

# THE ETHICS OF MODERNISM

*Moral Ideas in Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett*

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## *Introduction: literature and human nature*

Human nature restores a perspective on modernism that has been lost. Without this perspective, we can see little of the modernist moral project, which is to transform human nature through the use of art. Why should we remember the block of marble, dragged through the squalid province, before the breath of genius gave it life? Or more accurately, why remember the dray and the windgalled animal that pulled it, when we bask in the favor of Toyota and Boeing, NASA and Maersk? And yet the *old question* has unmistakably returned: what good is there in human nature?

Our answer will depend on our school of thought. I understand the issue as a choice between two alternatives, both ambitious and both imperfect. One is the New Darwinism.<sup>1</sup> Its exponents are mostly scientists and social scientists who want to reinvent the liberal arts in the image of Darwin. Their growing success is connected to the larger role of science in uncovering intellectual fraud in the humanities.<sup>2</sup>

Steven Pinker embodies the strengths and weaknesses of the New Darwinist school. A polymath reaching a wide audience with clear prose, Pinker brings Darwinian naturalism to bear both on modernist literature and on modernity itself. In *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, he shows that Darwinian science contradicts modernism on such immensely important topics as sex, psychology, and the meaning of art. Woolf, in particular, attracts Pinker's scorn with her famous statement, "in or about December, 1910, human character changed."<sup>3</sup> Pinker responds: "She was referring to the new philosophy of modernism that would dominate the elite arts and criticism for much of the twentieth century, and whose denial of human nature was carried over with a vengeance to postmodernism . . . The elite arts, criticism, and scholarship are in trouble because the statement is wrong. Human nature did not change in 1910, or in any year thereafter."<sup>4</sup> As Pinker indicates, the modernist turn from human nature reaches well beyond Woolf. Wilde detested "the great Darwinian principle of the survival of the vulgarest."<sup>5</sup>

Yeats spoke for a European tradition: "Art is art because it is not nature."<sup>6</sup> "Its impulses are not of a generically human kind," wrote Ortega in 1925, referring to the modernist movement and its "dehumanization of art."<sup>7</sup> Ortega pinpointed the changes at hand: "For the modern artist, aesthetic pleasure derives from . . . a triumph over human matter."<sup>8</sup> The modernist denial of human nature might be more aptly described as a deliberate and studied refusal of human nature. Otherwise, it is Pinker's dislike – and not his perception – of modernism that sets him apart from the modernists.

Pinker is certainly right to see a Cartesian bias in much modern philosophy, and to find its culmination in modernism and postmodernism. And he is right despite the intense efforts of the modernists themselves to overcome the Cartesian divide between subject and object.<sup>9</sup> The Cartesian dominancy has its beginnings in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Francis Bacon, Galileo, Hobbes, and Robert Boyle laid siege to the medieval fortress of Aristotle.<sup>10</sup> It is only fair to say that, at their intellectual best, the schoolmen sowed the fields of science and learning. But at their worst they succumbed to a logic-chopping and obscure scholasticism. They buried the living spirit of Aristotle before they were themselves laid to rest, and modern science lurched violently into being. On this subject, Eliot quotes Cowley's eloquent ode *To Mr. Hobbes*:

Long did the mighty Stagirite retain  
The universal intellectual reign . . .  
But as in time each great imperial race  
Degenerates, and gives some new one place:  
So did this noble empire waste,  
Sunk by degrees from glories past,  
And in the schoolmen's hands it perisht quite at last . . .<sup>11</sup>

Modern science was begotten by Descartes upon the void. Dividing the universe into mind and matter, he thought of animals as nothing more than complicated machines, constructed of passive particles. He lumped them with cabbages, sealing wax, and all the stuff of matter, which he called the *res extensa*, as opposed to the *res cogitans* or mind. Locke, finding that Cartesianism led to psychology, advanced an influential idea of disembodied personhood. Kantian ethics is denatured reasoning, and the categorical imperative is what William James calls a "cold-blooded and dispassionate judicial sentence, confined entirely to the mental realm."<sup>12</sup> Hegel opened the floodgates of historicism, the relativizing of morality, which weakens the claims of universal human nature. To support his

metaphysic, he disconnects morality from our life as animals: “morality is Duty . . . a ‘second nature’ as it has been justly called; for the *first* nature of man is his primarily merely animal existence.”<sup>13</sup> Influenced by Hegel, Marx describes the proletariat as suffering not just “the contradiction between its human nature and its condition of life,” but “the outright, decisive, and comprehensive negation of that nature”: a state of “dehumanization conscious of its dehumanization.”<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche’s theory of the mask assumes an ironic distance from human nature, whose dictates the author of *Beyond Good and Evil* refers to as “a certain kind of *niaiserie* [folly] which may be necessary for the preservation of just such beings as we are.”<sup>15</sup> Heidegger speaks of the “scarcely fathomable, abyssal’ character of the ‘bodily kinship’ of humans to animals.”<sup>16</sup> In his Harvard dissertation, Eliot adopts the linguistic idea of man while relegating our animal nature to an extraneous background. He holds that subject-object relations for animals are “rather lived out than known” because there are “no objects without language.”<sup>17</sup> Nor in the same work will Eliot allow that the body triggers emotion.<sup>18</sup> The neglect by Brentano, Husserl, and other phenomenologists of our animal nature, of the body’s physiological (non-intentional) contributions to mental activity, extends through Heidegger into the influential work of Levinas and Derrida. Even the anti-rationalist, anti-Cartesian legacy in France, associated with Derrida and Foucault, repeats the Cartesian bias against human nature.

My criticism of Pinker is that he looks at human nature from the outside. For instance, when he analyzes a scene from Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall*, the native humor eludes him. The young Alvy Singer is paying a visit to the family doctor:

- MOTHER: He’s been depressed. All of a sudden, he can’t do anything.  
 DOCTOR: Why are you depressed, Alvy?  
 MOTHER: Tell Dr. Flicker. [Answers for him.] It’s something he read.  
 DOCTOR: Something he read, huh?  
 ALVY: [Head down.] The universe is expanding.  
 DOCTOR: The universe is expanding?  
 ALVY: Well, the universe is everything, and if it’s expanding, someday it will break apart and that would be the end of everything!  
 MOTHER: What is that your business? [To the doctor.] He stopped doing his homework.  
 ALVY: What’s the point?<sup>19</sup>

Pinker is asking us not to confuse “ultimate causation (why something evolved by natural selection) with proximate causation (how the entity works here and now.)” He comments: “The scene is funny because Alvy

has confused two levels of analysis: the scale of billions of years with which we measure the universe, and the scale of decades, years, and days with which we measure our lives.”<sup>20</sup> But the confusion of two levels of analysis is not terribly funny in itself. You might smile gently at the boy who reports “a big problem” when he sinks a toy boat. What makes Allen’s joