpable absence of others. This is why the final appeal in Baudelaire is so different from the one in Tennyson. “Come, my friends,” Ulysses says, “Tis not too late to seek a newer world.” Baudelaire’s speaker has no friends to implore, and so he turns, instead, to death: “Ô Mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps! levons l’ancre!” Better, it would seem, to lose oneself to death than to reclaim your brothers from the same fate.

This difference in the representation of community, moreover, points back to the problem with which we began, the problem of Baudelaire’s strange Englishness. Part of the reason Baudelaire could not imagine his own community-in-progress—in life or in death—is because he was the first modern poet in a nation that was not the first modern place. His natural poetic partners were toiling away across the channel, and Tennyson is just another of those, another English writer in the vortex of modern life whose work Baudelaire could adapt for his own modernist purposes. It was from these British and American *guignons* that Baudelaire borrowed his literary materials, and it was to them that he looked when trying to imagine his own artistic community. They, however, were neither near enough nor tangible enough

to provide any real, social recompense for the pain of progress.

What is perhaps most astounding about Baudelaire's imaginary involvement in a secret club of English writers is that there were a number of English critics who indulged the same fantasy. One such reviewer wrote that "in Baudelaire prevails that intense and all-pervading sadness, that iron gloom, that calm, cold, pitiless painting of the worst side of human nature, which Frenchmen would consider the effect of English spleen" (Hillard)—picking up, obviously on Baudelaire's borrowing of this English word and using it to paint Baudelaire as a poet of English feelings. George Saintsbury, in his review essay, went even further. After quoting, in French, the concluding stanzas of "Le Voyage," he wrote, "the first thing, perhaps, which strikes a careful observer is that it is singularly *unfrench*" (512). And, elsewhere in the same essay, he expanded on that observation: "there is perhaps no French poet more deserving of appreciation in England, certainly there is none whose poetical qualities are so germane to those which we should chiefly affect and reverence on this side of the channel" (501). If Baudelaire looked to England to find an artistic community, it must also be said that these English reviewers returned his gaze. They knew, of course, that Baudelaire wasn't an English poet, but part of what they suggest is that if he were, he might not feel so painfully alone.⁴⁶

And if he could not make himself an English poet, he did what he could to narrow the gap: he looked to England to understand the dynamic that was reshaping France; he imported the word spleen into his own language; he celebrated a French artist who had found his proper medium in a Victorian periodical; and he used the resources of English poetry to improve his own verse. Tennyson, Poe, Gray, Longfellow, De Quincey—these writers helped shape his innovative poetic vision, so much so that part of his status as modern poet must be understood through his imaginary identification with England. It was from them that Baudelaire borrowed his literary materials and it was to them that he looked when trying to imagine a community for himself, most fundamentally because he thought they—better than anyone else—understood modernity. "La poésie anglaise" was also, for Baudelaire, "la poésie moderne," a kind of writing inseparable from the urban, industrial landscape that had overrun England (and America) and was spreading to France. Even when they are set in pre-industrial churchyards and Homeric islands, these English poems still seemed stamped—like the paintings Gauthier eulogized—with the imprint of that most advanced civilization. Each had found its own way of wresting Art from the engine of modern life, which made them indispensable for Baudelaire's own struggle with the echoing energies of nineteenth-century Paris.

What made Baudelaire the first modern poet, in other words, was something other than his susceptibility to the processes of modern life; that alone could not suffice, because these processes were not fully developed in Paris. He needed, also, to experience England—the only fully modern, industrial nation—and he drew that experience from his engagement with English and American poets. It was thanks to those writers whom he thought of as his partners in urban, industrial modernity and with whom he forged a secret community that he, more than anyone else, was able to capture and diagnose the Paris of the nineteenth century.

Looking Back: Eliot

It is time to turn back—to cross back into England from France and to look back, for the first time, into the past. Progress, we know, is future-oriented; it drives forward with the promise of endless improvement. And thus far, the writers we have examined have largely let themselves be driven forward: Carlyle by way of a spiritual detour, Tennyson with the help of a weak community, and Baudelaire with the help of Tennyson. Progress, however, also changes the way we relate to the past. By lashing the present to the future, it alienates us from history, making it difficult to determine what, if anything, history can mean for us. This would be true in any era of progress, but industrial progress deepened the divide. If industrialism marked the biggest change in millennia of human existence—breaking the Malthusian trap and inaugurating a new era in economic and social life—it thus rendered the lessons of history strangely obsolete; what value could the pre-industrial past have for a Victorian culture caught on the far side of a great, historical chasm?

This is not to say that the Victorians themselves were indifferent to their past. On the contrary, they were consumed with it. “Besotted” is the word preferred by David Lowenthal in his seminal book *The Past is a Foreign Country*: “Scott’s historical novels, Gothic Revival architecture, neo-chivalric fashions of dress and conduct, classical standards of beauty, successive passions for all things Roman, Greek Egyptian, Chinese, early English—all this betokened a people besotted with the past” (97).¹ As is clear from even this brief list, it was not just one era of the past that stood out. Medievalism certainly had its privileged place, but beside Carlyle and Ruskin’s attachment to the age of monasteries and cathedrals was Rossetti’s interest in the Italian Renaissance, Tennyson’s regular use of classical sources, and George Eliot’s preference for early 19th-century England. In each case, though, the fundamental problem was the same: what could the industrial world learn from the pre-industrial? What is gained, just now, by turning to the past? And why did the Victorians do so with such ritual regularity?

This problem is especially pointed in Eliot’s case, because in her work the relation between past and present has been narrowed to its thinnest. To invoke the ancient world, the Medieval, or the Renaissance, is to take for granted that history has happened in between. But for Eliot, the question of why she turned to the past is compounded by the question of whether she really did turn to the past. Eliot’s most regular setting was what we might call the last days of the rural—rural society on the brink of dissolution, when the world was still full of thriving artisans and strict communal forms but occasionally disturbed by railways and dispossessions.² More often than not, these last rural days are also carefully dated to the late 1820s and early 1830s; two of her three *Scenes of Clerical Life* are set then, as are three of her four provincial novels: *Mill on the Floss*, *Felix Holt*, and *Middlemarch*. Whether this makes them pre- or post-industrial is, however, still difficult to determine. The divide is never as sharply demarcated as, for instance, in the opening lines of Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*:

But not of late years are we about to speak; we are going back to the beginning of this century: late years—present years are dusty, sunburnt, hot, arid; we will evade the noon, forget it in siesta, pass the midday in slumber, and dream of dawn. (5)

Here, the contrast between early and mid-century is stark; compared to the “dusty, sunburnt, hot, arid” climate of the now, even the relatively recent past seems as fresh and promising as “dawn.”

Eliot’s past is not that distant. Indeed, with few alterations, it is possible to imagine her novels being set either in 1780 or in 1850. And though her readers in the 1860s and 1870s would certainly have thought of the 30s as the past, they might still have memories of that earlier time, which would make those years seem less like a distinct era and more like part of the unfolding present.

Both these perspectives make sense, and each corresponds to a different aspect of Eliot’s style: her nostalgia, on the one hand, and her realism on the other. Tracing this fissure reveals something more than Eliot’s ambivalent relation to the past; it tells us about the Victorian commitment to history more broadly. Turning back was never about wanting to go back; rather, it was about retrieving some keepsakes for the journey forward. For Eliot and her mid-Victorian contemporaries, progress was still the dominant idea and the beckoning future still shone brighter than the fading past. Yet, the inhumanity of industrial progress gave the past a weak, compensatory power—as the home of certain values that the future, though happier, simply could not sustain. Eliot, herself, was that familiar Victorian type: a devotee of progress who preferred to walk backwards into the future. And part of the burden of her work was to craft a matching kind of nostalgia, something warm enough to comfort but not so bright as to distract from the backward-march. The past, in Eliot, is there to be remembered and treasured—not sought or revived. *Middlemarch*, in particular, envisions a past whose value lies precisely in its archive of rich disappointment, its recollection of a time when not all tragedies looked like Huskisson’s and it was still possible to fail in a noble and grandly human fashion.

Realism

When *Middlemarch* was first published in 1871, the reviewers were equally certain that it was a genuinely historical novel, and that it was an absolutely contemporary novel. In the words of the *Edinburgh Review*, it describes “a quiet country-town of forty years ago, and a squire’s house lying near it, with just the people whom we know were there at that time.” (127). And yet it was also, according to the *Westminster Review*: “the book from which future generations will learn not only our outward lives, our daily doings, but our inmost thoughts and aspirations” (325). Somehow, *Middlemarch* seemed to capture both the lives of its contemporary readers and the lives of early-century rural denizens. And, as it happens, the book itself provides ample evidence for both views. At various points, Eliot insists that her *Middlemarch* world is a lost world. “In those days,” she tells us, “the world in general was more ignorant of good and evil by forty years than it is at present” (188). In the field of medicine, “this was a dark period” (145), and in politics, it was “before Reform had done its notable part in developing the political consciousness” (88). There are touches of irony in these several phrases, but they are light touches, and the emphasis still falls on the historical distance between reader and characters.

At other times, however, that distance collapses, as when Eliot suggests that Mary Garth may be waiting for us right around the corner: “If you want to know more particularly how Mary looked, ten to one you will see a face like hers in the crowded street to-morrow, if you are on the watch” (407). Against Eliot’s repeated insistence on the pastness of her fictional world, in other words, stands her tendency to universalize, her equal insistence that the motives and biases driving her characters still shape the people on the mid-Victorian street. The “stealthy convergence of human lots” which has become such a convenient shorthand for the operations of the books as a whole is itself a perfect example. That famous passage is remembered, chiefly, for its grand, universal statement about the diffuse nature of human influence:

But any one watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another, which tells like a calculated irony on the indifference or the frozen stare with which we look at our un-introduced neighbour. Destiny stands by sarcastic with our *dramatis personae* folded in her hand. (95)

Human lives, she tells us, are more intricately interwoven than is usually imagined—the connective tissue being dense, if also nearly invisible. What looks to us like a first meeting is frequently pre-arranged, long prepared by a destiny whose omniscience makes our surprise seem risible. There is nothing in this paragraph to suggest that such effects are particularly modern. Indeed, the very mention of destiny hints at age-long truths and universal relevance.

And yet, the very next paragraph reads: “Old provincial society had its share of this subtle movement . . . those less marked vicissitudes which are constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse, and begetting new consciousness of interdependence” (95). Why should “old provincial society” not have its share? Its denizens are human, so they have “human lots,” or at the very least they qualify as “*dramatis personae*.” What could possibly exempt them from destiny? Ultimately, I do not think there are sound answers to these questions. The fact that Eliot refers, at one moment, to a general feature of human social life and then must insist, at the next moment, that this truth about all societies happens also to be true of provincial society is just a symptom of the competing temporalities of her novel: its historical nature, on the one hand, and its absolutely contemporary nature, on the other.

The real question, and the one which we do need to answer, is whether this matters for Eliot’s realism. How does her realism—or realism in general—fit into history? From the very beginning, *Middlemarch* was understood in realist terms. “The leading men and women of Middlemarch,” wrote the *Athanaeum*, “are realities of flesh and blood” (726 Dec. 7, 72). And extending the argument from characters to setting, *St. Paul’s Magazine* believed that: “so graphically are the various scenes and persons brought under our notice that we seem to know the borough-town perfectly” (604). This verdict, of course, is supported not only by Eliot’s many realist pronouncements—as from the famous 17th chapter of *Adam Bede*—but also by the very painterly subtitle of *Middlemarch* itself: “A Study of Provincial Life.” Yet, no one seemed to know which reality this realism was supposed to reflect. Is

Eliot's a historical realism (i.e. bearing some meaningful relation to the reality of 1830s)? Or a contemporary realism (i.e. bearing some meaningful relation to the reality of the 1870s)? These are not the same thing. The England of 1870 was hardly identical to the England of 1830. Population had mushroomed, urban spaces had exploded into the air, class antagonisms had been substantially realigned. For forty years, industrial progress had continued its rapid and unabated course. So if realism aims, even in the weakest sense, to present an illusion of reality, it should have to account for such changes in the experience and understanding of reality.

This problem is not unique to Eliot, of course; it would seem to apply to all of 19th century realism. And although very few of today's critics have addressed the issue, some of the early practitioners did.³ When the realist school was first coalescing in France in the 1850s, and Louis Edmond Duranty summarized the doxa of realism for his journal *Réalisme*, his very first principle was "That Realism bans the *historical* in painting, the novel, and the theatre so that no lie may creep in and the artist cannot borrow knowledge from others"—(his second principle, virtually the same, was "That Realism demands of artists only the study of their period") (Furst 31). For Duranty, realism was first and foremost a depiction of the contemporary. Looking back, it is hard to say whether this French rule was more honored in the breach or the observance. *Madame Bovary*, for example, is set between the 1820s and the 1840s, which puts it between 10 and 30 years in the past. Balzac's novels are primarily set in the late 18th and early 19th century. Does that make them contemporary or historical?

On the English scene, Duranty's dicta had no more force. The recourse to history was a common realist practice, strongly rooted in the popularity and prestige of Walter Scott. If we took Duranty at his word, this would be proof of a kind of realist failing, but there is no good reason to take him at his word, especially on the English side of the channel. English realism was a completely different animal from French realism, having its own lines of influence, its own preoccupations, and its own theoretical basis.⁴ It was never self-consciously scandalous, as the French version often was, and it was never much interested in the vulgar or the irredeemably ugly, even when it turned to the "low." Indeed, an entire specialized discourse of English realism has developed to account for this difference. George Levine, for one, has argued that "Realism in England belongs, rather, to a much more affable and moderate tradition," one that "found little incompatibility between 'sincere' representation and a conscious attempt to speak helpfully to a sympathetic audience."⁵ Unlike its French counterpart, which is taken to be more detached and dispassionate, English realism is understood to include both a descriptive impulse and a didactic one, an effort "to use language to get beyond language" (6) and to do so "in the name of some moral enterprise" (8).⁶ Amanda Claybaugh has recently emphasized this same duality, arguing that mid-century realist novels are essentially reformist; they "represent the world as it is in order to bring about the world as it should be" (40).

Why this interest in reform and "moral enterprise" should manifest itself in a turn to the past is something neither Levine nor Claybaugh address directly, but Suzanne Graver's work on Eliot offers a first possible solution. In Graver's reading, Eliot's past is less like "the

world that was” and more like “the world that should be”; it is full of elements—values, beliefs, practices—which can aid in the reconstitution of the present. As Graver puts it, Eliot’s novels offer “a poetry of community created out of still vital old forms and beneficial new ones” (91). By “vital old forms” is meant, chiefly, the pre-industrial social structure: the sympathy, solidarity, and fellow-feeling which yesterday’s *Gemeinschaft* communities had and which today’s *Gesellschaft* society needs. But the details, here, are less important than the general framework. To the question of how Eliot’s realism could seem both historical and contemporary, Graver’s response is thus clear: it cannibalizes the past in the name of the present, taking invoice of history’s dustbin to see if there are scraps we might recycle. Eliot’s novels are historical and contemporary because they make history vital for the reform of modern life.

In a late passage from one of her notebooks, Eliot herself suggested something similar. Under the right conditions, she wrote, the understanding of history might help to guide society towards a better future. In particular, “the exercise of a veracious imagination in historical picturing seems to be capable of a development that might help the judgment greatly with regard to present and future events.” But even this careful statement, with its “seems” and its “might” represents Eliot at her most uncharacteristically hopeful and it does not comport well with the reality of the novels. No doubt, there are reformist aspects to Eliot’s work, and there is little question that sympathy, in particular, was a quality she thought fiction could inspire. But, to argue that Eliot used the past to redeem the future is to greatly overstate the case. For Eliot, the past was something other than a blueprint for the future—something more like a treasured, but fading photograph. History is central to her work not because it can be made present again but because it cannot—and, more important, because her readers did not want it to be.

The unique nature of her historical realism is beautifully illustrated by a lengthy 1882 review essay entitled “Village Life according to George Eliot.” Himself a product of the countryside, the author T. E. Kebbel declares early on that Eliot’s characters “seem to be old friends, to anyone at all conversant with the bucolic speech of Warwickshire or Leicestershire” (266) The emphasis, here, is on old, since Kebbel understands that Eliot’s characters belong to an England now half-a-century in the past. “Such men as these,” he adds, “we can remember well” (269). But Kebbel is troubled by something in Eliot’s history and concerned that her novels do not align with other accounts of the era:

It is necessary to remember that many of these scenes are drawn after what is called ‘the bad times’ had begun. They do not lie back in the golden past, in the days of Cobbett’s youth, the time in which, according to Hallam, writing in 1828, the English labourer was better off than he had been either before or since. They belong to the period when prices had risen almost to famine point, when nothing like any commensurate increase had taken place in wages, and when the enclosure of wastes and commons had deprived the poor man of the resources by which he had formerly supplemented them. Yet, in spite of all these circumstances, English rural life as painted by George Eliot still retains some of the hues of Arcadia. (274)

Where, Kebbel wants to know, are the labor pains of industrial progress? Where is the growing poverty? The flight to the cities? The rick-burners and machine-breakers? All the things that Cobbett described in his rural rides?

Kebbel is alert to the fact that Eliot is a writer of fiction and that there are many reasons a novel might be unfaithful to history, but he does not think this is relevant to Eliot's case because she is not just a writer of fiction; she is a writer of realism. She "claims for herself . . . the credit of reproducing common life with the accuracy of a Dutch painter," so if her descriptions of the past do not match the suffering seen in Cobbett's later rides, it is not enough to say that he writes non-fiction sketches while she writes fictional novels. Both claim to present the truth, and therefore only one of them can be right. Kebbel, for his part, trusts to Eliot:

We can only therefore account for the difference between them by supposing that the hardships of the village poor were to some extent exaggerated then, as they have been since, by well-intentioned sympathisers whose imagination was more powerful than their reason; as well as by interested advocates who had ulterior purposes to serve. It is easier at all events to believe this, than to believe either that George Eliot could have been entirely ignorant of the squalid penury which according to some contemporary writers was the lot of the ordinary English peasant during the period in question, or that, not being ignorant of it, she should never once have made the slightest allusion to it. . . . If we cannot trust George Eliot, what reason have we for trusting the writers who so widely differ from her.
(276)

The logic here is only too obviously blinkered, and Kebbel's conception of evidence too obtuse for comment. He chooses Eliot because he finds it "easier to believe" that early-century hardships were frequently exaggerated than to believe that she herself could have been ignorant of them. He trusts George Eliot's novels more than he trusts Cobbett's sketches, and he is untroubled by the fact that this means trusting realism more than non-fiction.

For Kebbel, there is something extra-trustworthy about realism. Notice, in that regard, that Eliot's realism does not just give her an equal claim to historical truth but in fact a better one, a higher purchase on reality. And though that may sound like a perverse misreading on his part, it actually takes its cue from the implied promise of realism itself: the promise to show us a reality that is richer and more complete than our own. Realism does not approximate reality in some asymptotic fashion; it constantly overreaches, giving us more reality than we have ever known. Time and again, throughout her career, Eliot's readers celebrated her work for being just that: more lifelike than life itself and so real that it could not exist in our world. *Middlemarch* was not just a mirror but "a magic mirror in which the aspects of real life are reflected but with a reflection far more intelligible than could be any direct vision of the objects that we are looking at" (*Examiner* Oct. 5 72, 985). And the *Academy* too spoke of its great pleasure in seeing "men and women whom we have all known in real life, where, however, to our dimmer vision, they seemed less real and life-like than in the book" (1 January 1873, 1-4.)⁷

For these reviewers, the world of *Middlemarch* is even more real than the real world. It is ablaze with a vivid intensity which reality itself has never provided, but which we imagine it might if we got close enough. The secret, as the *London Quarterly Review* astutely noted, was in the form. Eliot's narrator can secret us into guarded places and offer us otherwise inaccessible perspectives:

But this writer, to whom the manifold aspects of the human soul lie as naked as a dissected preparation to an anatomist, takes us with her behind the multiform veil of flesh, distance, and separation; lets us see through her eyes the minutest workings of the yearning heart, the troubled spirit, the guilty conscience; and puts into our hands a legible scroll of destiny, where actual circumstance would fling us an impenetrable hieroglyph or a Sphinx's riddle." (London Quarterly Review, 101-2)

Reality as we know it is all too illegible. Screened as we are by "the multiform veil of flesh, distance, and separation," the force of "actual circumstance" strikes us as "an impenetrable hieroglyph." *Middlemarch* lifts that veil. It shows us reality as we have never seen it before, populated by naked souls and organized by a Destiny willing to share her every design secret.

Herein lies both the great power of Eliot's realism and the first clue to its relation with history. In Kebbel's case, remember, it wasn't Eliot's representation of the present that seemed more real than reality; it was her representation of the past. And by a simple and seductive slippage *Middlemarch* comes to seem less like a picture of 'reality as we have never known it' and more like 'reality as we no longer know it.' If Eliot shows us a more vivid reality, and if she sets her novels in the past, than it is tempting to believe that these things are connected. "Actual circumstances" have not always been an "impenetrable hieroglyph;" they became so in the wake of industrialism, before which the real world was richer, fuller, and more soulful. It is not that her novels seem more real *and* that they are set in the past; they seem more real *because* they are set in the past, at a time when reality itself was somehow more vivid and more real. Eliot's more-than-realism is, in that sense, not a more intense picture of today's reality but an accurate reflection of yesterday's more intense reality. And the first answer to the question of how *Middlemarch* manages to be both realist and historical is precisely because its realism is angled to capture the richer reality of the past. We do not turn to the past in order to rebuild the future; we turn to the past because our memory is more complete than our reality.

Souls in the Crowd

If *Middlemarch*, as a whole, seemed more real than reality, it was still the case that some characters seemed more real than others. Of Lydgate, for instance, Eliot said that she was going to "make him better known to any one interested in him than he could possibly be even to those who had seen the most of him since his arrival at Middlemarch" (141-2). And of course there is also Dorothea, whom Henry James described in the following terms:

To render the expression of a soul requires a cunning hand; but we seem to look straight into the unfathomable eyes of the beautiful spirit of Dorothea Brooke. She exhales a sort of aroma of spiritual sweetness, and we believe in her as in a woman we might providentially meet some fine day when we should find ourselves doubting of the immortality of the soul. (49)

This is something like what Eliot said of Mary Garth. Dorothea, too, is the kind of character you might run into on a fine day. Only in Dorothea's case, you would have to be walking through a kind of spirit-world. She is something more than human, a "soul" with "unfathomable eyes" and an "aroma of spiritual sweetness"—vivid proof of our own uncertain immortality. As it happens, though, being a soul, rather than a real person, is what makes her so strangely fit for Eliot's more-than-realism.⁸

The word "soul," which James employs twice in these few lines, is one that he borrowed from Eliot. In the novel, Dorothea speaks with "the voice of a soul that had once lived in an Aeolian harp" (80), and when, later, she appeals to Lydgate for counsel, Eliot calls it a "cry from soul to soul" (290). Even when the exact term soul is not in play, some variant often is. Dorothea is "a heaven-sent angel" (425), "an angel beguiled" (209), "one of those county divinities not mixing with Middlemarch mortality" (432) who "wanted nothing for herself but a chair to sit in from which she can look down with those clear eyes at the poor mortals who pray to her" (768). She is a character from another realm, an incorporeal being who has condescended to visit this quaint, early-century town. To a lesser degree, Lydgate is as well—hence the "cry from soul to soul." Henry James, again, called Dorothea and Lydgate "two suns in [Eliot's] firmament, each with its independent solar system" (cite), and the metaphor is surprisingly apt. It is not just that both sit at the center of their own plots—orbited by their own subplots—it is that both belong to the airy heavens.

More than a soul, in fact, Dorothea is an old soul, come too late into this world. She belongs to a higher sphere and also a past life, and by that I do not mean the past of 1830 when the novel is set. The 1830s are already too late for her. Dorothea, herself, is just what her sister calls her, a dodo, an extinct species of human living a ghostly existence in a world unsuited for her kind. She belongs, in that sense, to the novel's own past, to the rarefied world of "the country gentry of old time," when the word noble could still credibly signify across moral and social lines. She is a dying, if not already defunct breed of aristocrat, a fantasy confluence of birth and worth. Which is why, when she meets Rosamond for the first time, the contrast of character is shorthanded as the more familiar contrast between old and new money, aristocracy and business, land and capital:

Let those who know, tell us exactly what stuff it was that Dorothea wore in those days of mild autumn—that thin white woollen stuff soft to the touch and soft to the eye. It always seemed to have been lately washed, and to smell of the sweet hedges—was always in the shape of a pelisse with sleeves hanging all out of fashion. Yet if she had entered before a still audience as Imogen or Cato's daughter, the dress might have seemed right enough: the grace and dignity were in her limbs and neck; and about her simply parted hair and candid eyes the

large round poke which was then in the fate of women, seemed no more odd as a head-dress than the gold trencher we call a halo. (432)

Dorothea enters as if from above. Her clothing is made of a kind of soft and perpetually sweet-smelling “stuff” that cannot be named and certainly cannot be bought. Its real beauty is gathered from the reflected glow of Dorothea herself, her “limbs and neck,” “her simply parted hair,” and the poke bonnet that looks, on her, like “a halo.” What is being echoed in this description is the signature claim of aristocracy, namely that nobility is not a matter of law but a matter of soul, a natural and eternal superiority that shines through the body and cannot be aped by mere fashion.

Rosamond, by contrast, is a model of petty and assertive grandiosity:

but imagine Rosamond’s infantine blondness and wondrous crown of hair-plaits, with her pale-blue dress of a fit and fashion so perfect that no dressmaker could look at it without emotion, a large embroidered collar which it was to be hoped all beholders would know the price of, her small hands duly set off with rings, and that controlled self-consciousness of manner which is the expensive substitute for simplicity. (432-3)

All value, this time, is a matter of price, measured in shillings and pounds. Where Dorothea is simple and radiant, Rosamond is self-conscious and ornate. Where Dorothea bears her wealth, Rosamond wears it. And where Dorothea is a paragon of nobility, Rosamond is an advertisement for capital. ‘You’d have to have a lot of money to look like me,’ is Rosamond’s tagline. Dorothea’s, in contrast, is: ‘It doesn’t matter how much money you have; you will never look like me.’ The values that Dorothea represents are the imagined values of the past, the hallmarks of a waning aristocratic order. Rosamond’s values are those of the present and the future. They are the values of conspicuous consumption and consumer capitalism, and more important than that, they are the distributed values of the social itself. Notice, in that regard, all the other people invoked in this description of Rosamond. What makes her dress perfect is the fact that “no dressmaker could look at it without emotion,” just as what makes her collar beautiful is the fact that “all beholders would know the price.” Value, in her universe, is a distributed phenomenon; it does not inhere in the individual but rather depends on the perception of others. Dorothea, the radiant sun, may be the source of all “grace and dignity” in her universe, but Rosamond is just a planet, casting no light of her own but finding herself occasionally lit up by some other celestial body.⁹

This contrast—between Dorothea and Rosamond, past and present, innate and distributed values—is actually something more than a contrast and something closer to a conflict, extending beyond these two characters and producing two distinct narrative universes.¹⁰ There is the universe of Dorothea and Lydgate, on the one hand, populated by independent souls and driven by grand ambition. On the other, there is the universe of collective Middlemarch, where worth is determined by the community as a whole and life is made up of petty, daily interaction.¹¹ In shorthand, we could call them the universe of the soul and the universe of the crowd. They are the two competing principles in this novel, two conceptions of value that continuously clash against one another.

Indeed, if anything unites Dorothea and Lydgate, it is their shared desire to escape from the world of the crowd, to avoid the mundane pressures of everyday Middlemarch life and find their world apart, free of the gossip, the courtesies, and the petty concerns. Such an ideal is precisely what draws Dorothea to Casaubon. He is “unconscious that trivialities existed,” and “To Dorothea this was adorable genuineness, and religious abstinence from that artificiality which uses up the soul in the efforts of pretence” (33). Lydgate’s reasons for settling in Middlemarch are much the same. He aims to “keep away from the range of London intrigues, jealousies, and social truckling” (145), and he is consequently quite staggered to discover that even in a provincial town one often feels “the hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity” (180). In both cases, staying clear of petty reality is the precondition for greater idealism. If Lydgate and Dorothea are going to be more real than reality, they must first get free of the superficial entanglements of everyday life.

Of course, they cannot. The world of 1830 belongs to the crowd and for these old souls there is no escaping the pull of that vortex. Lydgate’s failure is the more complete, brought low as he is by the shallow vanity of his wife and the twittering superstition of a whole network of patients, ill-wishers, and professional gossips. He is chastened by the crowd and made, essentially, to accept their ideal and their system of values.

I must do as other men do, and think what will please the world and bring in money; look for a little opening in the London crowd, and push myself; set up in a watering-place, or go to some southern town where there are plenty of idle English, and get myself puffed, - that is the sort of shell I must creep into and try to keep my soul alive in. (768)

This same character who, at first, sought to prove the “independent value of his work” (145) finds himself, in the end, desperate for “a little opening in the London crowd.” To do “as other men do” is the only ambition left. Having learned that he cannot shine out on his own, he will try to become one among many, and perhaps even a successful one at that. He knows that Rosamond has found some fortune that way—beautiful in the eyes of others, well-regarded by the many who speak of her—and now he will have to do the same. He will have to give himself over to the crowd and allow his true value to be determined from the outside, by the distributed assessment of the community at large. His soul he can keep, if he likes, but it will be useless to him, a kind of vestigial organ that can subsist, meaninglessly, inside his new shell.

Dorothea is less easily cowed. Having resisted the admonitions of friends and relatives before marrying Casaubon, she continues to ignore their advice long after circumstances have proved them right. “Sitting alone in that library at Lowick,” Mrs. Cadwallader says to her, “you may fancy yourself ruling the weather; you must get a few people round you who wouldn’t believe you if you told them. That is a good lowering medicine” (537). Dorothea’s response is defiant and not entirely untrue: “I still think that the greater part of the world is mistaken about many things. Surely one may be sane and yet think so, since the greater part of the world has often had to come round from its opinion” (537). There is no simple

way to resolve this disagreement, because ultimately Dorothea and Mrs. Cadwallader are expressing two fundamentally different epistemologies. Where Mrs. Cadwallader trusts collective knowledge and believes it necessary to regularly check your beliefs against those of your neighbors, Dorothea trusts herself and thinks that checking with one's neighbors is likely to sully one's keenest insight. Against the wisdom of the crowd, Dorothea once again articulates the fading idea that the noble individual is the ultimate repository of value.

Despite her self-certainty, however, Dorothea never gets to test her convictions. "I never could do anything that I liked," she says to her sister. "I have never carried out any plan yet" (820). She may not bow to the Cadwalladers and the Chettams, but in the end she too puts her soul in storage, abandoning her ideals and ambitions in favor of a modest marriage and a move to London. Like Lydgate, she stows her own stubborn self and becomes "absorbed into the life of another." That other, of course, is the much-debated Will Ladislaw, whose doubtful status in the text has long troubled readers. What makes his character so slippery, I would add, has very much to do with this broader conflict between souls and crowds.¹² Does Will belong to the world of 1830, the world of distributed values and distributed knowledge? Or does he belong to the older, lingering world of noble individuality? Is he sufficiently like Dorothea to be wedded to her? Or is the marriage a condescension?

These are the question that first erupt on that fateful day when Dorothea happens upon Will and Rosamond. To see them together is to feel that they both belong to the same Middlemarch crowd. "Why," Dorothea asks herself afterward, "had he not stayed among the crowd of whom she asked nothing—but only prayed that they might be less contemptible" (787). Why, in other words, did he even enter my world, if his interest lay with Rosamond and the baubles of Middlemarch. For his part, Will feels that very same divide:

Until that wretched yesterday . . . all their vision, all their thought of each other, had been as in a world apart, where the sunshine fell on tall white lilies, where no evil lurked and no other soul entered. But now—would Dorothea meet him in that world again? (804)

Previously, when Will and Dorothea met, it was in that same ethereal space James envisioned—free of "evil" and full of golden "sunshine" and pure "white lilies." In that "world apart," Will and Dorothea were themselves two characters apart, two souls raised briefly above the petty details of Middlemarch society. No people came to disturb them, because no people could inhabit such a world. Only other souls can, and Will assures us that "no other soul entered." On that wretched yesterday, however, when Dorothea witnessed the intimacy of Will and Rosamond, Will lost his pass to the idealized world. He became, in Dorothea's eyes, just one more face "among the crowd." Of course, this is not the final word. Dorothea and Will do end up meeting again, and marrying. But, as I said, that marriage has always seemed problematic, and the reason is precisely because it takes place in the crowded, humdrum world rather than in this world apart. Will does, it is true, bind himself to Dorothea "by a love stronger than any impulses which could have marred it" (835). But she, in order to give "wifely help" (836), has to accept Rosamond's values and learn, as she says "what everything costs" (812).

Ultimately, that is, Dorothea's second marriage follows the pattern of Lydgate's. She too must accustom herself to the petty pressures of social life, a once-glowing sun now just another spiraling orb. She is thrust out of the noble past and dropped into the crowded present of the 1830s, where she never belonged.¹³

All of which makes Dorothea and Lydgate something less than “guignons,” to return to Baudelaire's term. After all, the curse that falls on those ill-fated artists is one of isolation and solitude, the burden of toiling alone—albeit with the comforting knowledge that there are other lonely toilers, slowly preparing the ground for a new kind of community. Neither Dorothea nor Lydgate is willing to accept such a lonely fate. Instead, they choose capitulation over isolation. Choose to give up their ideals, to accept the responsibilities of marriage, and to find their way through the modern crowd.

Progress and Nostalgia

If this is true, however, and if the values of the crowd rule all destinies in *Middlemarch*—triumphing over Dorothea's noble soul and Lydgate's grand ambition—that does not make this a book about the triumph of the crowd. No one, not even the Middlemarch crowd, actually desires that outcome. To the very end, there persists a belief that it should not have happened, that Dorothea in particular should have found a way to fulfill her noble purpose and keep herself immune to the distributed values of petty society:

Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done . . . (836)

This is the sentiment of the crowd; it is what the “many who knew her” thought about her fate. And they think it is a shame she should be one of them. Too “substantive and rare” for such a common lot, Dorothea deserves better than to be “absorbed into the life of another” and “only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother.” Admittedly, they cannot say exactly what “she ought rather to have done,” but they are certain she ought to have done something grander and more noble.

Even in victory, the sympathies of the crowd lie with Dorothea, and the same could be said of the novel more generally. To the very end, its sympathies lie with its two great failures, Dorothea and Lydgate, those who “ought to have done” something more. On this point, Eliot's readers and reviewers were adamant in their agreement. This was a tragic story, they insisted, a tale of two grandly idealistic figures brought low by shallow circumstance. *Blackwood's Magazine* was struck by the “remarkable tinge of melancholy” (737), *The Times* by Eliot's refusal to “lighten the general gray of a sky which novelists usually make it a point of honor to flood with sunshine at the final hour” (3). *St. Paul's Magazine* thought that the book was “almost over-weighted with sadness” and insisted, further, that the burden of that sadness fell heaviest on the most heroic souls:

The principal sufferers are those who have heroically striven, and who bear about them evidences of the struggle. . . . it is your spirits like Dorothea, which are bound in a sphere too narrow and too gross, and who are taught to feel the insufficiency and unsatisfying nature of the lot which has been assigned them. (610)

Middlemarch is a book, chiefly, about the exceptional suffering of those, like Dorothea, who struggle against circumstance in the name of their impossible ideals. It is manifestly not—as it might be—a book about the quixotic and futile idealism of those, like Dorothea, who eventually learn that to achieve anything in this life they must work within society, rather than floating above it. Plot alone could justify either of these readings. The difference between them is essentially a matter of sympathy and allegiance, and overwhelmingly the novel’s allegiances rest with Dorothea and Lydgate—against the chastening force of the crowd.¹⁴

The one repeated complaint, in fact, was precisely that the tragedy of *Middlemarch* needn’t have been so absolute. “If there be one phase of [Eliot’s] nature in which she does not meet the need of the times,” concluded *St. Paul’s*, “it is in her utter hopelessness” (616). And the *Quarterly Review*, for its part, was even more insistent:

About none of her other writings was there such a profound despondency. Truly it would be the most melancholy and forlorn historical situation (if actual and historical it were), that in which a reflective reader, rising from a study of George Eliot, might be inclined to place modern society . . . We repeat, and lay all possible stress upon, our protest. It is not the moral nor is it the artistic purpose of a work of fiction, (or indeed of sound literature at all) to produce this state of mind and to invite such afterthoughts. (365)

These reviewers both feel that *Middlemarch* is needlessly “melancholy and forlorn.” Literature, they insist, is not supposed to induce such hopelessness; it is supposed to elevate. That is its ultimate “artistic purpose.” The fact that Eliot’s novel is realist—as these reviewers elsewhere recognize—does not in any way alter that purpose. It would change nothing if Eliot said that her novel was “melancholy and forlorn” because the world was “melancholy and forlorn.” Her responsibility as a realist artist is not only to present reality but to present reality and be inspiring, regardless of what she actually sees.

Those two demands may sound contradictory but in fact they are entirely consistent with the general understanding of English realism that I sketched earlier. As George Levine, Suzanne Graver, and Amanda Claybaugh have understood it, realism is both descriptive and didactic, squaring verisimilitude with its own reformist impulses. If that is the case, however, then *Middlemarch* must be something other than a realist novel. After all, the chief lament of its early reviewers is that Eliot’s work lacks a didactic element, that it fails to elevate and remains, instead, trapped in the gray mire. And no less a critic than Raymond Williams has since agreed with them.¹⁵ For Williams, the whole structure of *Middlemarch* reflects its failure to imagine a remedy for the sadness that it everywhere describes:

The real step that has been taken is withdrawal from any full response to an existing society. Value is in the past, as a general retrospective condition, and is in the present only as a particular and private sensibility, the individual moral action . . . All that is left is a set of personal relationships and of intellectual and moral insights, in a history that for all valuing purposes has, disastrously, ended.
(180)

In Williams' view, the only didactic element in *Middlemarch* is a brand of "individual moral action" so circumscribed as to have no historical force. It is the weakest, most feeble kind of politics, too defeatist to be effectual and too humble to be meaningfully reformist. If that is true, the novel would seem to be too melancholy to be properly realist, lacking as it does the didactic element which Levine et. al. ascribe to English realism.¹⁶

If I must choose, à la Kebbel, between denying the realism of *Middlemarch* or rejecting this definition of realism, I too trust to Eliot. *Middlemarch* is still realist, even if understanding its realism requires us to do away with the idea of a necessary didacticism. I do not mean to suggest that Eliot's realism is somehow free of unreal elements, that it is a pure or impersonal kind of realism, as Flaubert was wont to imagine it. Indeed, we have already seen that the characteristic response to *Middlemarch* was to say that it was more real than reality, hyper-real in some indefinable sense. Eliot's realism is not pure mimesis; it involves a very clear admixture, only in her case that admixture has to do with history and progress, rather than reform and politics. This is where the connection between realism and history comes back to help us. I argued earlier that what enables Eliot's hyper-realism is its entanglement with history, the ease with which her representation of 'reality as we have never known it' comes to look like 'reality as we no longer know it.' And that confusion of hyper-reality and past reality is the key to understanding her unique style of realism. Ultimately, that is, Eliot writes nostalgic realism, and her provincial novels, in particular, activate a complex kind of a longing for an imagined time when the world was as palpably real as the more-than-reality she shows us.

I say complex because the feeling of nostalgia is never a simple one; it is tortured and intricate, and it can include a variety of competing emotions. At its core, nostalgia is a kind of temporal homesickness, the yearning for a past which we imagine to be somehow more complete. In Svetlana Boym's account, it "is a longing for that shrinking 'space of experience' that no longer fits the new horizon of expectations" (10).¹⁷ Once upon a time, there was more room for existence; today, we are left with something less. That is the whispered story that nostalgia tells. Eliot's version is similar enough that we need to keep the word nostalgia, but distinct enough to require its own elucidation.

The most important change, in Eliot, is that the idealized past happens not to be all that idyllic. There is too much obvious pettiness in the world of the 1830s—too many ignorant gossips and overbearing neighbors. Too much, in a word, of the crowd. Of course, there are also those few noble souls, but they are already old souls, residues of an earlier, more aristocratic past; they linger in the world of the 1830s, but they don't shape it. In fact, they fail conspicuously in all of their several efforts to build, for themselves, lives of modern idealism. Paradoxically, though, it is precisely this failure which appeals to Eliot.

She is nostalgic for something other than the time when Lydgate and Dorothea might have fulfilled their grand ambitions; she is nostalgic for a time when they no longer could, when ambition had been forcibly shrunk down to the size of the average and the ideals of the soulful were tightly bound by “the meanness of opportunity” (3). It is not the greater “space of experience” that makes the past enticing, but rather the greater space of tragedy. Nor was notion this unique to Eliot. It is something we find elsewhere in Victorian literature, and notably in Tennyson. “The Lady of Shalott,” for instance, is a poem very deliberately set at a heroic, indeed epic moment in British history. But it too is more tragic than epic, a soulful elegy whose significance the knights at Camelot cannot fathom. Even *Idylls of the King*, which has a more traditionally epic structure, is wildly slanted towards tragedy. The rise of Arthur covers one book, the strength of Camelot two, and then nine full books on the slow-wending decline. This may sound like a peculiar kind of nostalgia—this looking back to a time of fuller tragedy rather than a time of greater happiness, but it is also peculiarly apt, carefully crafted for an age of progress. This is simply what nostalgia looks like when we trust the future more than the past.

Like Tennyson, Eliot believed in progress, believed that society had moved, was moving, and would continue to move in a desirable direction. She was hardly an ideologue on this score, but she was acutely conscious of the advances of industrialism and generally optimistic about the long term. She felt that humanity was “slowly, slowly, growing out of barbarism” (Letters IV. 292), and she was convinced, as she wrote in one of her more famous essays, that “the life of collective mankind is slowly swayed by the force of truth and not of twaddle; our views may be hissed to-day, but in the next century they will be held too undeniable to be applauded” (Essays 391). As is customary with Eliot, these descriptions are global and gradual. Progress, for her, was a slow and uneven process made visible by long time-horizons and wide geographical spaces.

Ironically, one of her more emphatic defenses of progress comes precisely in a section of *Theophrastus Such* entitled “Looking Backward.” There, with some disdain, she condemns the vogue for admiring the distant past: the only reason remote times seem halcyon, she insists, is because they are remote. To compare the present with a more freshly memorable historical moment is to face the undeniable improvements of recent years:

... it would be really something original in polished verse if one of our young writers declared he would gladly be turned eighty-five that he might have known the joy and pride of being an Englishman when there were fewer reforms and plenty of highwaymen, fewer discoveries and fewer faces pitted with small-pox, when laws were made to keep up the price of corn, and the troublesome Irish were more miserable. Three-quarters of a century ago is not a distance that lends much enchantment to the view. We are familiar with the average men of that period, and are still consciously encumbered with its bad contrivances and mistaken acts. (Essays: Impressions 265)

It is impossible, Eliot here suggests, to be genuinely nostalgic for the recent past. It is too familiar, and more than that, too backwards. Her contemporaries were perfectly aware—because they remembered—that 75 years earlier politics were less democratic, smallpox more

menacing, travel more dangerous, and foodstuffs more expensive. That era was filled with “bad contrivances” and “mistaken acts,” which no sane individual would want to revisit or revive. Indeed, the humor of the passage plays against the possibility that some foolish young poet might indeed indulge in such an absurd kind of nostalgia. And yet, what I am essentially arguing is that *Middlemarch* is shot through with just this kind of nostalgia, the nostalgia for a “life of mistakes” and a world strictly limited by its “meanness of opportunity” (3). If anything, Eliot is even more bold than her imagined young writer, willing to look less than three-quarters of a century into the past to a time that was only more obviously preparatory to her own. What keeps her nostalgia, then, from drifting into absurdity is that it is adapted to the conditions of industrialism. In her provincial novels, she found a way to refit nostalgia for a world in progress.

Eliot understood that those terms—nostalgia and progress—were not incompatible. Certainly, the more familiar, nostalgic idea that life was better in the past is no friend to the progressive idea that history is the story of humanity’s advance. However, there is no contradiction between the belief that humanity is advancing and the belief that the past, too, had its value. Nostalgia, in that case, is simply the desire to remember treasured aspects of the past that the brighter future threatens to erase. Such, for instance, as the idea of noble individuality. Industrial progress, itself, made little room for individual action; on this point, virtually all of its major theorists were in agreement. Progress was an impersonal phenomenon, driven not by the concerted and purposeful activity of a few world-historical individuals but rather by an abstract, diffuse, and distributed system of interactions. With an eye to *Middlemarch*, we might say that it drew its energy from the wisdom and work of the crowd, rather than the stirring idealism of noble souls. For just that reason, though, it seemed to trivialize the impact of the individual. And part of the value of *Middlemarch* for a society in progress was precisely its ability to reanimate the noble individual. Through characters like Dorothea and Lydgate, Eliot’s novel helps keep alive a comforting memory of the individual as the ultimate locus of value and the center of social significance, even as the crowd has become the real engine of history.

At the same time, Eliot’s peculiar brand of nostalgia sets a limit to its own seductive force. It flirts with the recollection of nobility, but it does no more than that. The story *Middlemarch* tells is that of the decline rather than the ascendancy of the noble individual. Sadness and melancholy was felt to be the dominant mood, and it is precisely this sadness that nurtures Eliot’s nostalgia. It is what keeps nostalgia subordinate to progress, ensuring that the reader’s attachment to Dorothea and Lydgate does not distract from the more important forward march. We get to remember the glory of noble individuality, but not so triumphantly as to make us want to go back. The lights of the past must be bright enough to reach us but sufficiently dimmed that they pale beside the glow of the future. And Eliot’s nostalgia for failure ensures just that relation. It draws our attention to the book’s noble souls, but it also guards against a too-strong attachment by parading their failures.

The delicacy of this imbalance—between nostalgia and progress, souls and crowds, past and future—is beautifully exemplified by the famous, final passages of Eliot’s text. As the “Prelude” opens, so the “Finale” closes, with a comparison between Dorothea and St.

Theresa, a recognition that the ambitions of a Theresa can have, today, no proper outlet

A new Theresa will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventual life, any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother's burial: the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is for ever gone. But we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know. (838)

The central contrast in this passage is between the "ardent deeds" of the distant past, when Theresa and Antigone lived their (real and fictive) lives, and the more limited opportunities of what we might loosely call today, after such deeds have become impossible. "We" are irrevocably severed from that time (and, in answer to our opening question about whether Eliot's settings count as the past, this "we" seems to compass both the populace of the 1830s and the readers of the 1870s). Somewhere between then and now, Eliot tells us, history slipped out of the hands of even the most heroic individuals, leaving the world awash with "we insignificant people."

This triumph of the insignificant might seem bad enough, but in fact it is only the minor side of the tragedy. Today's world is not only full of insignificant people; it is also dotted with significant people who are doomed to discover the impotence of their own distinction. Even in the fallen present, Theresas and Antigones continue to be born, but their only destiny is to be crushed by the insignificant crowd. Dorothea, we are told, is one of those—but only one, and not the saddest. There are many such "Dorotheas," impotently-significant people with the bearing of grand, noble souls and the lot of inflated, imprisoned ones. What this penultimate paragraph tells us is that, one way or another, these Dorotheas will keep being born, and just as surely they will keep being sacrificed.

Of course, if this is just the penultimate paragraph that means there are still a few final lines in which to reimagine the fate of these Dorotheas:

But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs. (838)

Something certainly has changed, in these last lines. Whereas, just before, Dorothea was conclusively set apart—the epitome of rare distinction and rare suffering—now she rests with the insignificant, in the very same cemetery; she has lost her nobility and found a common grave. Eliot's closing words harken back to Gray's elegy and the lines that Baudelaire borrowed for "Le Guignon." "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen," Gray wrote, and by that he meant both unseen and ineffectual. The forgotten dead who people Gray's cemetery might, in other circumstance, have made their mark on history, but as it happened they did not. Eliot, however, means something different. In Eliot's graves lie those who shaped history despite their lack of opportunity. Their "unhistoric acts," though unhistoric,

still ripple through time and space, being in fact so “incalculably diffusive” that they touch even upon “you and me.” And by joining them, Dorothea too gains a weak kind of causal power, an ability to make small, but not-quite meaningless, contributions to the “growing good of the world.”

Why, though, should there be such a difference between these last two paragraphs? How can Dorothea be, at one moment, extraordinary and impotent and, at the next moment, ordinary and potent? Is she unlike everyone else, and therefore doomed to a life of unfulfillment? Or is she exactly like everyone else, and therefore capable of some grand, diffuse agency? These are the questions that linger at the end of Eliot’s novel, and they are also the ones that point back from the text to its industrial context, linking issues of character and closure with concerns about change, history, and above all progress. *Middlemarch*’s split conclusion is a residue of Eliot’s split allegiance; the penultimate paragraph a last nod to nostalgia and the final one a last paean to progress.

Indeed, in that last paragraph, the description of industrial progress is both subtle and precise. Eliot gives us a literary version of that same, impersonal engine that Darwin and Spencer imagined: an abstract force with no sure conductor, a vague but potent mechanism for channeling trivial acts into powerful movements. History, here, is not governed from above but fed from below, propelled by a myriad of hidden lives that somehow add up to an “incalculably diffusive” historical current. Eliot’s last lines involve a magical kind of addition which precisely mirrors the magic of progress itself, building the consequential out of the common, and the epochal out of the everyday. If, in the end, Dorothea can be finally influential, it is only because she finds herself in a paragraph which celebrates the attenuated impact of the small and the many. Resting, now, in an unvisited tomb, she joins that resistless agent of modern history, the crowd.

Yet, even as Eliot implies that the “growing good of the world” is “dependent on un-historic acts” she says only that it is “part dependent on unhistoric acts.” And though she wants to insist that things are better with you and me “owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life,” what she writes is “half owing.” Progress was something Eliot believed in but it was never something she could whole-heartedly embrace; it was too inhuman for that. Though it seemed to have a magical ability to turn the trivial into the tremendous, it also seemed to demand that we all, first, become trivial. Dorothea, for instance, can only find her “incalculably diffusive” impact after she has found her way to a common grave. And that troubled Eliot, as it did her contemporaries.

The value of nostalgia lay precisely in its ability to ease that concern. This, essentially, is what the next-to-last paragraph of *Middlemarch* is for: balancing the costs of industrial progress with a weak nostalgia. In these not-quite-last lines, Dorothea has no grand diffusive influence, hers being instead a life of great, if sad sacrifice. But at least her sacrifice is not trivial. Quite the contrary, Dorothea is elevated above everyone else, freed from the world of the insignificant and likened, instead, to a few, select heroines. She is removed from her forgotten grave and granted a rightful place among the great souls of the past. And though this apotheosis has its own price—stripping Dorothea of her diffusive power and dooming her to a life of ardent impotence—that is simply the cost of Eliot’s peculiar brand of nostalgia; it

requires that the world of the past be both more human and less contented, rich and round and doomed and impotent. If Dorothea is distinguished, it is not because she succeeds where others have failed; it is simply because she has found a way to fail more grandly. And the poignancy which suffuses her story derives from that grand failure, from noble sadness rather than greater happiness.

Progress and the crowd are allowed their triumph, but *Middlemarch* does not care to look in that direction, and neither did its readers. They looked, instead, at the grandeur of the tragedy, and held to the idea that there was something valuable for them in the memory of a stifled nobility of soul. It was not something they could put into practice nor, being tragic, was it something that they wanted to revive, but it was something human that they could recall as they were driven forward by the inhuman force of progress. That, essentially, is how Eliot's nostalgia works, by activating a new kind of longing for a time that was not happier but was still, in some ways, more richly human. If, as I have been arguing, industrial progress was composed of one great hope and many smaller fears, and if that one hope still minimally outweighed those many fears, then any redress would have to be delicately-balanced—soothing the many small fears without undermining the one great hope. This is precisely what Eliot's work manages to accomplish. Her warm, human, and still communal images of the past—full of soulful Dorotheas—help make industrial progress bearable, providing a comforting memory of a vanishing time. But they are also carefully calibrated so as not to become too comforting; not just in *Middlemarch* but throughout Eliot's provincial novels, nostalgia always cedes its place to progress, accepting its position as the second-best solution in the second-to-last paragraph. Her communities may be warm and personal, but they are also full of great suffering and great disappointments. They are enjoyable to read about, but not idyllic enough to strive for. To put it most succinctly, they make us long for a time to which we do not want to return. And that strange longing which has no interest in consummation is itself a direct response—indeed Eliot's most direct response—to the changes unleashed by industrialism.

Industrialism did not just intensify the operations of industry; it accelerated all of economic history. And in so doing, it produced a newly ambivalent conception of progress. What Eliot's work offered was a powerful, literary counter-ambivalence, a weak strain of nostalgia which, precisely because it was weak, could ease the pain of industrial progress without, however, threatening the pace. And from that example, we can better understand why the Victorians at large were so enamored of the past. It was not simply because they thought the past held the secret for a brighter future; progress was taking care of that. More often, it was because the past held some fading, but still cherished values that they wanted to remember. They did not look back because they thought the answer to their pain lay in the past; rather, they looked back because looking back, on occasion, was the only possible answer.

Looking Out: Morris

The term *fin-de-siècle* already tells us that theirs was a crisis of ending. When one of Oscar Wilde's characters utters the phrase, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the response is a slant echo, "fin-du-globe." The end of the century as the end of the world. In some cases, this could be rather literal, as when the insights of thermodynamics began to reveal that the universe itself was running down—and that the date of its demise could be readily calculated. But more often it meant the end of the known world, the familiar world, the Victorian world.

It certainly meant the end of runaway progress. Slowly but unmistakably, that grand, resistless force came to seem less certain, less absolute, and less trustworthy. There were a number of reasons for that, but chief among them was the widespread perception of economic decline. Like so many periods of historical crisis, that is, the final decades of the 19th century were also years of economic malaise—or, at least, they were felt to be so. The best information we have today seems to suggest that the long recession of 1873-96 never was; there was no deep, 20-year depression, no long contraction of GDP and no great fall in industrial output. There were brief periods of decline, certainly, but overall the fundamentals of the economy were sound enough. Yet, contemporaries across a wide swath of professions and locales felt themselves to be caught in an economic crunch, thanks to a number of forces that made the economy look more sluggish than it was (deflation, shrinking profits, the uneven distribution of suffering.) What brewed, in response, was a ferment of new political organization and new ideological exertion. Bloody Sunday and the Dock Workers' Strike, the SDF and the Socialist League, the Fabian Society and the New Unionism—all of these belong to the 1880s and all owe a good deal of their force to the sense that the system was beginning to flag.¹ Tennyson, himself, worried that "a mighty wave of evil" was hastening towards the shore. "All ages are ages of transition," he wrote, echoing Mill, "but this is an awful moment of transition" (rpt in Rosenberg 3). Many indeed felt the gnawing fear that despite the power of industrial progress there might be, in T. H. Huxley's words "no hope of a large improvement of the condition of the greater part of the human family" (Kidd 4).

There was also a utopian side to this era of economic decline, political fractiousness, and hysterical self-diagnosis. Partly, it took the form of cultural politics: experiments in identity, pleasure, and the limits of the permissible.² But there was also a stricter kind of Utopianism, a new approach to age-old questions about the structure of the good society which brought eu-topia into strange new contact with decadence and degeneration. Indeed, the paradoxical argument of this chapter is that while the *fin-de-progrès* looked, to some, like a terrible crisis, to others it looked like a rare opportunity to rethink the requirements of Utopia.

It is Wilde, once again, who shows us the depth of this connection, this time in his unaccountably earnest "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." That Wilde even wrote such a Utopian tract is still something of a surprise, given his generally more anarchic commitment to wit and irony. But "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" is an unabashedly political essay, written for the *Fortnightly Review* not long after the release of Morris' *News from Nowhere*.³ It is a thorough, boisterous, occasionally idiosyncratic defense of socialism as the only just organization of society and the surest basis for the flowering of human beings. In Wilde's view, once private property is abolished, there will be no poverty, no dull labor, no crime, no

punishment, no marriage or traditional family life, no public opinion, no authority, indeed no compulsion of any sort. In their place, there will be “true, beautiful, healthy Individualism” (8), the fulfillment, by each person, of his own truest personality, which the grubbiness of contemporary life has twisted or destroyed.

One particular, and justly famous, image in the essay crystallizes not only Wilde’s idea but the broader aspirations of fin-de-siècle Utopian fiction.⁴ It stands as Wilde’s strongest defense of both the grandeur and impracticality of his vision—in a word, its rank utopianism:

Is this Utopian? A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sails. Progress is the realization of Utopias. (16)

There is a familiar line of thought running through this passage, the line of thought that treats Utopia as a spur to development, an imaginary place which inspires real change. To use Anatole France’s words: “Without the Utopians of other times, men would still live in caves, miserable and naked” (Qtd. in Mumford 22). Wilde’s thoughts run parallel to those of France, but they also have their own eccentricity, especially in that second sentence. Utopia, as Wilde has it, is not the imaginary place towards which humanity is forever sailing; instead, it is “the one country at which Humanity is always landing.” But when, exactly, has Humanity ever landed at Utopia? And then why, if we did land there, did we choose to leave? The idea that we could be lured away from an existing Utopia by the promise of a greater Utopia is a deeply anti-Utopian notion. It makes Utopia just another name for the empty promise of progress itself—forever beckoning us onward towards the New and the Next. Indeed, it makes Wilde sound something like Ulysses, come to take his mariners away from the contentment they have found on the island of the Lotos-Eaters. What kind of Utopian could find Utopia unsatisfying?

I should say that I do not think this reading is actually fair to Wilde. Despite his strange suggestion of a journey from Utopia to Utopia, Wilde’s essay is hardly an apology for endless progress. His is a defiantly Utopian vision. Yet, what the confusion of this passage points to is a newly fraught relationship between these two ideas: Utopia and progress. Whatever “Progress is the realization of Utopias” means, it manifestly does not mean: “Utopia is the realization of Progress.” Utterly foreign to Wilde’s essay is the idea that progress might be leading us towards a genuinely Utopian tomorrow. And yet, he also doesn’t want to let go of either term. Precisely what their relationship is—or should be—I do not think Wilde quite knows, but the very fact that he is interested in imagining a new relationship between progress and Utopia puts him squarely inside a much larger intellectual effort, an effort common to Utopian writers of the moment, as well as fabians like Shaw and Webb, socialists like Dilthey, and imported prophets like Nordau and Henry George. It was the effort to save progress from itself, to keep alive the happy future which progress was always targeting, even if that meant disabling progress itself.

Utopian writers like William Morris and W.H. Hudson pushed this logic to its most tortured conclusion, making the fulfillment of progress depend, perversely, on its complete

rejection. For them, reaching a place of Utopian happiness required neither growth nor advancement but rather decline, decay, and degeneration. These utopianists, in other words, accepted that progress had stalled and that society was decaying, only they found in this decay a new Utopian hope. They embraced the logic of degeneration and followed it to what they considered its surprisingly happy end. If we wanted happiness—and with it Utopia—then we had to abandon this drive towards complexity and turn progress in the opposite direction. That, in essence, was the key to their Utopias. The bright future that Victorian society had long apotheosized was not, they insisted, to be found at the top of a hill. It lay, instead, at the bottom of a long, downward-sloping path—accessible only by embracing the possibilities for human degeneration and by finding ways to live, for long periods of time, with boredom.⁵

If we followed that path, then eventually there would be happiness—though, to be precise, it still would not be our happiness. Even committed Utopians, like Morris, felt themselves to be constitutionally unfit for Utopian life. Real Utopia, as they understood it, required new human beings, and that meant generations, if not centuries of preparation. And if, as my title suggests, they were looking for a way out of progress, it was not because they felt they could be happy without it; it is because escaping from the pull of progress was the only way to make future people happy. Their job, simply put, was to act in a dramatic, radical, and revolutionary way so that someone else, generations later, might eventually be happy. It was a matter of starting down the path to Utopia and then waiting until others degenerated into the kind of species that might finally live there. Only in that way could the promise of progress be finally salvaged and the chance for fulfillment redeemed.

Urban Degeneration

Degeneration is hardly a novel thing for a literary critic to bring up, but generally it serves to enrich our understanding of late-century gothic and decadent fictions.⁶ In many cases, in fact, this pairing is treated as something natural and inevitable. Progress breeds confidence, and degeneration unleashes madness, as Regenia Gagnier nicely summarizes:

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the narratives of progress were less likely to terminate in Reason or Freedom in their Hegelian or Kantian senses than in (1) the sublime and *irrational* images of degeneration, devolution, or fear of engulfment in the late Victorian Gothic or in (2) economic rationality and the individual's freedom to maximize self-interest. . . . As psychological models were replacing the sociological by the *fin de siècle* in both aesthetics and economics, deep, disturbed Unreason, on one hand, or economic rationality and instrumental reason, on the other, were replacing Reason as the mind's divine capacity to improve its own condition and that of others. (103)

The first thing I want to say—in response to just the opening sentence—is that I hope I've already shown that nineteenth century narratives of progress were never likely to “terminate

in Reason or Freedom in their Hegelian or Kantian senses,” at least not in British literature; comforting endpoints like these had been swept away by industrial progress.

My more specific point is less contentious, though. I don’t think Gagnier is wrong to note the prevalence of “Unreason” and “instrumental reason,” as the narrative carriers of degeneration. These things are certainly related. But there’s another link in this chain—less direct and also less well understood. The declining idea of progress didn’t just make space for dark degeneration; it also made space for Utopia. Strangely enough, the turn from progress to degeneration brought some writers closer to Reason and Freedom than they had been for most of the century.

In order to see this, the first thing that must be recognized is that degeneration is not the antithesis of progress. We are not talking about a return to the old, enlightenment debate between those who imagined society falling away from a richer past and those who envisioned it moving forward towards a glorious tomorrow. For all their doomsday histrionics, the theorists of degeneration do not actually insist on the inevitable decline of civilization. To the contrary, they demand that civilization be saved from decline and restored to its rightful, progressive path. Degenerationists were in fact among the staunchest supporters of progress, only with a heightened sense of its precariousness. No longer an implacable force, that is, progress seemed to them rather more fragile, a delicate system that has to be regularly tuned in order to work properly—and the late-19th-century system seemed badly out of tune. The world was moving quickly in the wrong direction, and it needed, just as quickly, to be righted.

The many different versions of degeneration—and there were many—all shared this fundamental belief that the work of industrial progress had been somehow sabotaged, that a stick had been poked through the wheels or a bug introduced into the code. Where they differed, however, was in the way they imagined that bug. Some thought of it as a neurobiological defect which spread through families, leading to crime, sterility and death. Others imagined it as an evolutionary glitch, which made species fit for survival by diminishing their capacities. Still others saw it as a sociological distortion that allowed the push for growth to actually weaken the social body. From the perspective of Utopian fiction, the most important of these was undoubtedly the second—the evolutionary glitch—but as an introduction to the unacknowledged and unusual interaction between these genres, it is worth beginning instead with a more specific degenerationist obsession, the city.

There was much to fear in the late-century city—cities really were slum-ridden, poverty-stricken places with reduced life expectancy and abysmal sanitation. But even these real blights could hardly compare to the fears and anxieties which circulated in pamphlets and public lectures like “Degeneration Amongst Londoners” or “The Town Dweller”—both of which surveyed the flagging minds and bodies of London denizens and blamed, for a surfeit of reasons, London itself.⁷ Cities, it was believed, deprived people of elements essential to the maintenance of human life (like ozone, exercise, and fresh food) while, at the same time, stressing the human sensorium in unprecedented ways. The combination, for obvious reasons, was thought to be devastating. To detractors, late-century cities seemed like over-stuffed menageries of the dehumanized and the unnatural. As the author of “The Danger

of Deterioration of Race” phrased it: “A murky mass hangs like a shroud over the city—a dismal list of noxious gases is so intimately diffused throughout the air that neither can the earth’s heat radiate into space nor the warm beams of the summer’s sun thoroughly dissipate the suspended canopy” (Morgan 29). No light could penetrate nor fresh air enter. And worse, even as this “murky mass” kept out the sun, it still drew people inside, absorbing hale country laborers and infecting them with what one critic called “urbomorbus,” city disease (Cantlie 24).

Among the many dire causes of urbomorbus, none was more visible than poverty. “The poor you will always have with you” is a biblical line that Dickens, among others, liked to repeat, but the problem of urban poverty seemed especially pressing at the fin-de-siècle. For most of the century, poverty had been imagined as a temporary problem, a matter of transition which could be overcome with little more than a few cycles of progress (compare, for instance, the Mill’s words from the introduction). By the 80s and 90s, however, the continued entrenchment of urban immiseration gave the lie to this idea, sapping faith in the progressive waiting-game and inspiring poetic lines like the following, from Tennyson’s late sequel to “Locksley Hall”:

Is it well that while we range with Science, glorying in the Time,
City children soak and blacken soul and sense in city slime?

There among the glooming alleys Progress halts on palsied feet,
Crime and hunger cast our maidens by the thousand on the street. (217-220)

A full century of social and economic improvement had done shamefully little to ease the burden of crime, hunger, and disease for the London residuum, leaving Tennyson’s lines to bear the same anger and pathos that Blake’s “London” had blasted in the 1790s. A glance at the misery of the urban poor—who continued to suffer under the same conditions as their grandfathers and great-grandfathers—seemed like a vision of progress halting. And urban degeneration provided a ready explanation: the city itself was immune to progress, a kind of no-progress zone where history was as stagnant as the air. It was not just sunlight, in other words, that was relegated to the boundary of the city; progress was as well, checked by the open circuit of country bodies pulsing into diseased cities and fizzling out.

What is more, as those country bodies pulsed into the urban miasma, they were also pulsing out of the countryside, depriving it of its own most needful element: healthy young laborers. And this was the most constant lament of urban degenerationists. As surely as it vilified the city, urban degeneration championed the country, lamenting the damage done to the once-proud world of English agriculture, now suffering—or so it seemed—from an economic disease that crippled the countryside by luring its most virile members into the fetid city and trapping them there, to moulder. As the *Illustrated London News* put it: “Nearly half a million of fresh-bodied units . . . arrive in our great Babylon every year. They settle down, marry, and for a time stay the degenerative process by the infusion of healthy life . . . two or three generations of London life see them out and as extinct as the dodo itself” (rpt. in Greenslade 41). With a vivid image, urban degeneration seemed to answer two of the era’s most disconcerting questions: why was English agriculture stagnating? And why

had a century of progress done nothing to alleviate urban poverty? And that is one reason it found its wide audience.

Another reason that this fantasy of urban degeneration took such deep root in late-century England is because it resonated so strongly with the still-profound influence of early-century Romanticism, which had painted a similar vision of the country as fresh, free and communal, and the city as frantic, overwrought and full of commotion.⁸ Over the course of the time, this contrast had only intensified. As the number of cities exploded—along with their populations—during the decades of Victorian industrialism, so too did concerns about city life. At the turn of the nineteenth century, London was essentially the only major city, and most Britons could still boast of country lives. By the end, a critique of the city was a critique of England itself, now a nation dominated by urban spaces and overwhelmed by urban dwellers (something Baudelaire and Benjamin both recognized, from the outside).

It was only at this stage of urbanization that a vigorous defense of the country could require a new Utopia, rather than a simple vacation. And late-century Utopian fiction offered just such a defense. Rather than champion the great achievements of urban capitalism, it heeded the warning of degenerationists and sought refuge in the country. That alone is revealing for a genre that had for so long been consumed with the details of rational urban organization and strict institutionalization. As the great diagnostician Northrop Frye once put it, “Most Utopia-writers follow either More (and Plato) in stressing the legal structure of their societies, or Bacon in stressing its technological power” (27). Fin-de-siècle Utopias do neither. Instead, they banish the city altogether, turning their backs on the stagnant air, the entrenched poverty, and the risk of urbomorbus. At the fin-de-siècle, Utopian life meant, above all, rural life—or even better garden life.

That word—garden—is one that H.G. Wells’ time traveler uses to describe his future world. “The whole earth,” he says, “had become a garden” (cite). And Wells’ idea of the world as garden is already just an echo of Morris, whose own time traveler finds that while England was “once a country of huge and foul workshops . . . It is now a garden”—its inhabitants being in fact so fully naturalized that they can be found: “mingling their kind voices with the cuckoo’s song, the sweet strong whistle of the blackbirds, and the ceaseless note of the corn-crake” (105, 218). The Edenic ideal has fed back into the Utopian one to produce a new vision of the future as another happy garden: beautiful, warm, green, fecund, and organic. And that last term, organic, is actually the most important. Indeed, what makes these texts fully Utopian—rather than wistfully Arcadian—is that their chief concern is not happiness, *per se*, but the organization of happiness. They return to nature not because they are searching for some originary bounty but because they see in nature a model for the non-rational organization of complex, interacting (biological) systems. And that model then becomes the paradigm for their own efforts to reimagine the system of social life.

The general pattern for this new Utopian order was set by Richard Jefferies’ *After London*: not a Utopian text, exactly, but still a story about the transition into a radically new future. In his long introduction, Jefferies writes as if from the perspective of that radically distant future, raking over the artifacts of the 19th century like an archaeologist. As the title would

suggest, however, his most vibrant and horrifically gleeful language he reserves for the fate of once-great London:

Thus the low-lying parts of the mighty city of London became swamps, and the higher grounds were clad with bushes. The very largest of the buildings fell in, and there was nothing visible but trees and hawthorns on the upper lands, and willows, flags, reeds, and rushes on the lower. . . . The flags and reeds are coated with slime and noisome to the touch; there is one place where even these do not grow, and where there is nothing but an oily liquid, green and rank. It is plain there are no fishes in the water, for herons do not go thither, nor the kingfishers, not one of which approaches the spot. . . . For all the rottenness of a thousand years and of many hundred millions of human beings is there festering under the stagnant water, which has sunk down into and penetrated the earth, and floated up to the surface the contents of the buried cloacae. (49-50)

This is the graveyard of the urban, and the fulfillment of everything the urban degenerationists predicted. Nothing of the excitement or energy of urban life remains, only the waste and the rottenness. Indeed, this city is not only foul and diseased, perilous for its inhabitants and plagued by poverty, it is so toxic that it has become anathema to life itself, a true thanatopolis. No fish can swim in the waters above its bubbling cloacae, nor can any plants take root. Life begins instead on the outskirts, at first hesitantly with trees and hawthornes and then more lavishly with the “Great Forest” that covers all of England. For Jefferies, too, the city is a place of death and the country a place of life. But it is the movement from one to the other—from the England of fetid cities to the England of great forests—which stamps his text as the hinge between late-century urban degeneration and the Utopian fictions of the same moment. *After London* does something more than dismiss the city as a fetid, dehumanizing miasma; it buries the city and restarts society on a new footing. With its insistent association of life with nature and its continual privileging of ecology over economy, Jefferies establishes a key paradigm for Hudson and for Morris.

Hudson’s *Crystal Age* admits no distinction between technology and biology. Architecture, humanity, and nature all belong to the world in the same way. Nowhere is this clearer than in the description of houses, which are less like structures and more like host organisms. Each community has its own house—or, more accurately, each community develops alongside its house, growing with it and thriving with it. As one Utopian puts it, houses are “eternal”, “like the forest of trees, the human race, [and] the world we live in” (37). In *News From Nowhere*, the penetration of the organic is, if anything, deeper and more elaborate. Morris shows us the organic Utopia in its fullest flowering, a self-generating and self-sustaining system focused entirely around the needs of life—be it social life, human life, or natural life. In this Utopia, there is no room for industrialism, no need for progress, and no chance for the city to reassert itself and spread its noxious vapors. All is integrated into a perfect, unregulated system that effortlessly harmonizes pleasure with necessity and production with consumption without recourse to social or economic abstractions: no consumers, no producers, no investors, no markets, no laws, no hidden hands. In a system like

this, where labor is pleasure, technology is optional, and all the old economic questions are answered by a natural equivalence of needs and means, there is no need for rationalization, no interest in economies of scale, and no place for the city. Utopia itself has been naturally reshaped to forego the strictures of urban life and meet the concerns of urban degeneration.⁹

Degenerate Utopia

Urban degeneration was not the only strain of degenerationist clamor that echoed through England at the end of the nineteenth century. Nor, indeed, was it the most consequential for the writing of Utopian fiction. That honor belonged instead to evolutionary degeneration—which, as the name would suggest traced the flagging vigor of progress to a problem of natural selection, rather than urban blight. Evolutionary degeneration drew its critical energy from faint dissonance between two terms that are almost, but not quite, synonyms: progress and evolution. For most of the century, those terms had seemed like natural partners—not identical, perhaps, but mutually reinforcing.¹⁰ What Spencer called the law of Progress in 1857 he renamed “The Law of Evolution” by 1867—without altering the underlying theory. By the end of the century, though, their difference was becoming more apparent and more menacing. Progress, remember, names the belief that society is moving in a desirable direction. It does not tell us exactly what is meant by desirable—it could be richer, happier, more ethical, more equal, more knowledgeable, more intricate, *inter alia*—but it assures us at least of increasing states of desirability. Evolution, on the other hand, cannot guarantee even this. What it promises, instead, is fitness. Fitness, alone, determines which species thrive and which die out. And fitness itself is no surety of improvement.

On the whole, Darwin was relatively confident that improvements in fitness would generally lead to more desirable evolutionary arrangements, but he couldn’t be sure.¹¹ Even successful adaptation, as Friedrich Engels noted, “can mean regress just as well as progress.” Under the right conditions, it could well happen that less sophisticated species might still outperform their more sophisticated competitors, proving more fit despite being less desirable. (Qtd. in Pick 224). That, at least, is what the Darwinian acolyte E. R. Lankester began to argue. For the sake of precision, Lankester tried to distinguish between desirable and undesirable kinds of evolution. The one he called elaboration, the other—not surprisingly—degeneration. Following Spencer’s approach, Lankester thought of elaboration as a process that made species more intricate and degeneration as one that made species simpler. Or, in his words, “Degeneration may be defined as a gradual change of the structure in which the organism becomes adapted to less varied and less complex conditions of life; whilst Elaboration is a gradual change of structure in which the organism becomes adapted to more and more varied and complex conditions of existence” (26-7). Left to its own devices, evolution could work in either direction: it could contribute to the elaboration and advancement of a species or it could result in simplification and decline. Findings like these fed the degenerationist argument that evolution was running in reverse, that humans were becoming more degraded, and that progress was beginning to falter.

It was H. G. Wells who brought this problem into literature and whose 1895 *Time Ma-*

chine made it newly vivid.¹² Indeed, the gap between evolution and progress presides over Wells' story like an uncanny fear. His two future species, the Eloi and the Morlocks, are perfectly fitted to their worlds. Their relationship is elegantly symbiotic, with the shadowy Morlocks producing life's necessities for the delicate Eloi and the Eloi furnishing (themselves as) food for the Morlocks. From an evolutionary perspective, both groups are quite well adapted, physically and mentally, to their different roles. But what they are not—at least not in any way that the narrator can see—is advanced humans. The Morlocks are hunched and brutish while the Eloi are effete and child-like, devoid of all grit and character. In Lankester's terms, they are clearly degenerate species whose transformation into lower-order animals proves that evolution may, over time, actually reverse the difficult and important work of Victorian progress.

What the more earnest fin-de-siècle Utopias would seem to suggest, however, is that this need not be cause for concern; it might rather be an opportunity. Wells' whole approach depends on Lankester's (and Spencer's) association of desirability with complexity—and on that score the life of an Eloi or a Morlock must be counted less desirable, since each has roughly half of our complexity. But it could be that the complex is not always desirable. Perhaps simplicity and degeneration are exactly what modern society needs. Would it matter, for example, that the Eloi were degenerate and delicate if they were also happy?¹³ Is it possible to imagine them being both simpler and more content? This may seem an odd question for *The Time Machine*, given what we know about the cannibalism of the Morlocks and the slaughter of the Eloi, but it is actually a question that the novel itself raises in the narrow window of time after we meet the Eloi but before we learn the truth about their predation. For that brief narrative moment, the narrator seems genuinely ambivalent, torn between a kind of grudging envy for the childlike simplicity of Eloi life and a rather lofty pity. "It seems to me," he says, "that I had happened upon humanity upon the wane":

I thought of the physical slightness of the people, their lack of intelligence, and those big abundant ruins, and it strengthened my belief in a perfect conquest of Nature. For after the battle comes Quiet. Humanity had been strong, energetic, and intelligent, and had used all its abundant vitality to alter the conditions under which it lived. And now came the reaction of the altered conditions. . . . We are kept keen on the grindstone of pain and necessity, and, it seemed to me, that here was that hateful grindstone broken at last! (47-8)

There is something triumphant in that final exclamation point, with its ring of liberation from all work and want, but there is also some regret. To rid itself from "pain and necessity," humanity has had to sacrifice its strength and its vitality; it has become newly free but also newly slight, which is a kind of freedom that makes the narrator decidedly uneasy. Is it worth it, he wants to know, this loss of keenness in the name of contentment? Ultimately, of course, he never has to decide. The moment he discovers that the Eloi are, in fact, domesticated animals reared for slaughter, the question simply dissolves.

But that same question keeps popping up elsewhere, as for instance in Jerome K. Jerome's 1891 story "The New Utopia." Though, in that case, all of the ambivalence which pervades

Wells' text is absent, having been replaced by a self-contented disgust. Jerome's narrator, a politically naive, Fabian-sympathizing, Lafitte-drinking businessman, falls asleep after an enlivening night at the "National Socialist Club" only to awaken one thousand years later in a world of actually existing fabianism. The reign of equality is everywhere ensured by ruthless rationalization: names have been abolished in favor of ID numbers; family life has been replaced by barracks life; all citizens are fed, washed, and cared for by the state; and no one works more than three hours per day. Most obscene, whenever a person of excessive physical or mental prowess is born, he must be levelled down—either by having an arm removed or his brains softened. Naturally, the narrator finds this future appalling and cannot understand why the citizens of the 29th century do not rebel, or failing that why they do not commit mass suicide. Such a thing, he realizes incredulously, "never occurs to them" (359). The only explanation, he decides, is that they are no longer fully human. And, looking around him, he finds his suspicions confirmed: "I looked at the faces of the men and women that were passing . . . it was just the quiet, troubled, wondering expression that I had always noticed upon the faces of the horses and oxen that we used to breed and keep in the old world" (359). What allows these people to tolerate their lives of grotesque equality, in other words, is that they are not people at all—they are animals.

Waking up in his own bed the next morning, the narrator is glad to discover that his whole journey was just an alcohol-induced nightmare and thrilled to hear the comforting sounds of 19th-century life still roaring about him: "Through the open window I hear the rush and roar of old life's battle. Men are fighting, striving, working, carving out each man his own life with the sword of strength and will" (360). Those forceful participles—fighting, striving, working—are primed to overwhelm a whole set of fabian concerns—starving, exploiting, eating. And the narrative as a whole is meant to show the dehumanizing consequence of socialist policy. And yet, the text gives us no reason to actually doubt the happiness of Jerome's Utopians. Unlike the Eloi, they have no predatory Morlocks to concern them, nor are there any other wrenching risks or dangers. We know from the story that they spend their leisure time talking about "how wretched life must have been in the old times, and about how happy we are now" (358). We might not like the stifling sense of conformity or the gruesome practice of leveling down, but these features of Utopian society do not seem particularly unattractive to the Utopians. If they did, there would be some sign of discontent, and there is none. Only the narrator is disappointed. He alone is eager to return to a life of "fighting," "striving," and "working."

Once again, then, the real question is: what if happiness requires loss, a decline in the complexity or sophistication of humanity? For Wells, that diminution is gently figured as "physical slightness" and "lack of intelligence." For Jerome, it is more brutal and more shocking, what with the severed arms and softened brains of all those people deemed too strong or too smart. But the two visions still run parallel. Jerome, too, shows us a society that is diminished, yet happy, and he too rejects it in the name of "old life's battle."¹⁴ Such happiness is, for him, not a fulfillment but a travesty of Utopia, a betrayal of the full richness of human potential. For Wells and Jerome—as for Lankester—human development means increasing complexity, and complexity requires dissatisfaction. Indeed, as one of Lankester's

early reviewers noted: “We seem to learn from [his theory] the absolute necessity of labour and effort, of struggle and difficulty, of discomfort and pain, as the condition of all progress, whether physical or mental, and that the lower the organism the more need there is of these ever present stimuli, not only to effect progress, but to avoid retrogression” (Rpt. In Pick 217). To Wells’ “hateful grindstone” and Jerome’s “battle,” we can now add this “necessity of labour and effort”; all three authors imagine humans not just as creatures who happen to toil painfully, but as creatures who must toil painfully if they want to develop as a species and maintain their distinction from mere animal life.

Another way to phrase this would be to say that Wells, Jerome, and Lankester want to wrangle the Lotos-Eating mariners from their island happiness, drive them back to their ship, and force them, once again, to climb the climbing wave. Or, perhaps they want to drive the speaker of “Locksley Hall” from his own island paradise, or the speaker of “Le Voyage” from his rendez-vous with desirable death. They don’t care what these characters actually want; they only care that they keep working, that they toil to defeat the threat of degeneration and safeguard the great promise of progress.

Morris and Hudson fundamentally disagreed. For them, diminution was the very essence of Utopian life and the surest guarantee of happiness. The difference, in other words, between fin-de-siècle Utopia and anti-Utopia is largely reducible to the question of whether one is willing to trade complexity for happiness. Anti-Utopians are not, but Utopians are. They therefore approach the whole question of the “hateful grindstone” through the opposite lens, insisting that if—as the anti-Utopians insist—painful struggle is necessary for development, then it is equally true to say that development consigns us to a life of pain and struggle. Real happiness, for that reason, can only come through a rejection of development. And this, in essence, is what the fin-de-siècle Utopias try to imagine: a life that is happier because it is simpler and less complex.

The simple life, I should add, did not mean the primitive life. There is very little noble savagery in these fin-de-siècle Utopias, largely because the noble savage was imagined as being somewhat too active, too virile and too independent.¹⁵ The downward-sloping path to Utopia followed a slower, less rugged route to the simple life. “When man is happy,” Wilde says, “he is in harmony with himself and his environment” (36). And this harmonious happiness, rather than rousing struggling or enlivening pain, is what he means by Utopia. Morris’ ideal, as developed not only in *News from Nowhere* but also in more polemical essays like “The Society of the Future,” is even more explicit:

Or again, some may say such a condition of things might lead indeed to happiness but also to stagnation. Well, to my mind that would be a contradiction in terms, if indeed we agree that happiness is caused by the pleasurable exercise of our faculties. And yet suppose the worst, and that the world did rest after so many troubles—where would be the harm? I remember, having been ill once, how pleasant it was to lie on my bed without pain or fever, doing nothing but watching the sunbeams and listening to the sounds of life outside; and might not the great world of men, if it once deliver itself from the delirious struggle for life amidst dishonesty, rest for a little after the long fever and be none the worse for it?

The central image here is of progress as disease, a sickness whose most debilitating symptom is not that it makes us struggle but rather that it makes us believe there is no life but struggle. And, again, it is an effect familiar from “Ulysses,” and “The Lotos Eaters.” We do not just live through progress; we belong to it, and because we belong to it we cannot imagine happiness in any other way. For the early Tennyson, this was a milder kind of anxiety, well outweighed by the prospects of growth and development. By Morris’ time, however, those prospects seemed much dimmer, and the anxiety much more disturbing. If we have become infected by the disease of progress, and if the prognosis is not as promising as it once was, then it may be time to look for a new treatment.

The treatment Morris proposes is something like bedrest. If the only cure for progress is stagnation, Morris is perfectly willing to accept it. He feels he can safely “rest for a little after the long fever and be none the worse for it”—which is to say that he does not think resting threatens some deep-seated human need to struggle at life’s grindstone. Unlike Tennyson, Wells, Jerome, and Lankester, he is untroubled by the thought of a sojourn on the island of the Lotos-Eaters. In fact, the narrator of *News from Nowhere* says exactly that, while rowing down the river on a warm, bright, windless day: “It was the sort of afternoon that Tennyson must have been thinking about when he said of the Lotos-Eaters’ land that it was a land where it was always afternoon” (204). That line has come a long way from Tennyson’s pages through Baudelaire and into Morris (I should add that Carlyle made his own use of that poem. Whiling away in Yorkshire, he expressed his mixed sense of comfort and idleness by noting that it was “as if for the time one had *got* into the country of the Lotos-Eaters” (Kaplan 322).)

In Tennyson, the repetitions of land and afternoon signal a problem—a formal problem that rebounds upon its subject. In Morris, that formal problem becomes a virtue. The same two words are repeated—land and afternoon—only this time for emphasis, as if to reinforce the glorious nature of this endless Utopian afternoon. Repetitions, in *News from Nowhere*, are no longer suspect. They are to be treasured as part of the landscape of ease and simplification that makes Utopian life possible. Morris, himself, may have been a full-blooded socialist, one of those who dared to cross what he called the “river of fire” and embrace radicalism as a political necessity, but there is still something of the *paradis artificiel* in his Utopian vision, something that resonates with even the more solipsistic utopianism of a Baudelaire or a Des Esseintes. In this passage, it is not the worker so much as the convalescent who best approximates the pleasures of Utopian life, and those pleasures are like nothing so much as lying in bed watching the sunbeams. From that minimal experience springs the whole of Morris’s Utopian world, where a people who are simpler and have less—less stimulation, less differentiation, less commerce, less struggle—somehow find greater happiness.

This is not to say that Morris was immune to the doubts of a Wells or a Jerome. His own Utopian narrator—the aptly named William Guest—experiences something of their unease. He, too, wonders whether Utopian happiness has cost too much in the way of human sophistication, and he too cherishes his old life of pain and struggle. In that sense, he is just another in a long line of Utopian visitors who discovers that he cannot tolerate

Utopia. It is rare that Utopian fiction tells the story of a person who stumbles upon Utopia, learns the ways of the Utopians, and acclimates to Utopian life. Much more often—though not always—it tells the story of a person who stumbles upon Utopia, learns the ways of the Utopians, and discovers that he cannot stand Utopian life. In that regard, at least, the tensions of Utopian fiction are quite consistent with those of anti-Utopian fiction; both depend on the narrator’s discomfort with the constraints of a new world. Just as Wells’ narrator is sickened by the delicacy of the Eloi and Jerome’s is appalled by the reign of brutal conformity, Guest is fatigued by the dullness and boredom of everyday life.

This is despite Guest’s enthusiasm for the organization of Utopian society. From the beginning, he is wholly enamored of this garden-world, with its pleasurable labor and beautiful citizens. But he feels, throughout, that it is not for him, and the Utopians feel it as well. “You will be happy there,” the knowledgeable Hammond tells him, “for a while” (NFN 162). But only for a while. Hammond seems to know that sooner, rather than later, Guest will swim back to the 19th-century world, lured there by a song so deeply ingrained that it cannot be resisted. In the end, Guest is not torn away from Utopia, or otherwise forced to leave. He wakes up in his own bed at the very moment when he wishes to, the moment when Utopia begins to seem less desirable than the life he knew. That is why he is, as he says, “not so despairing” about having returned:

All along, though those friends were so real to me, I had been feeling as if I had no business amongst them: as though the time would come when they would reject me, and say, as Ellen’s last mournful look seemed to say, ‘No, it will not do; you cannot be of us; you belong so entirely to the unhappiness of the past that our happiness even would weary you . . . Go on living while you may, striving, with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness.’ (NFN 228)

Faced with a choice between the wearying happiness of the Utopians and the pain of a life in progress, Guest chooses progress—precisely as do the narrators in Wells and Jerome. Nor is it a difficult choice, since Guest knows that he is not fit to enjoy the happiness of Utopian life. His nerves still crave excitement, his mind activity, and his soul discontent. He belongs all too fully to the familiar world of unhappiness, where “living” is a matter of “striving” and illness the normal state of things.

There is, however, this difference, which is the real difference between fin-de-siècle Utopia and anti-Utopia: Morris does not color his Utopian world with Guest’s discomfort. Guest can be uneasy and Utopia still ideal. Put differently, the mere fact that Guest is not happy in Utopia does not imply that no one is happy there—as it does for Wells and Jerome. Ultimately, that is, what *News from Nowhere* imagines is the possibility that Utopia might be undesirable for humanity *as it is* but still preferable for humanity *as it might be*.¹⁶ And the key shift, at the end, is that even though Guest himself cannot enjoy Utopian happiness, he still respects the Utopians’s happiness. More than that, he wants to use his life to build a future for these diminished Utopian people.

Utopian Nature

In a sense, though, Guest's choice is too easy. Yes, he commits himself to other people's happiness, and yes he chooses to work for a Utopia that he can never inhabit—building up “little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness” (228)—but in the meantime, he gets to wake up in his own, comfortable bed and enjoy a painful life free from stultifying satisfaction. He is not compelled, as he might have been were he forced to stay, to work little by little to adapt himself to a Utopian existence he was unfit to enjoy. The reason he can choose Utopia, in other words, is that he does not have to live there.

Hudson's narrator does. Smith, as he is called, has also slept his way into the future, and he too has found a race of people perfectly adapted to their own deep content. They are hard-working and healthy, but also delicate and refined, lacking any real vigor. Over time, Smith comes to understand the pleasure of their restful lives, and even at one point feels himself approaching their “serene, enduring bliss” (249). Passion, however, keeps him from contentment, specifically his deep and growing passion for a woman named Yoletta, who can never return his affections because she, and her people, feel only familial love, not eros. They have lost that vital emotion, in their slow descent towards happiness, leaving Smith the lone desiring human, doomed to a life of unfulfillment. Overcome with disappointment, he too feels the lure of his old unhappy life and the desperate desire to “repeople the peaceful world with struggling, starving millions, as in the past, so that the beautiful flower of love which had withered in men's hearts might blossom again” (304).¹⁷

Unfortunately for Smith, there is no going back—no chance of magically awakening in his old bed, alongside Jerome and Guest, or hopping into a still-functioning time machine. His past is truly past, leaving him no choice but a Utopia that he feels he cannot bear.¹⁸ It is at this point that he finds a bottle of liquid, inscribed with the lines: “When your soul is darkened, so that it is hard to know evil from good, and the thoughts that are in you lead to madness, drink of me, and be cured” (305). Of the many possible interpretations, Smith settles for the most appealing. Being desperate to shed his skin and his painful passion, he takes the words to mean that if he drinks the liquid, he will be cured of his love for Yoletta and free, finally, to become fully Utopian.

After drinking, however, he finds himself plunged into darkness, and only then does he realize that the liquid is in fact a poison and its promised cure is death (305). The story ends with Smith drifting into oblivion while surrounded by the mourning members of his Utopian community, but despite the narrative fade-out it is still difficult to say exactly what this death means. Has Smith died in the sense that his heart has stopped beating and his body begun to decay? Or has he died in the rather different sense that he has lost his identity and become a kind of being who is no longer Smith? These are very different outcomes, but both fall within the orbit of this word death, which, as Fredric Jameson has recently argued, always haunts the idea of Utopia. In Jameson's words, “The fear with which this prospect [of total systemic change] immediately fills us is then to all intents and purposes the same as the fear of death” (52). This is what Smith discovers in his final moments: that, from his perspective at least, becoming Utopian is indistinguishable from dying. Regardless of whether the elixir is magical or poisonous, it will put an end to Smith.

As so often in these tangles of progress and death, there is another perspective. When Carlyle's Phoenix dies, it is in preparation for rebirth (she immolates herself so that "she may soar the higher and sing the clearer.") When Baudelaire's speaker sets off for "la mort," he is also setting off for a new life (he grasps at poison in order to finally find something new.) In the same way, Smith's death may also be a kind of birth, the birth of a being finally fit for Utopia.

Trying to reconcile those two perspectives—that of Smith, who sees only death, and that of his successor, who may be taking his first breath—is all but impossible, and yet their coexistence is central to late-century Utopian fiction. On the one hand, that is, these Utopian novels narrate the absolute impossibility of becoming Utopian, the failure of the narrator (whether Guest or Smith) to adapt himself to a Utopian life that they nonetheless envy. At the same time, however, they show us the lives of Utopian people who have quite successfully adapted themselves. I say adapted because we can rule out the possibility that these Utopian people have always been Utopian. These are not island Utopias, set off in uncharted waters and populated by a distinct human race; they are British Utopias set in a future which has developed directly out of the 19th-century British world. Green and fecund the countryside may be, but it is still the same country, and its population consists entirely of what we would call posterity, the descendants of 19th-century England. So although the narrators cannot resist their restlessness, their progeny eventually do. Somewhere along the line, the inhabitants of Hudson's *Crystal Age* shed their sexual desires, just as the citizens in Jerome's dystopia lost their attachment to privacy, and the people of Morris' garden-world lost their addiction to struggle.¹⁹

In the case of *News from Nowhere*, we are actually privy to the story of how society accomplished this feat, how it reconciled itself to boredom. In the early years of Utopia, everyone was bored, and for a while it seemed that the curse of boredom might imperil the prospects for happiness.

... When men began to settle down after the war, and their labour had pretty much filled up the gap in wealth caused by the destruction of that war, a kind of disappointment seemed coming over us, and the prophecies of some of the reactionists of the past times seemed as if they would come true, and a dull level of utilitarian comfort be the end for a while of our aspirations and success . . . But, after all, this dull thundercloud only threatened us, and then passed over . . . The remedy was, in short, the production of what used to be called art, but which has no name amongst us now, because it has become a necessary part of the labour of every man who produces. (160)

In the years after the revolution, a whole generation of Guests found themselves disappointed with the "dull level of utilitarian comfort" that seemed the only fruit of their socialism. But quickly enough, they found a new source of stimulation: art. Unalienated, aesthetic labour was always Morris' singular ideal, and in *News from Nowhere* it became his solution to the problem of Utopian boredom. If you find yourself unable to bear the contentment of everyday life, produce beautiful things and be cured.

That, however, can't be the only solution—not even for Morris. If aesthetic labor were enough to make one Utopian, then Guest could surely stay. No one would have to warn him, as they do, that his happy visit must end or tell him, as they do, that he “cannot be of us.” Instead, they would simply encourage him to attempt his own art-work. The fact that they do not points to a deeper, and more complex problem with Utopian boredom. Doing art-work is not enough; first, you have to become the kind of person who can find real satisfaction in art-work, and that takes a good deal of time, even in Nowhere:

...they were puzzled as to what to do, till they found the feeling against a mechanical life, which had begun before the Great Change amongst people who had leisure to think of such things, was spreading insensibly . . . in the half-century that followed the Great Change it began to be noteworthy; machine after machine was quietly dropped under the excuse that the machines could not produce works of art, and that works of art were more and more called for. (201)

Notice how tentative the language is: “spreading insensibly,” “began to be noteworthy,” “quietly dropped.” And even this tentative beginning is spread over a “half-century.” More time is required—perhaps much more time—for the habit to be ingrained and for artisanship to fully supplant boredom. The real reason that Guest cannot devote himself to art-work is that he is not yet ripe for that, having missed the long, intervening period of insensible change. He has only his lifetime to work with, whereas any effective adaptation to the dull reality of Utopian existence requires generations.

Guest's problem is a secular version of the old issue of the Israelites in the desert. To the question, “why were the Jews compelled to wander for 40 years,” one longstanding answer has been: so that a generation raised in slavery could die out and cede its place to a new generation raised in freedom. As Marx himself put it, with the revolutions of 1848 in mind: “The present generation is like the Jews whom Moses led through the wilderness. It has not only a new world to conquer, it must go under in order to make room for men who are able to cope with a new world” (Qtd in Walzer 54). Our narrators are like those doomed wanderers, fated to die so that a new, degenerate, unspoiled race of humans can cope with Utopian life. They are the ones who must go under. Though there is at least this difference from the biblical story: in the 19th-century, one dead generation is no longer enough. Evolution, along with geology, had expanded the scope of historical time and slowed the expectations of historical change so that, in these fin-de-siècle Utopias, multiple generations must go under, each sacrificing itself for offspring who will be slightly more well-suited to happiness until, after many iterations, a Utopian child can finally be born. In Morris, fifty years is only enough for a beginning, whereas Hudson allows one hundred centuries to complete the change. It is a matter, ultimately, of giving degeneration enough time to change human nature.

That phrase, “human nature” may sound a bit dated, perhaps even quaint. Certainly, it is not one we often associate with Utopia. Indeed, one of the bedrocks of Utopian thought is precisely that humans are not bound by their natures, that they can become different under different circumstances. Wilde, for his part, thought human nature a conservative

bugbear designed to stifle the political imagination, and he quickly dispatched it in favor of his socialist ideal:

It will, of course, be said that such a scheme as is set forth here is quite unpractical, and goes against human nature. This is perfectly true. It is unpractical, and it goes against human nature. This is why it is worth carrying out, . . . A practical scheme is either a scheme that is already in existence, or a scheme that could be carried out under existing conditions. But it is exactly the existing conditions that one objects to . . . The conditions will be done away with, and human nature will change. The only thing one really knows about human nature is that it changes. (31)

As Wilde sees it, there is no such thing as human nature; there is only the nature of humans under particular conditions. Change the conditions and you change the humans. If the humans you know seem violent or grisly or selfish, that is actually a reason to build them a Utopia. Their brutishness does not prove their unworthiness; it shows that they have been brought low by brutish conditions and need new ones.

For his part, Morris more than equaled Wilde's contempt for the idea of human nature. "What human nature?" is the cry of *News from Nowhere*, "the human nature of paupers, of slaves, of slave-holders, or the human nature of wealthy freemen?" (118). More generally, it might even be said that the very mention of human nature within Utopian fiction merely begs the question. Which human nature do you mean? The human nature of the narrator or the human nature of the Utopians. Those Utopians are, after all, humans of a different nature—"utterly unlike any fellow-creatures I had ever encountered before" (13), as Hudson puts it, with a perfectly balanced emphasis on their otherness and their fellow-ness? Utopian fiction is built on this multi-human basis, involving as it does the representation of two very different kinds of human beings. That alone should suffice to upset any more orthodox understanding of human nature.

And yet, these fin-de-siècle Utopias seem to accept that human nature is, in fact, an obstacle to Utopia. In particular, they acknowledge some fundamental limit to the pace, if not the scope, of human change. If, as Wilde has it, "the only thing one really knows about human nature is that it changes," he is equally convinced, as he says only a few pages later, that "the evolution of man is slow" (35). These two positions are perfectly compatible, even if they point in different directions. Humanity is, in the long run, infinitely plastic, capable of limitless change and infinite adaptation. But for now, for the living, and for the foreseeable future, the force of *habitus* remains stubbornly intractable. Our tics, our habits, the way we think and speak—these things have settled so deeply into the fabric of human life that they can only be slowly cleared away. New worlds, in that sense, cannot turn us into new people; all they can do is make us slightly new, and our children slightly newer, and their children slightly newer. Human nature crawls along at the speed of evolution.

There is a classic Utopian shortcut, a way to overcome the slow, incremental pace of human change. It is another "eu"-term, like eu-topia, only it refers to the good race rather than the good place. Eugenics—a new word for an old idea—was experiencing a revival

at the end of the 19th century, thanks in large part to the influence of Francis Galton, the late-Victorian polymath who set about trying to actively and scientifically enhance the capacities of human beings. Long before Galton, however, the search for a program of rapid human alteration had been central to the work of Utopian fiction. In the words of one critic, writing before fascism had besmirched the eugenic dream: “Plato and More, and Campanella and Bacon after him were *the prophets of the modern eugenics movement*” (Hertzler 288).²⁰ These early Utopian writers embraced eugenics because they understood that their new worlds required new people and they wanted, each in his own way, to hasten their arrival.

By contrast, the fin-de-siècle Utopias do no such thing. Hudson’s only eugenic concern is to ensure some minimal reproduction (which is obviously difficult, given that his Utopians have lost all sexual desire). Morris eliminates even this constraint, allowing for sexual partnerings of any consensual type and trusting to organic life to manage the balance. Precisely at the moment when eugenics was first becoming an organized science, it lost its place in the Utopian imagination. And though there are a variety of reasons for this—including the turn to the organic—none was more important than the new, Utopian attachment to degeneration. Eugenics, after all, is a science of human enhancement, and enhancement is precisely what Morris and Hudson reject. They were committed, instead, to the idea of a lesser human nature, because they hoped this lesser nature might allow for greater happiness.

Radical Evolution

Ultimately, then, these Utopias were stuck with the problem of human nature. Even if, in the long term, they felt there was no such thing, the short-term still set a terrible limit to their Utopian dreams. There could be no instant Utopia, no shortcut-wormhole, no set of legal or political changes that would bring Utopia to life. Reaching Utopia would now take vast stretches of time. And yet—and this is another of the peculiarities of late-century Utopian fiction—it might still require revolution. Indeed, revolutions, of a sort, occur in both Morris and Hudson: in Morris, it is a rally-turned-uprising which becomes a civil war and leads, eventually, to the overthrow of capitalist society; in Hudson, it is a plague of worms which decimates the population and forces the survivors to rebuild on a new footing. Obviously, these visions are rather different—worms and workers being very different sorts of revolutionary agents—but it is nonetheless essential to both texts that human history be utterly transformed with a single stroke at a single moment. Somehow, reaching Utopia still requires revolutionary change, even though the inertia of human nature ensures that no such revolution can actually get us there. Nothing—not even the most radical revolution—can alter the fact that Utopia takes time. But it also seems to be the case that time alone can do nothing without a prior revolutionary act. In some unspecified way, these acts set in motion the long, gradual process that leads us to Utopia. Revolution is what makes evolution possible and only their conjunction makes Utopia possible.

This argument—that fin-de-siècle Utopian fiction reveals the deep, though often obscured coupling of radicalism and evolution—is rather different from the conventional understanding of the politics of the genre, and far removed from the traditional Marxist stance. Utopia

is something of a bad word in classical Marxism, thanks to the sustained critique Marx and Engels leveled against it throughout their writing, from the *Communist Manifesto* to the later *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*. In their view, the trouble with Utopia was that it always risked becoming a mere idealism, an escapist fantasy which left behind the material conditions of historical becoming in favor of a programme for better living, Fourier's phalanstery being the best example. More recently—beginning with Martin Buber but coming to a head with the second edition of E. P. Thompson's biography of Morris—there has been some attempt at reconciliation. To quote Thompson, Marxist writers have finally stopped “running away from the acceptance of utopianism as a valid imaginative form, because of a fright given to us by Engels in 1880” (797). If they have stopped running away, however, there is still a good deal of fast walking. Utopia has its Marxist champions, but what they choose to celebrate is something other than the picture of future happiness. The real value of Utopian fiction, they argue, lies instead in its ability to take us outside of history, to provide some distant vantage point from which to reevaluate our own historical moment.²¹ As Paul Ricoeur has phrased it, “From this ‘no-place’ an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted” (16).²² What matters is neither how we might get to Utopia nor what we would do after we arrive; the point is simply to see our present selves anew.

This approach to the politics of Utopia takes its newest, most sophisticated form in the work of Fredric Jameson. His book, *Archaeologies of the Future* makes otherness—radical otherness—the very keystone of Utopian fiction:

For it is the very principle of the radical break as such, its possibility, which is reinforced by the Utopian form, which insists that its radical difference is possible and that a break is necessary. The Utopian form itself is the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system. But it asserts this by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break. (231-2)

For Jameson, Utopia is not just a different place; it is a radically different place, a place set so far apart that it is no longer recognizable as a human place. And therein lies its real value as a political construct and a literary form. It offers us something more than just a distant platform from which to re-view ourselves: an opportunity to think about leaping towards that distant platform. Utopia, in other words, confronts us with the choice of radical change, the kind of change which changes everything and which cannot be accomplished by reform alone.

There is a good deal of evidence for the Jamesonian view in the texts we have been examining. In Morris, as in Hudson, Wells, and Jerome, we do confront the possibility of radical change; we watch as the narrators stumble into worlds so alien that they simply cannot make themselves fit, however much they may wish it. Between our world and the Utopian one is a chasm so profound that crossing it, as Smith discovers, is like nothing so much as death itself, the relinquishing of everything that we call life. And this, clearly, is one way to envision the prospect of radical transformation.

Unfortunately, though, it is quite literally half the story. There is discontinuity in these 19th century Utopias but also continuity, a strange combination of the radical and the gradual. Smith may have to drink poison in order to become Utopian, but his offspring have managed to do so without any such aid. Indeed, if these fin-de-siècle Utopian fictions do, as Jameson suggests, show us the radical side of Utopian change—the fact that becoming Utopian looks like nothing so much as death—they also describe the long, slow, gradual journey to Utopia, the fact that given enough time humanity can become Utopian without ever leaping. There is continuity, in other words, lurking beneath the radicalism that Jameson finds at the heart of Utopian fiction, a slow change that testifies to the most profound idea of the fin-de-siècle Utopia: the idea that radicalism happens over time. To put it more concretely, there are two reasons that the narrators cannot stay in Utopia: first, because the change is too radical; and, second, because it is too protracted. No single person can survive the transition, but if generations are allowed to go under than at some point the transition will have happened. These Utopian fictions compass both types of change: the radical and the gradual. Through the eyes of the narrator, we see the otherness of Utopian life and the existential divide that separates our societies. Through the eyes of the Utopians, however, we see the lightly-graded downhill path that winds its slow way from our world to theirs. It is the combination of these perspectives that constitutes the real power, and the real politics of these narratives. Impossible though it may be for the narrator and the Utopians to share the same historical perspective or inhabit the same world, it is still crucial that they inhabit the same text. Only together can they generate that binocular view of history which characterizes fin-de-siècle Utopian fiction, the view which sees social change as both radical and evolutionary. So that what is finally at stake in these Utopian fictions is nothing less than the nature of historical change itself, the strange and powerful entanglement of revolution and evolution, discontinuity and continuity, praxis and patience.

Whether this counts as a politics is a difficult question. There is a strong revolutionary demand, but very little faith in the power of revolution; there is vigor, but little conviction that vigor alone can accomplish much. Time can prepare the changes necessary for Utopia, but the stretches of time involved defy the resources of active politics. Fin-de-siècle Utopian fictions thus involve a strange kind of radical fatalism. Radicalism alone, they know, will not suffice; regardless of how radical our actions may be, a good deal of waiting will still be required. At the same time, though, only such inadequate radicalism can create the conditions necessary for proper waiting. These Utopian texts are, in that sense, half-political, making equal claims for action and for waiting. They ask us merely to put ourselves in a position to wait in the right kind of way: to find the waiting room for decay and degeneration rather than the waiting room of progress and development—and then to wait there until we die. More to the point, they ask us to act radically while offering as their sole justification the far-distant happiness of a people quite unlike ourselves. That, in essence, was the great wager of fin-de-siècle Utopian fiction: that the grand future once promised by industrial progress could yet be saved, but that doing so would require the most intensely attenuated kind of political commitment. Only a combination of revolution and degeneration, radicalism and slow decline, could lead to happiness. And even then, it would not be our happiness.

But acting radically, right now, could conceivably enable some future people to escape from the endless compulsion of progress and gradually achieve the happy end we always wanted.

A New Look: Joyce

If, at the fin-de-siècle, the idea of Victorian progress was already breaking up, by the time of the Great War it had thoroughly exploded. The artists and writers who lived through that conflict saw an aspect of progress too disturbing to countenance: the progress of machine guns, tanks, and chemical weapons, the advanced technologies of death that made their first grand appearance in that merciless martial theater. For those, like Henry James, who straddled the Victorian and modern eras, the war threw an unflattering light on all their former beliefs, exposing just how cheap and hollow had been their onetime optimism:

The plunge of civilisation into this abyss of blood and darkness by the wanton feat of those two infamous autocrats is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to have to take it now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and meaning is too tragic for any words.
(153)

As James sees it, the war did something more than put an end to progress; it proved that such a thing had never actually happened. Progress was revealed as a treacherous, if seductive, illusion. Indeed, the whole Victorian age—which flattered the world with its assurance of gradual “bettering”—was exposed, in a flash, as a long, secret preparation for the most devastating of conflicts.

There are reasons to be skeptical of James’s account, and more reasons to question this whole neat tale about how war ended an era of optimism. In truth, to be as shocked as James is to be rather late to the party. Doubtless the spectacle of continent-wide destruction made for a grand finale, but the full denouement of progress had been long underway—all the doubts piling up like background radiation until that slight imbalance of hope over anxiety, which had stabilized the Victorian idea, finally tilted. We might, if we wanted, spend some time tracking causes back through the years and decades, but instead I want to focus on one thing that, surprisingly, doesn’t seem to have contributed to the decline of progress: the end of real, material progress.

Progress was killed by a crisis of confidence, and not a crisis of capitalism. That, alone, is remarkable. I argued, in the Introduction, that the idea of Victorian progress was inspired by the new reality of industrial growth. Now, at the close, it would be nice to round off with a neat, matching statement, but unfortunately it is not possible. Even as the idea of progress lost its preeminence around the turn of the 20th century, industrialism continued to drive society forward. The English economy was growing at a rate faster than any pre-twentieth century society, with measures of social welfare following apace. But even this was not enough to sustain the notion of a bright and beckoning future.

There is a way to make sense of this split, but to see it we have to pan out, widening our perspective to incorporate not just England but parts of Western Europe and the United States. For most of the 19th century, England remained the lone nation on the far side of the industrial divide; it was the only economy to have escaped from the Malthusian trap and the only society grappling with what Sterling called the “great though conflicting energies of industrial life.” By the turn of the 20th century, however, this was no longer the case.

Industrialism had slipped the borders of Britain, spread around the world, and turned what was a uniquely Victorian condition into an international phenomenon. Even more important, in terms of progress, these new, industrial economies were growing much more quickly than England itself. Indeed, they had a tremendous economic advantage: a predecessor whom they could emulate. England, being first, never had that luxury, and as other nations hurried up what was now a well-plowed path, England felt its old preeminence waning. Even if the English economy was not actually declining, in other words, it was still losing its advantage, and that was enough to sap the old Victorian idea of endless improvement.

The consequence for Victorian culture, and Victorian literature, was similarly profound. For as long as industrialism remained trapped on the island, British writers enjoyed a unique purchase on the pain and promise of that mixed experience (and a unique authority to fashion its figuration to their progressive liking). Their lonely experience of industrial life distinguished their artistic endeavors, giving the Victorian world not only a certain internal consistency but also a certain international primacy. As industrialism spread through Europe and America, however, they lost that privilege. The long moment of British—and only British—industrialism was now over, meaning that British writers were no longer alone in facing industrial change; they were now just one group in an increasingly international community of artists responding to the increasingly international reality of industrial change, one section in the multi-national and multi-media chorus that we call modernism. The internationalization of progress brought a close to what had been the relatively autonomous and relatively coherent formation called Victorian literature.

It is possible, of course, to phrase that last sentiment in a less lugubrious fashion. “Every limit,” George Eliot tells us, “is a beginning as well as an ending.” This, too, was both, and the object of this chapter is precisely to look in both directions: to bid farewell to the long moment of Victorian primacy, but also to describe the new dynamic of industrialism, progress, and literature that ushered in the movement known as modernism. The internationalization of industrialism, that is, may have ended an era in British literature but it established the conditions for a new form of international culture.

Seeing modernism in this light—as a cultural response to the international spread of industrialism—requires a number of critical adjustments. Most important, it means thinking of modernism as something other than the literary form of modernity. This is a not-uncommon definition of modernism, and it is well-represented by Marshall Berman for whom modernism is nothing less than “any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it” (5). Berman himself would hardly admit it, but if this is right then Victorian literature must count as modernism. The Victorians, after all, were at the center of industrialism and urbanization, and they had ample experience of the disjointed freneticism that has come to define the modern. To repeat an argument that I made for Baudelaire, if the word modern refers to urban, industrial capitalism, then the Victorians knew it more intimately than any of their contemporaries. And, in just the same way, if the word modernism refers to the literature of this “modern” landscape, then Victorian writers must be the first, great modernists. Yet, though Berman spends a good deal of time with Baudelaire, he does not

mention Tennyson (from whom Baudelaire borrowed so much), much less George Eliot or William Morris.

The only way to keep Tennyson and Eliot from becoming modernists is to make modernism mean something other than the writing of modern life, to recognize that it refers to a specific formal practice—not just a grappling with the modern but a set of techniques for grappling with the modern. Those techniques are nicely summarized by August Kleinzahler: “speed, compression, resistance to closure, obliquity, fragmentation, collage, surprise in transition and juxtaposition, polyvalency, and blocks of description, narrative or emotion reduced to the telling image or detail.”¹ If the Victorians are not modernists, it is because they did not, for the most part, embrace these techniques—despite the fact that they were still trying, in their own way, to get a grip on modernity.

The modernists wrote differently, and they thought about industrial progress differently—not least of all because they had the example of Victorian England before them. For them, the link which would join material growth to an ideology of open-ended progress (not just economic but moral, spiritual, political and otherwise) had been irreparably severed. They could see, only too plainly, the many misplaced hopes and long-deferred promises which British industrialism never actually realized—the unending cycles of poverty, the continuing blight of soot and smog, the inadequacy of intervention and remediation. And though they were hardly blind to the promise and the potential of growth, they were still less sanguine.

As a consequence, the old enlightenment debate about the shape of history—the one that the Victorians thought resolved—was thrown back open. There was room, again, for alternate visions of historical change, and new ways to think about the relation between history and literature. Modernists could champion progress with outrageous typeface, as the Futurists did, or they could mock progress with open affronts to aesthetics itself, like the Dadaists. If they preferred, they could diagnose it with penetrating sparseness, as in this passage from Kafka’s notebooks:

travelers in a train that has met with an accident in a tunnel, and this at a place where the light of the beginning can no longer be seen, and the light of the end is so very small a glimmer that the gaze must continually search for it and is always losing it again, and, furthermore, it is not even certain whether it is the beginning or the end of the tunnel. (Agamben 112)

The whole difference between Victorian and modern progress is in that final twist. If the light at the end were just distant and flickering, it could still be a symbol of the painful optimism that gripped Victorian literature. Kafka, however, refuses his travelers even that slight comfort. Those trapped in Kafka’s tunnel of history may occasionally see a light, but they cannot know if it beacons from the future or the past. And for that reason, they can never be sure which way they are moving, or which way they should be moving. This is just one modernist’s view of progress as absurdity.

To do justice to modernism’s full, varied response to the international spread of industrial progress—a response both formal and philosophical—would require a book unto itself, but even a minimal sampling can show just how thoroughly the relation between literature and progress was changed.

The minimal sample I have in mind is actually one of modernism's most paradigmatic texts, James Joyce's *Ulysses*. *Ulysses* is not, in any obvious sense, a book about industrialism or industrial progress. In fact, there seems to be very little of either in the Dublin of 1904, but these things are important to the novel nonetheless—important precisely as unmistakable absences. It is crucial that Joyce's Dublin be not only free of industrial elements but conspicuously free. His is a city that imagines itself as a kind of anachronism, a place left behind in a world given over to industrialism. This may sound rather bleak, but being an anachronism also has its advantages; in this case, having been passed over by progress means that Dublin can enjoy a kind of sensuousness that progress itself precludes. There is room in Dublin for activities and interactions that are no longer possible under progress. They are not utopian activities, and Joyce is not like William Morris, seeking out new models of human happiness and building a fictional society to fit those models. Nor, facing the other way, is he like George Eliot, remembering values from the past which, though comforting, can have no place in the future. He is neither so earnest as the one nor so resigned as the other. Instead, he inhabits a new, modernist position, where industrial progress is less a force than a farce. Its grandeur and pomposity are met with laughter, rather than distress; irony, rather than agony; and play, rather than politics. It is not a cruel or contemptuous laugh that rises from the pages of Joyce's novel, only a snickering sense that the promise of progress is rather flatulent, and that a city without progress can both nurture a great human type, like Leopold Bloom, and be the setting for a grand human story, like the *Odyssey*. What *Ulysses* slyly suggests, in other words, is that the only way to be roundly and sensuously human in the modern world is to keep one's distance from industrial progress—or better, to flush it down the toilet.

Modernist Dublin

One way to start thinking about the place of industrialism in Joyce's novel is by asking a very simply question: why Dublin? Why set the novel in this particular place, rather than in some other place. Did *Ulysses* have to be set in Dublin or could it have been set somewhere else? Paris or New York, for example? Would any city work? Any town or village? To put it another way: how much do you have to know about Dublin to understand *Ulysses*? If you read the book with Tokyo in mind, or Shanghai, how much can you appreciate? Nothing? Or how about: none of the details but everything that matters?

Given Joyce's lifelong intimacy with the city he never quite left behind, it may be hard, at first, to take the "why Dublin" question seriously. But there is really nothing inevitable about the choice of Dublin. Conrad did not spend his life writing about his native Poland. Nor did Pound and Eliot write obsessively about smalltown America. The Dublinness of *Ulysses* is as much a question of narrative function as of authorial biography, and as it happens there is a long tradition of critics who have wondered about it. From among the early reviews, the Dublin-published *Separatist*, *Freeman*, and *Dublin Review* all claimed the book for themselves, with phrases like, "Ireland, Dublin, is all over it" (4), "never was a city so involved in the workings of any writer's mind as Dublin is in Joyce's" (450), and

“Nothing could be more ridiculous than the youthful dilettantes in Paris or London who profess knowledge and understanding of a work which is often mercifully obscure even to the Dublin-bred” (273). Even the London-based *Quarterly Review* called it: “a book which, owing to accidents of circumstance, probably only Dubliners can really understand in detail” (226).²

Also from the beginning, however, there have been those who dismissed Dublin and claimed the book for broader pluralities—sometimes humanity, sometimes Modernity. Ezra Pound, for one, wrote: “I doubt if the local allusions interfere with *general* comprehension,” adding about Molly, “she exists presumably in Patagonia as she exists in Jersey City or Camden” (626). The most frequent comparison was with Dante and the Florentine intrigue of the *Divine Comedy*. As Gilbert Seldes phrased it in *The Nation*, “I have written this analysis of ‘Ulysses’ as one not too familiar with either [Catholicism or Ireland]—as an indication that the book can have absolute validity and interest, in the sense that all which is local and private in the ‘Divine Comedy’ does not detract from its interest and validity” (212).

Seldes’ point is valid enough, but there still seems to be something different about Ulysses. The *Divine Comedy* may have its private intrigue, but it is not attached to Florence in the same way that Ulysses is attached to Dublin—it is not even set there. Indeed, it is hard to imagine another work of literature being as attached to its locale as Ulysses is, as committed to the minute replication and meticulous recreation of its every crook and corner. Obviously, there is something specious about the connection. After all, Joyce’s Dublin is not Dublin; it is a representation of Dublin. Yet, if the two are not identical, they are also not entirely distinct. Joyce’s representation of Dublin cannot stray too far from the real, historical city without vitiating something of the realist illusion, and Joyce himself was unusually committed to that illusion. Indeed, even if we can say, with some confidence, that Joyce’s Dublin is not Dublin, it is still worth noting that *Ulysses* goes to heroic lengths to make Joyce’s Dublin seem identical to Dublin; it actively and minutely confuses the fictional with the real.

We know from the accounts of friends like Frank Budgen just how much Joyce enjoyed the game of realism:

To see Joyce at work on the Wandering Rocks was to see an engineer at work with compass and slide-rule, a surveyor with theodolite and measure chain . . . [Joyce wrote the episode] with a map of Dublin before him on which were traced in red ink the paths of the Earl of Dudlee and Father Conmee. He calculated to a minute the time necessary for his characters to cover a given distance of the city. (Wollaeger 87)

It is a wonderful image that Budgen paints—a portrait of the artist that finally discloses what it means to pare one’s fingernails. This is Joyce at his most meticulous and obsessive: using map, compass, and stopwatch to ensure that his fictional Dublin conforms in every physical way to the city of his birth—when of course, he is free to place Bohemia on the coast or Cortez in the Pacific. But Joyce wanted something else, something for which even

the term realism may not be adequate. “I want,” he had said earlier to Budgen, “to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book” (Fairhall 194). Why we should want that from a novel—when we could get it from a map or a survey—I am not sure. And in the end, *Ulysses* does not give it to us; there are errors of commission and errors of omission alike. To take one of a number of examples that may or may not matter, the Dalkey tram that Almidano Artifoni hails and misses in the *Cyclops* episode did not run in 1904 (16).

In another book this kind of slip might be called an oversight, but in *Ulysses* it really does feel like an error, because the emphasis on the mimetic is so painstaking. There are more street names, more businesses, more public houses, more government buildings, more statues, more policemen, and more people than in any prior novel—all of them mappable and legibly interrelated. There is also more banality than ever before: more eating, drinking, masturbation, bathing, idle chatter, random encounters, gossip, shopping, and fatigue.³ These kinds of things are hard to quantify, and perhaps it is too much to say that *Ulysses* is more realist than its predecessors. We know, from Eliot, that there is more to realism than a sliding scale of specificity. There are admixtures like didacticism and nostalgia—and there is a tendency to present not reality alone but some more intense reality. What can be said about *Ulysses* is that it contains more unplotted detail than its predecessors. It is more vulgar—more detailist—than any prior realism.

It is also, however, more mythological than any prior realism—and probably more mythological than any realism can be. *Ulysses* is not just a story about denizens of the city of Dublin on June 16, 1904; it is also a far older story about a far different place. The title, alone, is enough to reveal this problem. *Ulysses* is not the title of a realist novel; it is the title of a modern myth. Yet, it is never clear how this one book can be both. A sampling of the early reviews shows just how easy it is to trip over this problem:

... Mr. Leopold Bloom, ranges like Moby Dick throughout the watery globe, and communes with incommunicable things under the stars. Yet during that interval the body and the chained spirit of Mr. Bloom have merely partaken of, or assisted in, a bath at a public bathing establishment, a funeral, a luncheon ... (Slocombe 4)

“Ulysses” is the *Odyssey* retold, episode by episode, as the story of a day’s life in the streets, pubs, and brothels of Dublin, and is an attempt to give a complete account of the nature of man. It is apparently almost miraculously successful. (Maitland, “Mr Joyce” 70-1)

In the polished teapot the universe is contained, and all the thoughts and pictures that ever were can be poured out of it. ... There are exact notations of trivial but tremendous motions, and these are truly the inconsequential but significant things that one says to oneself. (Huddleston 9)

Notice how strained the language is. All the reviewers are trying to say is that the book is at once about Dublin and about everywhere, that it is particular and universal. But

somehow they keep stumbling. Phrases like “trivial but tremendous,” “inconsequential but significant,” and “communes with incommunicable things” have no intellectual force; they are just oxymorons, yoking together things that do not seem to fit together.⁴ They tell us *that* the book is particular and universal without telling us *how* that might be. Or, more accurately, they tell us that the relation between these things is simply a paradox, a palpable truth with no sure intellectual ground.

That is certainly the easy way out, but in fairness it is not clear what more there is to say. There just seems to be a sitting contradiction between the detailism of the novel and its mythology. Joyce’s detailism imitates the bare facticity and pervasive contingency of everyday life; it opens itself to chance, arbitrariness, and in the extreme case, insignificance (e.g. Bloom mentioning to Lenehan that he could throw away the newspaper, Stephen and Bloom being both dressed in mourning black, Molly thinking that Bloom wants breakfast in bed). And though there is something artificial about this arbitrariness—it is everywhere staged by authorial design—the patina of contingency remains. In *Ulysses*, it always seems that what happens could also have failed to happen.

Yet, the underlying odyssean structure tells us that this cannot be true. Full of gritty detail this novel may be but *Ulysses* is also saturated with mythological allusions. And those mythological elements have their own narrative force. They pressure the novel to unfold according to the pattern established by the myth itself, rather than the whims and choices of individual characters (e.g. Bloom could not have ended up just anywhere. Like Odysseus before him, he was destined to make it home). In mythical method, what happens is what has to happen. More precisely, what happens is what has already happened and whose happening the new text is attempting to reproduce. To the extent, then, that *Ulysses* borrows its structure from Homeric myth, it undermines its own contingencies. And vice versa.

Impossible though the conjunction of detailism and myth may be, however, there is still this book called *Ulysses*. Somehow, Joyce manages to make these compatible, to reconcile the particular (mere things) with the universal (enduring myths). *Ulysses* is a book about two things, Dublin life on June 16 1904 and life. It is the story of a day (arbitrary enough to be everyday) in which a man (perverse enough to be everyman) wanders through a city (indistinct enough to be every place.) You can never escape those parentheses, however close you stay to the Dublin streets. Or, to turn the relation around, you can never escape the smells of Joyce’s city, however lofty your perspective. If *Ulysses* deals with colonialism, it does so because Bloom has stepped into Barney Kiernan’s pub; if capitalism, because he is trying to sell an ad or buy some soap. At every turn, there is a detailed picture of Dublin life set beside an intimation of the universal.

It is easy enough to multiply examples of this kind from Joyce’s work. There is the familiar: “am I walking into eternity along Sandymount strand?” (31) and the less familiar “they creepycrawl after Blake’s buttocks into eternity” (153). There is Mulligan’s claim—about a bottle of Bass—that “Any object, intensely regarded, may be a gate of access to the incorruptible eon of the gods” (340) and Stephen’s claim that he is “a conscious rational reagent between a micro and a macrocosm ineluctably constructed upon the incertitude of

the void” (572). Each is an affirmation of the proximity of the mundane and the eternal, even if each imagines that connection in slightly different terms. Everywhere in Joyce’s Dublin, the universal is brought into communication with the everyday.

Nowhere, however, does the book explain that communication. Ulysses overlays an ancient, mythical world with a detailed and realistic Dublin while refusing to theorize their connection. The closest Joyce came was to say that the reason he wrote about Dublin was “because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world. In the particular is contained the universal” (Ellman 505). To quote Benjamin’s response to Baudelaire’s theory of beauty, “One cannot say that this is a profound analysis” (Selected IV.50). Why should Dublin, in particular, contain the universal? Or, to keep closer to our own interests, might the explanation have anything to do with industrialism, progress, and the turn from Victorian literature to modernism? The answer, I am going to argue, is an emphatic yes.

I am actually going to take these in reverse order, starting with modernism and working back to industrial progress. There are, in other words, two related—but not identical—ways to understand the relation between Dublin particularity and Odyssean universal. The second (which we will have to return to) has to do with the historical condition of early-20th-century Dublin. But the first has to do with the unusual aesthetic of high modernism. Modernism itself encourages a strange proximity between the very grand and the very trivial, the whole and the fragment. It produces what Joyce playfully called *chaosmos*, a version of that same Carlylean play of dissolution and renewal, only with a far less religious mission. As examples, you could think of the fragments that Eliot shores in his “Waste Land,” the thin film of images in Pound’s fourth canto, the mere anarchy that signals revelation in Yeats’ “Second Coming,” or Lily Bart’s answer to the meaning of life (“in the midst of chaos there was shape”). In each, you find the quintessential high modernist method: courting fragmentation so as to overcome it. Totality emerges through chaos, and the universal peers through heaps of mere particulars. Modernists break things up in order to find new wholes. And this is true not only for the British literary tradition but throughout international modernism. In Marinetti and Picasso, as in Malevich and in Kafka, you find the same mad method: to fragment and fracture and dis-integrate, not in order to reassemble but to reveal a truth that only fractured objects can reveal. That is the majesty of modernist art: its ability to produce fullness by emptying.⁵

Sweeping though this description may be, it captures the most distinctive, and most fundamental, aesthetic principle of high modernism. If we think of modernism as a constellation of artistic practices, then the gravitational force holding that constellation together is the belief that material particularity opens into universality under the right aesthetic conditions. When works of art reduce things to their most denuded, least interrelated, and most meaningless form, then—and only then—can they explode into everything. Or, more simply, the closer you get to chaos, the surer your path to totality.

To help make sense of this strange relation, I want to juxtapose two accounts of high modernist method: one from Walter Benjamin and the other from T. J. Clark. Benjamin, first, is the contemporary who theorized modernism most vividly, and also the one who did

the most to justify it philosophically. His description of its method begins, however, not with modernism proper but with its precursors, which he traced back to the baroque Trauerspiel:

That which lies here in ruins, the highly significant fragment, the remnant, is, in fact, the finest material in baroque creation. For it is common practice in the literature of the baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, and, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to take the repletion of stereotypes for a process of intensification. The baroque writers must have regarded the work of art as just such a miracle. (178)

The fragment, for Benjamin, is the material of miracles. So long as the fragments are utterly fragmented (lying in ruins), and so long as their arrangement foregrounds their fragmentariness (being without purpose) then the work of art can approach what Benjamin later calls resurrection.

And if this is true of the Trauerspiel, it is only more true of the high modernist aesthetic that the Trauerspiel prefigured. Modernism, too, builds its monuments with fragments. Benjamin had something like that in mind, but here Clark makes it explicit:

For surely transcendence in modernism can only be achieved—is not this central to our whole sense of the movement’s wager?—by way of absolute immanence and contingency, through a deep and ruthless materialism, by a secularization (a ‘realization’) of transcendence—an absorption in the logic of form . . . modernism was *already* that dissolution and disabusal—but exactly a dissolution held in dialectical tension with the idea or urge to totality, which idea or impulsion *alone gave the notion of dissolution* (or emptying, or asceticism, or fragment, or mere manufacture, or reduction, or deadpan, or non-identity) *sense*. (95)

All these modernist hallmarks—emptying and asceticism and reduction and non-identity and fragment—do the same kind of aesthetic work, the work that Clark calls dissolution. And that dissolution, in turn, is what makes transcendence possible. The two fit neatly together; indeed, it is their coexistence that defines modernism as an aesthetic and political movement. Dissolution, as Clark has it, empties the world into fragments, but if the fragments are heaped together in as conspicuously arbitrary a way as Benjamin describes then they may explode into everything. That alchemy is what lies at the heart of modernism.

It is the same alchemy that provides at least a first answer to the question of how Ulysses manages to be detailist and mythological: modernism makes it possible. *Ulysses* can be about Dublin and also about the universe because high modernism means *the aesthetic reconciliation of material particularity with the universal by way of emptying*. What allows the particular to cross into the universal is the very bareness of that particularity. And the function of Ulysses’ obsessively detailed style is precisely to make those details properly bare, properly denuded and properly contingent. Detailism does the work of fragmentation. *Ulysses* is in large part a novel of meaningless Dublin bits, but it is also a novel that treasures its meaningless bits—as all proper modernisms do. For they are precisely the source of a

deeper meaning, the empty fragments waiting to explode into mythical fullness. Following the alchemy of high modernism, it is the pointless Dublin details that serve as portals between the ancient and the modernist worlds. Perhaps that sounds glibly paradoxical, but any answer that seemed more intellectually satisfying would actually belie the deep and powerful illogic of the modernist aesthetic. Ultimately, *Ulysses* manages to be both realist and mythological not because it found some secret philosophical formula for achieving that mix, but rather because it participated in an aesthetic movement that magically crossed the barren particular with the richly universal. Joyce's great contribution was to show that Dublin was the true home of barrenness and thus a kind of portal to everywhere.

Evacuating Dublin

This, however, is only one part of the answer. As I said before, the transformation of Dublin into everywhere has to do not only with the operations of literary modernism but also with industrialism and industrial progress. Or, in the case of Dublin, with the lack of industrial progress. Back in 1800, Dublin was the second largest city in the British Isles, second only, that is, to London. By 1850, it was just the fifth largest. In 1904, when Joyce's book is set, it was no longer even the largest city in Ireland; that distinction belonged to the more highly industrialized Belfast (Prunty 14). With the fifth highest death rate in the world and infant mortality higher than Moscow and Calcutta, Dublin had lost its place among the advanced European capitals and earned its image as a municipal slum.⁶

Terry Eagleton is one of the few critics who has tried to connect the matter of Dublin's historical backwardness with our own opening question about its narrative inevitability. Is being backwards part of what makes Dublin the proper setting for *Ulysses*? Eagleton says yes: what makes Dublin such a ripe kind of anywhere is that it is decidedly insignificant, "a kind of nonplace and nonidentity." It is a city whose cultural vacuity presages the broader vacuity that is overtaking the entire globe, providing an image of what the world will look like when the work of industrial capitalism is complete:

If, like Joyce, you have little enough of a rich national lineage to begin with, then you become paradigmatic in your very colonial dispossession of the destiny of even advanced national formations in the era of international capital. (35)

The reason Dublin can approximate, so effectively, the future ravages of capitalism is because it was prematurely drained by the ravages of colonialism. It is therefore insignificant and hollow enough to be emblematic of the sprawling emptiness of modern life.

There is something profoundly right about this reading, but also something slightly awry. The key to Dublin's universality does, as Eagleton rightly says, have to do with its impoverishment, but the connection is not as direct as he would like. Even if it is true that Dublin is already empty and the world is becoming empty, it must be remembered that not all emptiness is the same. The homogenizing effects of international capitalism generate a kind of cultural poverty that is real, but hardly identical to that of pre-industrial Dublin. To the

contrary, what makes Dublin valuable for *Ulysses* is precisely that it is empty in a different way from the rest of the world. It still enjoys what we might call the pleasure of emptying.

Dublin is still home to a number of experiences that would be wholly foreign in a more advanced, industrial city. To begin with, Joyce's city still has a village character. The people you bump into are as likely to be intimates as strangers, and the streets tell a story about Irish history. To call it a knowable community would be too strong, but it exhibits some characteristics for which the more common expressions about modern urban life—shock, alienation, *Erlebnis*—are simply inadequate. So much of Dublin is familiar (to its inhabitants at least): faces, locales, stories. Who, at the end of the day, has not heard about the postcard that reads U.P.: up? Or about the funeral of a single, rather undistinguished, man named Dignam? These things are still communal, as is the love of music, the penchant for gossip, and the burden of a failed revolutionary history. This may, of course, be a cheap narrative effect, having little or nothing to do with the actual character of historical Dublin.⁷ But whether it is real or fictive, it is still true of Ulysses' Dublin. Bloom may busy himself hatching entrepreneurial schemes and devising captivating advertisements, but his world is still full of pre-industrial residues.⁸ To put it bluntly, when he shits he schemes, but he does not flush.

That may sound crass, but I think it is crucial to *Ulysses*, and crucial to the question of how Dublin can be every place. The key here is the toilet—or in Bloom's case the absence of a toilet. Not all shit is created equal, or more precisely not all shit is excreted equal. Bloom, in particular, excretes in “the jakes,” which is simply an outhouse with a bench and a hole (56). His jakes is musty, full of the “stench of mouldy limewash and stale cobwebs,” and it is dirty enough that he has to remind himself not to sully his nice trousers before the funeral. There is a “chink” in the wall through which he can see his neighbor's house—though on this particular morning it happens that no one is there. He brings his newspaper, and takes some pleasure in reading a vignette called “Matcham's Masterstroke,” though decidedly less pleasure than he takes in the dynamics of release:

Quietly he read, restraining himself, the first column and, yielding but resisting, began the second. Midway, his last resistance yielding, he allowed his bowels to ease themselves quietly as he read, reading still patiently that slight constipation of yesterday quite gone. Hope it's not too big bring on piles again. No, just right. So. Ah! Costive. One tabloid of cascara sagrada. Life might be so. It did not move or touch him but it was something quick and neat. Print anything now. Silly season. He read on, seated above his own rising smell. (56)

What is fun about this passage—as so many others have noted—is the confusion of defecation with reading; it is hard to say which is meant by the word “column,” or whether “It did not move or touch him” refers to the story or his leavings. In any case, the thing to notice is just how sensuous the whole experience is for Bloom. He plays at restraining and yielding as if it were a courtship—and then gushes at its success (“So. Ah!”). Bloom's counting house may be full of mouldy limewash, but that doesn't stop him from imagining himself in the role of the king.

After finishing the story and his business, Bloom wipes himself with the newspaper, picks up his pants, and buttons them before emerging “from the gloom into the air” (57). The one thing he does not do is flush. After all, a jakes is not a toilet, though that should have been obvious all along. Toilets belong to a different space altogether—less cracked and wooden and more polished and industrial. In particular, they belonged at that technological fantasyscape convened at the Crystal Palace exhibition in 1851, which did in fact house the first public toilets (200). Had he lived in London, Bloom might have ended his story with a flush, since, by 1904, the toilet had overrun the outhouse in much of England. So if famed 19th-century toilet engineer George Jennings is right, and “the civilization of a people can be measured by their domestic and sanitary appliances,” then *Ulysses* says something damning about Irish civilization—with its jakes and its open sewers (92).

But, then, Joyce did not think it was damning. Quite the opposite. He thought the obsessive industrialization of waste disposal the surest sign of cultural perversity. Hence Professor MacHugh’s joke about the Romans:

The jews in the wilderness and on the mountaintop said: *It is meet to be here. Let us build an altar to Jehovah.* The Roman, like the Englishman who follows in his footsteps, brought to every new shore on which he set his foot (on our shore he never set it) only his cloacal obsession. He gazed about him in his toga and he said: *It is meet to be here. Let us construct a watercloset.* (108)

“Our old ancient ancestors . . . were partial to the running stream,” is Lenehan’s response. And the fact that Bloom and Stephen later engage in a simultaneous outdoor urination suggests that the new modern Dubliners still are.⁹

Joyce was not the only artist treading this ground in the late War years. Duchamp’s infamous *Fountain* (i.e. urinal) was first rejected in April 1917, about the time that Joyce began writing *Ulysses* in earnest.¹⁰ It, too, uses the toilet (or a near relation) as an index of artistic and technological madness. As Duchamp put it, in a way that MacHugh and Joyce would have understood perfectly, “The only works of art America has produced are her plumbing and her bridges” (Ramirez 54).

To my mind, though, the most incisive account comes from Ernst Bloch’s 1918 *Spirit of Utopia*. Bloch uses the figure of the machine to describe both the modern obsession with technology and the modern obsession with toilets:

It knew, the machine, how to make everything as lifeless and subhuman on a small scale as our newer urban developments are on a larger scale. Its real objective is the bathroom and the toilet, these most indisputable and original accomplishments of our time, just as Rococo furniture and Gothic cathedrals represent structures that define every other art object of their respective epochs. Now *lavatoriality* [Abwaschbarkeit] dominates; somehow, water runs from every wall, and even the most expensive products of our age’s industrial diligence now partake of the wizardry of modern sanitation, the *a priori* of the finished industrial product. (11)¹¹

The toilet is to industrialism what the gothic cathedral was to feudalism. It is the dominant modern structure and the “real objective” of all technology. Today, everything flows towards the bathroom, with an inertia worthy of the name *lavatoriality*. It is a great word—lavatoriality—not only for this particular capitalist complex, but also for *Ulysses*.¹² It helps explain why the scatology of Ulysses is so different from that of Swift or Rabelais, and why it has been so strangely resistant to critical formulation. In *Ulysses*, it is not just waste that matters but also evacuation. Bloom sits on the jakes not in order to remind us that everyone does—as in so much scatological literature—but rather to remind us of a pre-technologized way of life *that is not just being repressed but actually effaced*. If the toilet prevails, people may never shit like Bloom again, and may never know the sensuousness that he finds amidst the jakes of Dublin. Where the toilet is the great symbol of sanitized London, the jakes is the great symbol of Joyce’s Dublin.

When Richard Aldington reviewed the as yet unfinished *Ulysses* in 1921, he made the following glib prediction: “Logically, I see no end to *Ulysses* except the suicide of Bloom, though no doubt it will terminate in the pleasant purlieus of a public lavatory” (337). He was, of course, wrong on both counts; Molly may spend a good portion of the final pages seated on her chamber pot, but a chamber pot is hardly a public lavatory. Still, what is interesting about his claim, and about the reviews more generally, is the degree to which they sensed not just the scatology but in fact the anti-lavatoriality of *Ulysses*—its resistance to the technological imperialism of the toilet. Even if they could not describe it exactly, they knew there was something about the novel that made the bathroom a fitting figure. The *Dublin Review* called it a “Cuchulain of the sewer,” complaining in a separate article that “We do not even float equably down the dim disgusting sewer” (Leslie 112, Martindale 275). One indignant reader of the *Literary Review* called Joyce “Van Eyck preoccupied with the privy” (Deutsch 281). While the *Sporting Times*—not exactly known for its literary criticism—damned the book as “the literature of the latrine” (4).

The best example, however, comes from a series of pungent letters in the *New Witness*, on the question of where Joyce might have found his muse. The initial review, by Cecil Maitland, was generally positive, full of praise for the book’s humor, insight, and psychological realism. The only problem he espied was “this vision of human beings as walking drain-pipes,” which he blamed on Joyce’s Catholic upbringing (“Mr Joyce” 70).

Then followed the letters, most of them less inclined to excuse. Of *Ulysses*, a certain D. wrote: “It might almost be compared to a man with some intelligence and sensitiveness scribbling bawdies on a lavatory wall” (127). And one Louis J. McQuilland agreed, “The rough notes for all Mr. Joyce’s work could be found in most of those underground lavatories, whose obscene inscriptions bear continued witness to the indestructible soul of the Yahoo” (95). Apparently piqued by the responses, the Maitland fired back: “If prose of this kind is to be read in the lavatory patronized by Mr. McQuilland, I should be much obliged if he would give me its address” (127). McQuilland did not oblige, but he did choose to respond, asking instead: “is it not a curious thing that in the long pageant of Irishmen of letters from the Four Masters to Patrick Pearse, James Joyce has been the only one to cabin his soul in a latrine?” (159). Lavatory, latrine, drain-pipes, privy, sewers: those are the terms that

obsessed Joyce's early readers; not shit *per se* but the *technology* of shit was the incessant refrain. Somehow, the vulgarity of *Ulysses* seemed less like an affront to human decency and more like an affront to lavatoriality—the sacred and sanitized privacy of the water closet.¹³ *Ulysses* was offensive because, like Bloom, it did not flush away its feces.

When toilets do appear in *Ulysses*—and there are a few—they are strangely freed from the responsibility of waste disposal. Patrick Dignam, restored to life in a satiric séance, tells us that “he had heard from more favoured beings now in the spirit that their abodes were equipped with every modern home comfort such as *tālāfānā*, *ālāvātār*, *hātākāldā*, *wātāklāsāt*” (248)—the joke, of course, being a confusion of the spiritual with the technological. The most these spirits can look forward to is electricity and indoor plumbing—rather, than, say eternal bliss.

The more interesting example, however, comes from Molly, and her memory of a visit to “Dr. Collins for womens diseases.” As part of his diagnosis, Collins asks her about her stool, which prompts the following rumination:

Asking me if what I did had an offensive odour what did he want me to do but the one thing gold maybe what a question if I smathered it all over his wrinkly old face for him with all my compliments I suppose hed know then and could you pass it easily pass what I thought he was talking about the rock of Gibraltar the way he put it thats a very nice invention too by the way only I like letting myself down after in the hole as far as I can squeeze and pull the chain then to flush it nice cool pins and needles still theres something in it I suppose I always used to know by Millys when she was a child whether she had worms or not . . . (633-4)

Molly is at first reluctant to describe her stool to the doctor—threatens, in fact, to give him a closer look than he really needs by way of a good smathering. Then, “by the way,” she praises the toilet as a “nice invention.” What makes it nice, in her estimation, has absolutely nothing to do with cleanliness. It is instead a matter of pleasure. Molly likes to lower herself into the toilet and flush, so as to feel the prickly spray of the swirling water—and there is really something quite charming about that idea. With a bit of irreverence the toilet becomes a secret pleasure-chamber, a private fountain for our most delicate parts. Clearly, Molly's fondness for the toilet is wholly unrelated to its sanitizing power. She has found a way to strip the toilet of its technological aura and restore its materiality—and its delights. As with Bloom's jakes, what matters for Molly is the sensuousness of it; the pins and needles is to her what the game of restraint and release is for him. To borrow from Bloom, it is just so “Ah!” which, in a word, is why *Ulysses* is set in Dublin.

Joyce's Dublin is a place that still values pre-industrial pleasures, and it is a place that still knows how to misuse capitalism for pleasure. That is the point of these moments in the bathroom: to show how, with a little perversity, pleasure can be resurrected from technology. There are kinds of pleasure available in Dublin that are not available elsewhere, particularly not in London. In that gleaming metropolis, the imperative of lavatoriality had penetrated too fully and the work of industrialism had gone too far. If Bloom is *l'homme moyen sensuel*, then Dublin is *la ville moyenne sensuelle*. And, like Bloom, it is really equal parts *sensuelle*

and *moyenne*, a place of deep banality but also a place of truly banal pleasures—as opposed to the more rarified delights of “tālāfānā, ālavātār, hātākāldā, wātākāsāt.” It is a city that revels in its backwardness and opens itself to the delights of decline. To the question, then, of why Dublin should be the gateway to everywhere, the answer is that its long economic decline revealed possibilities—of immediacy, of sensuousness, of development, and perhaps of *being*—that advancement had elsewhere foreclosed. Pace Eagleton, Dublin is less an image *of* the world than an image *for* the world. It is universal not because it looks like everywhere else—after all, it has no toilets—but because it makes not having toilets seem like a universal imperative. Not flushing away its waste—reveling, instead, in the bare materiality of local life—is what allows Dublin to become a repository for untapped human possibilities. Put differently, Dublin can serve as the gateway to the universal because it knows something that the world once knew and now needs to relearn: how to enjoy emptying.¹⁴

This is what it means to laugh at progress: it is to invert the progressive ideal and to render it obsolete at the same time. For *Ulysses*, as for modernism at large, progress matters less than dissolution, breaking down more than building up. Not every city can be universal. Only a backwards city will suffice, because only a backwards city is bare enough to be shown as a mere heap of fragments. *Ulysses* presents us one such bare city, and in that way, it introduces us to the new modernist possibility that it is evacuation—rather than progress—which can make us more sensuously and more fully human. The goal, here, is neither to save progress from itself nor to reach, by a new path, the fulfillment that progress had long promised. The goal is to find an entirely new ideal of fulfillment. Joyce’s Dublin is one of these new modernist ideals, a city of sensuous possibilities that only surface when life is barren of toilets, emptied of lavatoriality, and free of the technological perversity of industrial progress.

Finale

In the earliest stages, I had thought of calling this book *The Carlyle Era*—partly because Carlyle blasts its keynote and partly to express my allegiance to the best of old-fashioned criticism, like that of Hugh Kenner.

While writing, it seemed more like *The Tennyson Era*; his poems—not Carlyle’s prose—became the real touchstone for my thinking about literature, industrialism, and progress.

Now, after editing and revising, it occurs to me that the figure who really presides over this book is not Tennyson or Carlyle but Ulysses.

Every age, Kenner argues, creates its own Homer. “Invented Homers,” as he says, “range through three millennia” (49). Kenner himself was interested in the modernists’ Homer, the Homer of Joyce and Pound. As he saw it, the defining feature of *that* Homer was his historical presence. No longer an outsized, mythical bard, the modernists’ Homer was a real person who had lived in a real world (one currently being unearthed by archaeologists.) And being a real person gave his work a new purchase on reality. “The Homer of this new Renaissance could concentrate all that one knew of the real” (45).

The other thing Kenner finds striking about the modernists’ Homer is that he is, first and foremost, the author of *Ulysses*. “Homer in most times has been the poet of the *Iliad*. That *Odyssey* decade was an historical anomaly” (44).

Except that it wasn’t, not if we listen to Tennyson and company. For them, too, *The Odyssey* was the most resonant Homeric text.¹ And the reason has nothing to do with archeology. They turned to *The Odyssey* because it spoke to them, because it expressed something of their own experience. Specifically their experience of industrial progress: both the excitement and the restlessness, the freedom and the homesickness, the ever-expanding pull of desire and the growing demand for finality.

This is not to say that Homer’s epic was about industrialism (what would that even mean?), but like a glass which comes to vibrating life when the right note is struck, *Ulysses* responded to the call. It opened itself to relevant reimaginings.

Tennyson’s poem is very much a reimagining: not an invocation or an allusion but a new version. It gives us an invented Ulysses to put beside Kenner’s invented Homers. And part of what is new about this invented Ulysses is that—finally—he is a captain with a crew who matter. Because of course in Homer, the crew do not matter. They all die along the way, without so much as a nod towards the kind of felicific calculus which would compare these many deaths against a single homecoming and judge the book a tragedy. In Homer, only one fate matters, and it’s the fate of Odysseus, whose Nostos is a resolute triumph.

In Tennyson, things are different. The crew do matter. In “The Lotus-Eaters” they actually get to speak and even in “Ulysses,” where their voices are still stifled, they are important enough to be raised from the dead.

Nor is this only true of Tennyson. It follows wherever his work reaches. To Carlyle, for instance, who quoted from Tennyson’s poem as part of an impassioned letter he wrote to the author.

And so I say let us all rejoice somewhat. And so let us all smite rhythmically, all in concert, “the sounding furrows”; and sail forward with new cheer, “beyond the sunset,” whither we are bound—

It may be that the gulfs will wash us down,
It may be we shall touch the happy Isles
And see the great Achilles whom we knew! (I.83)

Carlyle doesn't even mention Ulysses, here. He uses him, and uses Tennyson's poem, to mount an appeal for concerted, collective action. As if Tennyson's poem was about this "we"—or even more broadly the thrice-repeated "all"—rather than any particular individual.

And though the figure of Ulysses is certainly more distant in Eliot, this question of how to value the work of the crew, the crowd, the many—when there are some heroic individuals whose lives would seem to be more meaningful—is absolutely central. Her answer is the same: the once-unhistoric are now profoundly important.

This is an effect of industrial progress, a consequence of the realization (grounded in economic reality) that improvements in economic welfare were now possible, and that they could be widely shared. No longer was there a Malthusian trap waiting to cut down those many lives made dispensable by the old laws of economics. Finally the bounty of growth belonged to all: captains and crewmen, masters and laborers, the long-significant few and the once-insignificant multitude. The Victorian Ulysses made room for this new perspective, ceding space and voice to those who "toiled and wrought and thought" with him.

The modernist Ulysses was something different. He carried a different burden and he struck a different balance with his fellow-travelers. You can see it in Baudelaire's hollow "nous," this speaking voice which grew out of Tennyson but which belongs neither to the grand captain nor his devoted crew (even as it hints at both). And there is a similar ambiguity in Joyce. Leopold Bloom is manifestly not Ulysses, but he is also not a crewmember. He is neither and both. A typical, world-historical, ordinary, remarkable, trivial and tremendous character. All at once. That is Joyce's modernist solution: to make the epic ordinary and the ordinary epic, without having to worry about who should lead and who must cede.

But if these modernist solutions look different than the Victorian ones, that's not because they are more advanced. It's because they come from elsewhere, from someplace just outside the world of industrial progress: someplace distant (in Baudelaire's case) or someplace belated (in Joyce's). Their Ulysses is not a descendant of Tennyson's; he is a twin, or an alterego.

And the same could be said of Victorian literature and modernism more broadly. There is no easy chronology which can take us from *Sartor Resartus* to *Ulysses*. What there is, instead, is a complex geography of time and place, a collection of perspectives—some looking in, some out, some ahead, some back—which, sewn together, shows us how industrialism was understood, how it became partnered with progress, and how that troubled partnership shaped 19th and early 20th century literature.

Also, it shows us how industrialism reinvented Ulysses.

Notes and Bibliography

Notes

¹Catherine Gallagher's excellent *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* was published in 1985—over 25 years ago—and Raymond Williams' inimitable *Culture and Society* in 1958, just over 25 years before that. Whether more recent work on commodity culture, credit markets, or urbanization are, in fact, treatments of industrialism by another name is a question we will need to revisit.

²The basic model for this approach comes from Louis Cazamian's *The Social Novel in England: Dickens, Disraeli, Mrs. Gaskell, Kingsley*, published in 1903.

³For a recent argument about the legacy of this approach, see Collini and Mulhern

⁴See also Bodenheimer.

⁵The collection by Osteen and Woodmansee provides a rich introduction.

⁶For another comparison of pre-industrial agriculture with hunter-gatherer groups, see Diamond.

⁷For more detailed accounts, see Clark, Perkin, Jones.

⁸It was this strangely parochial view of historical development that piqued Bagehot and inspired his wonderfully damning charge against Smith, namely that his work shows “how from being a savage, man rose to be a scotchman” (rpt. in Almond 39).

⁹Mill is a good test case for this, because he was more likely to think in terms of progress when most removed from economic discourse, and most likely to reflect on the possibility of a stationary state when closest.

¹⁰Similar statements appeared in the *British Quarterly Review* (1851) and *Victorian Magazine* (1866).

¹¹Since Buckley, far more work has been done with evolution than with progress, including such major studies as Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots* and George Levine's *Darwin and the Novelists*. But evolution and progress are not the same thing—though they are certainly related, in ways that I will explore later.

¹²Bury actually uses the term “civilization,” rather than society. Other good, if rather sweeping, studies of progress include Passmore, Nisbett, and van Doren. For alternate definitions, see Ruse, Spadafora, Almond.

¹³For a much fuller reading of 19th-century self-improvement, see Andrew Miller's inimitable *Burdens of Perfection*.

¹⁴The precise definition of ideology is one of the more slippery questions in marxist criticism. Althusser, Eagleton, and Ricoeur all offer rich and interesting accounts.

¹⁵Something of this scientific vision of Progress can still be found in the Victorian period, as for instance in the work of Babbage and Huxley. For more, see Buckley.

¹⁶Spadafora and Peter Gay have both authored excellent studies on enlightenment theories of progress and its many opponents.

¹⁷Not surprisingly, this view was kept alive by religious thinkers. Newman called progress “a slang term” and Pope Pius IX listed it among the errors in his *Syllabus Errorum* of 1864 (Buckley 42, 46)

¹⁸Machiavelli imagines this cycle in political terms (democracy gives rise to oligarchy which gives rise to tyranny which then gives rise to democracy) but there was a competing 18th-century view that progress created wealth which lead to luxury, then decadence and decline. For more, see Jack.

¹⁹It should be said that the extent of this collapse was limited to the idea of European and, somewhat more narrowly, British progress. Arguments about the pace and possibility of advancement in the colonies continued to follow the older, enlightenment pattern, where the world was neatly divided into the stages of civilization and advancement from one to the other could only be ensured by proper European oversight. Only at the metropole was progress indisputable and inevitable.

²⁰One parallel would be Zlotnick's argument that men and women developed very different ways of relating to the rise of industry. Another would be Buckley's original work.

²¹The connection between progress and providence was vital in the American context as well—all the way through the 19th-century and up until their industrial break. The *Merchants Magazine* captured the link beautifully, in their 1848 article on the subject. The darker, more fully industrial vision of progress made its full appearance only later, in texts like *The Education of Henry Adams*.

²²This was not the only distinguishing characteristic of Victorian progress. One could point, with only slightly less emphasis, to its dramatic foreshortening. During the Enlightenment, progress was generally understood to require lifetimes and centuries; the Victorians had a much more quick-working, and much more tumultuous, power in mind.

²³And the poem goes some way to reinforcing this position as it unfolds.

²⁴To pursue the analogy with political economy, Tennyson's lines seem to echo a passage from J. R. McCulloch's *Principles of Political Economy*, about the spur of endless desire: "When, indeed, the end is compassed, when the object of our exertions has been attained, it may, perhaps, be found not worth the trouble of acquiring; or, though prized at first, the enjoyment may pall upon the sense. But this, instead of discouraging, invariably tempts to new efforts; so that the pursuit of even imaginary conveniences, of riches, distinctions, and enjoyments that can never be realized, is productive of an intensity of gratification, unknown in the apathy of a fixed or permanent situation" (533).

²⁵In fact, this was only Spencer's more mature, and more subdued version. At an earlier stage, he wrote: "The modifications mankind have undergone, and are still undergoing, result from a law underlying the whole organic creation; and provided the human race continues, and the constitution of things remains the same, those modifications must end in completeness. . . . as surely as there is any meaning in such terms as habit, custom, practice;—so surely must the human faculties be moulded into complete fitness for the social state; so surely must evil and immorality disappear; so surely must man become perfect" (*Illustrations* 32).

²⁶Ruse has made a strong argument that evolutionary theory (including Darwin's) drew a great deal of its force from a very widespread and often unscientific belief in progress. And there is also the evidence of *The Origin of Species*, which confidently concludes that "as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection" (215).

²⁷Marshall Berman's book of the same title is rich with this kind of figural play.

²⁸Turgot and Condorcet both use this idea (Almond 34-5), as does Comte (Nisbett 25).

²⁹Gallagher suggests, interestingly, that Malthus had already severed this pairing (albeit in the opposite direction) by making individual improvement a threat to social improvement (*Body Economic* 37).

¹It also helps explain why I treat Carlyle, but not Ruskin. So much of what matters in Carlyle—especially in terms of his relation to industrialism—happens at the interchange between form and content, palpable fiction and pressing fact; nothing similar can be said of Ruskin because with limited exceptions Ruskin didn't produce imaginative literature.

²See *Capital*, Chapter 7, section 1. Breton too argues that "Both Carlyle and Marx conceive humankind in relation to material activity: in willed work human beings objectify or project themselves onto a creation and thus become real and knowable to themselves in a sense that exceeds basic materiality (corporeality)" (37).

³Treadwell is one of few to note the slight but persistent distinction between productive work and purposeful work.

⁴This is what Carlyle felt in his more confident moments. At other times, though, he doubted whether intellectual work were really vigorous enough to count at all. For more, see Treadwell and Kaplan.

⁵It was this kind of passage that drew the quizzical complaint of an American reviewer, who thought fit to remind Carlyle that "spiritualism degrade[s] itself by the use of weapons so foreign to its own nature, so

akin to savage animalism” (Southern Literary Review 7).

⁶In another piece, he listed as the three great elements of civilization “Gunpowder, Printing, and the Protestant Religion” (Works I.24)

⁷Or, again: “Mount into your railways; whirl from place to place, at the rate of fifty, or if you like of five hundred miles an hour; you cannot escape from the inexorable all-encircling ocean-moan of ennui” (Kaplan 359).

⁸Schlegel has an epigram which surely would have appealed to this side of Carlyle: “Only such a confusion may be termed a chaos out of which a new world can be shaped” (Qtd. in Vida 11).

⁹The precise nature of this (im)balance has long divided critics. Brooks and Levine argue that the destructive energies are not just subordinate, but largely spurious—designed to make the triumph of creation seem more thorough. Others, like Dale and Hillis Miller, would celebrate the reign of chaos and the futility of all construction.

¹⁰Vida offers a very thorough reading of the name (137). See also Tennyson (220)

¹¹G. B. Tennyson offers the most complete description of the formal characteristics of Carlylese, from the convoluted sentences to the surging capitalizations, unmatched dashes, obtuse neologisms, and tangled metaphors (246).

¹²Kaplan argues throughout his biography of Carlyle that a more tempered and nuanced style animates the letters and the travelogues.

¹³In the same letter to Emerson, Carlyle makes the related argument that all other styles have been “broken and abolished” and that his is simply the best way he knows “of being sincere” (Letters).

¹⁴For competing answers, see Findlay and Brookes.

¹⁵I don’t think it productive to argue the point at any length, but I should note that J. Hillis Miller makes precisely this misreading, turning Carlyle’s Phoenix into a death-drive minister who can signal the death-driven force of *Sartor* at large.

¹⁶In addition to the ones I list, Levine has attributed it to Carlyle’s personal ambivalence while G. B. Tennyson holds to the more universal idea that this is simply how man is: a churning mix of chaos and cosmos.

¹⁷In my reading, it is not that Carlyle’s work on the French Revolution introduced him to the dynamic of creation and destruction, it is rather that his preexisting interest in creative destruction drew him to write on the French Revolution.

¹⁸Vida’s is the best account of Carlyle’s German influences, but Metzger, Haney, and Mellor also discuss the affinities with German Romanticism and especially Romantic irony. I should add that while it is hard not to think, also, of Hegel’s possible influence, Carlyle was relatively unfamiliar with his work.

¹⁹LaValley has made the most concerted effort to explain Carlyle’s work by way of its involvement with the energies of modernity.

²⁰Tennyson argues that these chapters all but mar the whole (302), Metzger thinks that they abruptly the end the reign of natural supernaturalism (328), and Mellor finds them symptomatically unsatisfying (133).

¹Sterling was also an acquaintance of Tennyson’s. Both were members of the Apostles when at Cambridge—though Sterling left before Tennyson arrived. And both were involved in the same abortive scheme to aid Spanish revolutionaries. For more, see Culler, “Tennyson.”

²When trying to describe Tennyson’s modernness, Sterling’s language becomes rather diffuse, as when he praises: “this fusion of his own fresh feeling with the delightful affections, baffled or blessed, of others—and with the fairest images of the real world as it lies before us all to-day” (414). Adjectives like “delightful,” “fairest,” “blessed” and “baffled” are too mild to fit comfortably alongside “racked,” “torn,” and “haunted,” and it is hard to say why a person of such “fresh feeling” should be nominated as the preeminent poet of our half-sick, half-dreaming world.

³As he recalled: “When I went by the first train from Liverpool to Manchester (1830) I thought that the wheels ran in a groove. It was a black night, and there was such a vast crowd round the train at the station that we could not see the wheels. Then I made this line” (*Poems* 130n182).

⁴Kissane, Carr, and Rosenberg detail the importance of the past in Tennyson.

⁵A great deal has been written about Tennyson, Browning and the development of the dramatic monologue. A. Dwight Culler traces its origins back into the 18th century and beyond (“Monodrama”). Isobel Armstrong situates the genre within the broader context of the Victorian “framed poem” (7-16). W. David Shaw provides the most theoretically-inflected account of the relation between Tennyson and his speakers (101-3). William E. Fredeman contrasts Tennyson’s dramatic monologues with Browning’s. Robert Langbaum describes the interplay between judgment and sympathy (80-93). Linda Hughes offers a reasoned synthesis of the analyses to date (1-18).

⁶All line numbers refer to Christopher Ricks’ three-volume edition of Tennyson’s poems (Tennyson, *Poems*).

⁷For other accounts of the private/public relation in Locksley Hall, see Buckler (121, 128), Kincaid (54-5), and Shaw (83-5).

⁸For a rich reading of Tennyson’s ambivalence towards Ulysses, see Chiasson.

⁹Versions of this argument are made by Culler (*Poetry*), Kincaid, and O’Brien.

¹⁰Brantlinger is one of the few critics to recognize this link between Ulysses’s compulsive wanderings and Victorian progress.

¹¹“Locksley Hall”, too, has some strangely anachronistic elements—including, particularly, the repeated sound of a bugle-horn. It is easy enough to simply read past them, but they seem to have bothered some of the early reviewers, including Sterling (411).

¹²Maxime du Camp makes just such a charge against French literature in the preface to *Les Chants Modernes*: “nous sommes le siècle où l’on a découvert des planètes et des mondes, où l’on a trouvé les applications de la vapeur, l’électricité, le gaz, le chloroforme, l’hélice, la photographie, la galvanoplastie. . . et il faut s’occuper de la guerre de Troie et des panathénées!” (13).

¹³Fredeman argues that the problem of closure extends throughout Tennyson’s poetry (180), but I think the difficulty is heightened by his attention to progress.

¹⁴Frank Kermode, D. A. Miller, and Peter Brooks have all written wonderfully on the issue of closure.

¹⁵This is the section of the poem most directly indebted to Dante, whose own Ulysses also set out on one final westward voyage—past the pillars of Hercules and into the undiscovered world. But the context for that final voyage is completely different. Dante’s Ulysses, for instance, has never been home—he heads west just after leaving Circe’s isle. Which means, of course, that he has not seen Penelope, restored peace to his home, or gotten bored with domestic life. He is still enjoying his adventurous life of travel. Tennyson’s Ulysses is not trying to continue his adventurous life, but to recapture it.

¹⁶See Culler “Monodrama” (383), Culler *Poetry* (94, 97), Langbaum (90), Palmer (47), Shaw (74, 145), Tucker (230, 236-7).

¹⁷As it happens, we know that Carlyle particularly liked these lines, having quoted them with great reverence in a letter he wrote to Tennyson just after reading his 1842 *Poems* (I.82-3).

¹⁸Several critics have noticed this peculiarity. Christopher Ricks has suggested that the line has an invisible double, which reads: “To strive, to seek, to yield, and not to find” (59). Culler argues that “those last two verbs are the Victorian addition to an otherwise Romantic poem, for whereas in the second paragraph the margin faded for ever and for ever, it now appears that at some point it will stop” (*Poetry* 97).

¹⁹Palmer recognizes the simultaneous suggestion and denial of finality in Tennyson’s poems, but he relates it to Tennyson’s apocalyptic imagination, rather than to any notion of progress (49-50).

²⁰Kincaid (39-41), Culler (*Poetry* 98), and Day (41) offer general accounts. Sinfield presents an interesting colonial reading of the problem (47-50), and Armstrong reads the poem as a critique of alienated labor (87).

²¹Shaw is one of the few critics who mentions the troubling nature of these gods (132).

²²Evolution, of course, was an abiding interest of Tennyson’s, and this is just one of the instances where progress and evolution become entangled in his poetry. Brantlinger offers an excellent reading of this dynamic in “Locksley Hall”, showing how the poem thrives on the competing pull of evolution and regression (188-9).

²³To be sure, this is not the poem’s final word. There is some doubt left at the end, some last concern that even divine wisdom won’t quite do—chiefly because there are not enough who heed its counsel. But it never admits the possibility—so crucial to the other poems—that wisdom is something other than the answer we have not yet fully recognized; it is something that we, being molded by progress, can no longer want.

²⁴A classicist colleague of mine has suggested that this is even stranger than it seems at first. Homophrosuné—thinking alike—is the term Homer repeatedly uses to describe the special bond between Ulysses and Penelope in the *Odyssey*. The use of “thought” in Tennyson’s line would suggest that the bond has been transferred to his mariners.

²⁵They are there, of course, in Dante, but only because Dante’s Ulysses never made the homeward journey that killed his crew. Tennyson’s Ulysses did. More generally, though, the issue of whether these characters should or should not be dead in Tennyson’s poem is tied to the broader question about how exactly these poems fit into their allusional frames. For more, see Buckler (108) and Ricks (68).

²⁶One thing to note about these communities-in-progress is the absence of women. It is not just domesticity that is being left behind but, rather, women in general. Progress, it seems, is so masculine an activity that it only allows for homosocial forms of community.

²⁷There is one other way that makeshift community makes itself felt in Tennyson’s poems, and it has to do with their form. Central to the experience of dramatic monologue is the problem of relating to an unfamiliar and not necessarily trustworthy third person. It is not a philosophical problem or a linguistic problem, at essence, but a social problem. How can I make sense of this “I”? Dramatic monologues thrive on this kind of relational question. They make social relations a problem for poetry. And it is this awkward social negotiation that made Tennyson’s dramatic monologues so fit for an industrial age whose most visible impact was not just economic but social and which demanded, for that reason, a poetics of the community-in-progress.

¹More recent books on Baudelaire tend to reinforce this idea. Ulrich Baer calls him “the first poet . . . of our modernity” (1) while Debarati Sanyal refers approvingly to Baudelaire’s status as the “exemplary bard” of “urban modernity” (3).

²In Michael Jennings’ words, Benjamin “accomplished nothing less than a wholesale reinvention of the great French poet as the representative writer of urban capitalist modernity” (1)

³My own title—“London: Capital of the Nineteenth Century”—is an echo of the exposé he wrote for the *Arcades Project*: “Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century.”

⁴The best account of these changes, and their importance for Benjamin, comes from Nord.

⁵For more on the importance of ambiguity in Benjamin’s depiction of the Paris Arcades, see Jennings.

⁶This is actually Adorno, in a letter to Benjamin, but the context makes clear that he is trying to express something that Benjamin already knows but has kept in silence.

⁷Engels frames this divide rather differently in a note from the 1888 English edition of *The Communist Manifesto*: “Generally speaking, for the economical development of the bourgeoisie, England is here taken as the typical country, for its political development, France” (337).

⁸As it happens, the middle section is the only one of the three planned sections that Benjamin was able to complete. He left copious notes for the others, in the form of outlines and the *Arcades Project* itself.

⁹Poe, of course, was one of Baudelaire’s great passions, and translating Poe one of his few completed projects.

¹⁰He once considered doing so, as part of his review of the 1855 *Exposition Universelle*, which housed a selection of English works that Baudelaire found “très singulièrement belle, et digne d’une longue et patiente étude [singularly beautiful, and worthy of a long and patient study]” (II 582, my translation). Only he felt himself unready, and the task too difficult.

¹¹The essay is most often translated as “The Painter of Modern Life.”

¹²Leakey offers a useful discussion of the relation between spleen and ennui in Baudelaire.

¹³Blood offers an alternate interpretation of this poem and its many borrowings.

¹⁴“Literary history shows us other such destinies, real damnations—men who have the word *guignon* written in mysterious characters in the sinuous folds of their foreheads.” My Translation)

¹⁵“To lift such a heavy weight, Sisyphus, a man would need your courage. Though we work with a good heart, Art is long and Time is fleeting. Far from the tombs of the famous, towards a lonely graveyard, my heart, like a muffled drum, goes beating funeral marches. Many a gem sleeps buried in dark forgetfulness, far, far from picks and plumb-lines; Many a flower unwillingly loses its perfume, sweet as a secret, in deep solitudes” (Clark, *Selected Poems*, 13).

¹⁶Several of the earliest reviews and letters pointed to that fact.

¹⁷Baudelaire was not the only one attracted to these unusual lines, however: Poe was as well. He used them as the epigraph for the first version of the “The Tell-Tale Heart” (the image of a muffled, but still beating heart being obviously appropriate.) It is possible, in fact, that Baudelaire first encountered them in Poe’s story, and only later came to know them in the original context.

¹⁸The original meaning of the phrase, generally attributed to Hippocrates, was also not about art, in any direct sense. “Vita brevis, Ars longa” means something like: “Life is fleeting, and the art of medicine takes long to master.” For more on the history of the phrase and its migration into Baudelaire, see Vines.

¹⁹It may, however, be worth noting another suggestive connection, namely that between the city in this poem and the picture of Athens in Shelley’s “Ode to Liberty.”

²⁰“It is still a fashionable error, and one I want to resist as I do hell itself—I am speaking of the idea of progress.” My Translation.

²¹“Poetry and Progress are two competitors who hate each other with an instinctive hate, and when their paths cross, one of them must serve the other.” My Translation.

²²“It has discharged each of us of our proper duties, delivered every soul from its responsibilities, and freed the will from all those requirements imposed upon it by the love of the beautiful.” My Translation.

²³“Where is that guarantee? It is a figment, I would say, of your fatuous credulity.” My Translation.

²⁴“I leave aside the question of whether, by tantalizing humanity with the promise of new pleasures, endless progress wouldn’t be the cruelest and most ingenious torture; if, proceeding by way of a continual negation of itself, it wouldn’t amount to a kind of eternally-repeated suicide, and if, enclosed in this logical circle of fire, it wouldn’t resemble the scorpion who stings himself with his fearsome tail, an eternal *desideratum* which ensures its eternal disappointment?” My Translation.

²⁵There is a broader circuit of connection as well. Poe referred to Tennyson as “the noblest poet that ever lived” (461). And Baudelaire made use of that praise, referring at one point to Poe’s “admiration quasi fraternelle” for “la mélancolie molle, harmonieuse, distinguée de Tennyson” (600).

²⁶“to make nature shudder, and with it all the amateur philosophers of progress.” My Translation.

²⁷“Come enjoy the strange, intoxicating sweetness of this afternoon which has no end.” My Translation.

²⁸Babuts provides a fuller account of the many classical allusions.

²⁹Burton argues that it echoes the “nous” of “Au Lecteur,” the last poem thus mirroring the first.

³⁰“For the child, in love with maps and prints, the universe is equal to his vast appetite. Oh, how big the world is by lamplight! In the eyes of memory, how small the world is! / One morning we leave, our brains full of fire, our hearts swollen with resentment and bitter desires, and we go, following the rhythm of the waves, rocking our infinity on the finitude of the seas:” (Clark 138).

³¹“The poet,” Baudelaire wrote, “enjoys the incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else, as he sees fit. Like those roving souls in search of a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes” (rpt in Benjamin *Selected* IV.32).

³²“We imitate, horror! the top and the ball in their waltzing and bouncing;” (Clark 138).

³³“Astonishing travellers! What noble tales we read in your eyes, deep as the seas!” (Clark 139).

³⁴In one of his more anti-progressive moods, Carlyle wrote something similar: “Mount into your railways; whirl from place to place, at the rate of fifty, or if you like of five hundred miles an hour: you cannot escape from that inexorable all-encircling ocean-moan of ennui . . . you can but change your place in it, without solacement except one moment’s” (Kaplan 359).

³⁵“We saw stars and waves; we saw sands too; and, in spite of many shocks and unexpected disasters, we were often bored, there as here.” (Clark 140).

³⁶Benjamin, for his part, had planned to make a variant of that term, the ever-same, the focus of the third and final section of his unwritten book on Baudelaire, in order to bring his anti-progressive poetry into the more philosophical space of eternal return.

³⁷“It is bitter knowledge that comes from traveling! The world, monotonous and small, today, yesterday, tomorrow, always, shows us our own image: an oasis of horror in a desert of tedium!” (Clark 143).

³⁸“If you can stay, stay; leave, if you must.” (Clark 143).

³⁹“the vigilant, deadly enemy, Time!” (Clark 143). “When he finally puts his foot down on our necks, we will be able to hope and cry ‘Forward!’ Just as we once left for China with our eyes fixed on the open sea and our hair in the wind, / We shall set sail upon the Sea of Darkness with the joyful heart of a young passenger.” (Clark 144).

⁴⁰“Do you hear those voices, charming and deathly? They sing, ‘This way, you who want to eat / Of the Scented Lotus! This is where men gather the wondrous fruits that your heart desires; come and be lost in the strange intoxicating sweetness of this afternoon that has no end.’” (Clark 144).

⁴¹This vision is familiar from so many of the poems that fall under the heading of Baudelairean “*idéal*,” where fulfillment is figured as an escape into sexuality, memory, wine or some other un-productive activity.

⁴²To quote from Richard Burton, it may be that this “resurgence of hope amid the darkness represents nothing less than a gratuitous reinfusion of childlike expectancy and delight in the midst of adult cynicism and despair” (88).

⁴³Baudelaire did have his religious sentiments, but they were always of the darker persuasion. And even in the poem itself, all of the allusions point towards the ancient, rather than the Christian world. If there is some redemption to be found in these stanzas, it is decidedly non-Christian.

⁴⁴“O Death, old captain, it is time! Let us weigh anchor! This country is tedious to us, o Death! Let us make ready! If the sky and the sea are as black as ink, our hearts which you know are full of rays of light. / Pour us your poison and let it strengthen us! We want, such is the fire that burns our brains, to plunge into the depths of the abyss, Hell or Heaven, what does it matter? To the depths of the unknown to find something *new*.” (Clark 145).

⁴⁵In another register, Leo Bersani has written powerfully about Baudelaire’s attachment to rocking and the soothing experience of pitching back and forth (42-3), and in his *Journaux Intimes* Baudelaire expressed his fascination with “these beautiful big ships that lie on the still water imperceptibly rocking, these strong ships that look so idle and so nostalgic.” But those same idle ships posed, for him, a burning question: “Are they not asking us in a mute language: When do we set sail for happiness” (qtd in Benjamin IV 59).

⁴⁶Enid Starkie has made the most of this idea by imagining Baudelaire as an innocuous English type: “Baudelaire, at this stage of his life, would have gone up to either Oxford or Cambridge, as an undergraduate where, under proctorial and tutorial supervision, he would have done himself no permanent harm. He would probably have made a name for himself in undergraduate circles, in artistic and literary clubs, and this might have satisfied his need for eccentric self-expression” (Rpt in Lloyd).

¹Rosenberg provides an excellent account of Victorian society’s long lament for the loss of the past, and the influence this had on literature. In contrast to my own, forward-looking attentions, Rosenberg thinks that “much of the most moving literature of the English nineteenth century is one long song of mourning” (4).

²Suzanne Graver and Henry Auster have both done excellent work on the social organization of Eliot’s fictional universe.

³I say “few critics” because there have been a few. Rene Wellek, in his excellent diagnosis of 19th-century realism, considers including “*historistic*” as one of the genre’s defining feature—before deciding that it would exclude too many patently realist authors. In the case of Eliot, Neil McCaw has talked about her “*historico-realist*” style, though without sufficiently noting the tension between those terms. And Graver has shown how insistently the relation between past and present is foregrounded in the opening set-pieces of Eliot’s various works.

⁴Realism in general and English realism, in particular, has attracted an enormous amount of scholarship. The foundational works are those of Auerbach and Watt, with excellent elaborations by Barthes, Wellek, Brooks, and most recently Fredric Jameson.

⁵Tennyson would have agreed. In painting at least, he thought that realism had no excessive obligation to reality. In talking to John Everett Millais about the “limits of realism in painting,” he offered the following advice: “if you have human beings before a wall, the wall ought to be picturesequely painted, and in harmony with the idea pervading the picture, but must not be made too obtrusive by the bricks being *too* minutely drawn, since it is the human beings that ought to have the real interest for us in a dramatic subject picture” (rpt in Ormond 133).

⁶To a large degree, French realism has been reduced to a straw man in these accounts of the distinctiveness of English realism. Suffice it to say that French realism was never casually dispassionate or grandly impersonal. Culler and Weinberg have both produced excellent work on the specific conventions of French realist writers.

⁷The following, quite similar claims are from *Saint-Paul's Magazine*, *the Spectator*, and the *Examiner*, respectively: “the coat of mail in which men and women resolutely attempt to encase themselves has been removed in all these people, and we know them almost as they knew themselves.”; “Her characters are so real that they have a life and body of their own quite distinct from her criticisms on them”; “GE gives us just such insight into the lifelike characters of the people of her story as, if we were clever enough, we might obtain for ourselves during a short stay in the mid-England district in which her scene is laid.”

⁸In the same vein, Q. D. Leavis called Dorothea, “a product of George Eliot’s own ‘soul-hunger’—another day-dream ideal self (102).

⁹Butwin provides an excellent account of how the figure of the crowd operates not just in *Middlemarch* but through Eliot’s work.

¹⁰D. A. Miller has written beautifully about these competing perspectives, or what he calls a “scheme of reference and values” (109). Rather than souls and crowds, however, he thinks of the contrast between individuals and the community—a useful perspective but one that expands the category of soulful individuality too far and thus obscures the deep distinction between Dorothea and Lydgate, on the one hand, and everyone else, on the other.

¹¹Alex Woloch’s *The One Vs. the Many* provides another way of thinking about this conflict. Despite the fact that *Middlemarch* presents a familiar character-space, one dominated by a few vivid individuals, it reverses the pattern of representation as exploitation. The main characters in this novel are oppressed by the great collective weight of their minor offshoots.

¹²Gordon Haight has provided a useful summary of the many critics uncomfortable with Dorothea’s choice of second husband.

¹³There is at least one other kind of sympathy, distinct from these two and leading to a quite different resolution. It involves Mary and Fred, and it is Eliot’s bland tribute to the possibility of living happily between the two dominant ethics. Non-noble individuals.

¹⁴D. A. Miller makes a similar point. “Paradoxically,” he writes, “it is also obvious that the text values the feckless enterprises of its main characters far more highly than it does the cleanly enforced ‘achievement’ of its community. In a double ambivalence fraught with psychological and ideological antagonisms (parent versus child, community versus romantic individualism), the text shows a respectful courtesy to what it clearly resents, while persecuting with clearheaded insight what it profoundly seems to cherish” (130).

¹⁵Williams is hardly alone in recognizing this political knot. Leo Bersani has described Eliot as refusing to “abandon the dream of structured significance, even if she has to sustain it by the vague doctrine of individual goodness finally, in some way, affecting the course of history, or by the more desperate move of showing how the very subversion of her protagonists dreams is itself a proof of the interconnectedness in life” (rpt in Furst 249).

¹⁶As a corrective to Williams’ argument about *Middlemarch*, it should be said that the idea that industrialism narrowed the space for leisure is simply untrue and so can hardly serve as a just framework for reading Eliot’s text.

¹⁷Boym’s rendering of the experience of nostalgia is probing and subtle, if a bit slippery. And though our models are different, she too believes that nostalgia and progress are intimately related: “Nostalgic manifestations are side effects of the teleology of progress” (10).

¹As the historian Gareth Stedman Jones has it, the mid 80s are comparable only to the Chartist agitation and the Second Reform Bill for the anxiety they generated among the propertied classes (189-90).

²Excellent work has been done on this by Judith Walkowitz, Jonathan Dollimore, Richard Dellamora, and others.

³The essay was widely read and even more widely translated. It has been the subject of a great deal of critical attention and the chief object of many efforts to pin down Wilde’s slippery politics. For more, see Danson, Eagleton, Gagnier. For others who have dealt specifically with the relation between Wilde and

Morris, see D'Amico, Lesjak.

⁴The most interesting attempt to make sense of this passage—in Blochean terms—is in Beaumont.

⁵For more on Wilde's relation to boredom, see Nunokawa.

⁶Exemplary among the treatments of gothic degeneration are Hurley's *The Gothic Body* and Greenslade's *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel*. More general studies of degeneration include Pick, and Chamberlin.

⁷Here is Stedman Jones's description of urban degeneration and its late-century context: "Between 1880 and 1900, the agricultural depression, the rural exodus, the growing predominance of urban England, the increase of working-class discontent, fears about foreign competition and doubts about free trade were all inter-connected. The theory of urban degeneration is best understood within this complex of middle class beliefs" (150).

⁸On this, see Raymond Williams, *The City and the Country*.

⁹Lesjak offers a fuller account of the revolutionary implications, working also with Morris's essays.

¹⁰For some examples, see Greenslade.

¹¹For more about Darwin's thoughts on the subject, see Ruse, *Monad to Man*.

¹²Hurley and Greenslade both deal with the complex of issues connecting Wells, evolution, and progress.

¹³Lankester's answer to this question is a resolute no. "It is possible for us—just as the Ascidian throws away its tail and its eye and sinks into a quiescent state of inferiority—to reject the good gift of reason with which every child is born, and to degenerate into a contented life of material enjoyment accompanied by ignorance and superstition. The unprejudiced, all-questioning spirit of childhood may not inaptly be compared to the tadpole tail and eye of the young Ascidian; we have to fear lest the prejudices, preoccupations, and dogmatism of modern civilisation should in any way lead to the atrophy and loss of the valuable mental qualities inherited by our young forms from primaeval man." (48-9)

¹⁴His characters, in fact, are aware of this tradeoff, and they freely admit "that it was a pity we could not level up sometimes, instead of always leveling down; but, of course, that is impossible" (354). For them, however, it is a minor issue—a matter of this happiness or that, this equality or that.

¹⁵One exception to this would be Alfred Wallace, whose *Malay Archipelago* does imagine a kind of simple, primitive Utopia, especially at 456-7.

¹⁶Fredric Jameson discusses the importance of choices like this for Utopian fiction in general, and in particular the delicate balance between the otherness of the Utopians and their shared humanity (*Archaeologies* 168).

¹⁷It is worth noting that the question of sex in Utopian fiction is very closely tied to the question of human nature. Is sex possible between Utopians and visitors? Procreation? Do they belong to the same species? In anti-Utopias, it frequently happens that the secretly unhappy Utopians find themselves attracted to the visiting narrator, which stands as a proof of his superiority. See Bulwar-Lytton and Wells.

¹⁸As it happens, there is a special place marked out for Smith in this Utopian world which will allow him to fulfill his passions and finally embrace Yoletta, but he doesn't realize it until it is too late.

¹⁹Michel Houellebecq's recent *Les particules élémentaires* is a novel—told from the utopian perspective—about the pre-utopian people who made happiness possible.

²⁰See also Lewis Mumford, Patrick Parrinder.

²¹See, for example, Barbara Goodwin, who argues that "Every Utopia by its very existence, constitutes an *ad hoc* criticism of existing society" (29).

²²Similar ideas can be found in Trousson (15), Goodwin and Taylor (29, 211).

¹He added to the end of this list: "They didn't like Tennyson very much."

²In recent years, this line has been continued by post-colonial Joyce critics, who tend to emphasize the representation of Irish colonial life. See Duffy, Cheng, Nolan, Attridge and Howes.

³Even the vaunted stream of consciousness method has a realist flavor—psychological realism being the favored phrase. It heralds a new, more invasive, brand of realism: an X-ray as opposed to a mirror. Edmund Wilson in the *New Republic* called it the "most faithful X-ray ever taken of the ordinary human consciousness" (164). The *Daily Express* said that it followed life "to places and recesses in the human soul and heart inaccessible to the camera."

⁴This habit of the early reviewers has not disappeared. Richard Ellmann makes a similar claim in his magisterial biography of Joyce: “To be narrow, peculiar, and irresponsible, and at the same time all-encompassing, relentless, and grand, is Joyce’s style of greatness . . .” (7).

⁵As to the historical conditions that contributed to this redemptive vision of fragmentation, it is not enough to cite the experience of fragmentation in the early 20th century. There is, no doubt, ample testimony to that fact, as for example Edmund Wilson’s: “towards the breaking up of things, furthermore, all the forces of the time seemed to drive: life itself was anarchic and confused; even the unity of capitalism had collapsed” (“Rag-Bag” 237). There is, however, a problem with this interpretation. The modernists were hardly the first to feel the fragmentation of everyday life. Wordsworth felt it, Carlyle felt it, Marx felt it, Dickens felt it, Baudelaire felt it—indeed it is one of the most characteristic experiences of the social and economic transformation that usually comes under the heading of the industrial revolution. Only with high modernism, however, does the experience of fragmentation become the basis for an aesthetics of fragmentation.

⁶When he began writing *Dubliners* in 1904, Joyce described Dublin as “that hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city” (Ellmann 163). For more on the status of Dublin, see Moshenberg and Daly.

⁷If you wanted to pursue that point, you could begin by noting all of the things that Joyce leaves out of his Dublin, from the slums on the one hand to the Anglo-Irish on the other.

⁸This is how Fredric Jameson describes it: “So in that great village which is Joyce’s Dublin, Parnell is still an anecdote about a hat knocked off, picked up and returned, not yet a television image nor even a name in a newspaper; and by the same token, as in the peasant village itself, the ostensibly private or personal—Molly’s infidelities, or Mr Bloom’s urge to discover how far the Greek sculptors went in portraying the female anatomy—all these things are public too, and the material for endless gossip and anecdotal transmission” (134).

⁹The origin of this little joke seems to be H.G. Wells’ generally favorable review of *Portrait*, which incidentally accused Joyce of harboring a “cloacal obsession” (“James Joyce” 710). Anticipating MacHugh, Joyce responded: “Why, it’s Wells’s countrymen who build water-closets wherever they go” (Ellmann 414). Part of what the incident suggests, of course, is that *Portrait* piqued its readers in much the same way that *Ulysses* would five years later. And it is worth mentioning at this point—by way of prefiguration—that another *Portrait* reviewer felt that Joyce “would be really at his best in a treatise on drains” (Pound, *Pound/Joyce* 118).

¹⁰For a complete account of the writing process, see Arnold.

¹¹I thank Matthew Rampley from the Edinburgh College of Arts for the presentation that first drew this to my attention.

¹²For one thing, it articulates the difference between Joyce and the other famed scatological authors: Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift, et al. Joyce’s scatology belongs not only to some broad discourse on the irreducible or trans-historical truths of the body but also to a particular dynamic of early twentieth-century capitalism, the one Bloch calls *lavatoriality*. For an example of that trans-historical discourse, see Bakhtin.

¹³The one exception to this is Pound, who thought the vulgarity was an affront to art. “The excrement,” he wrote, “will prevent people from noticing the quality of things contrasted” (*Pound/Joyce* 131).

¹⁴To be fair, none of this rules out the possibility that *Ulysses* could be set elsewhere. After all, the fact that Dublin revels in its decline hardly precludes Brooklyn from doing the same—especially if what matters is not actual reveling but some susceptibility to reveling in fiction. Still, there are some discriminations to be made. Yes, it could be set elsewhere, but the book would diverge from its present form to the degree that the new setting lacked the generic character of Dublin—i.e., the entanglement of backwardness with sensuousness. This, I take it, explains why people who nominate alternate sites seem to gravitate towards underdeveloped cities near burgeoning metropolises—the Bronx, Bradford, Jersey City—namely because those kinds of cities already share something of Dublin’s economic condition. By contrast, nobody seems to have suggested that *Ulysses* could be set in London. Bloom would never be able to shit there.

¹⁵I haven’t discussed it, but Morris translated *The Odyssey*, and not *The Iliad*.

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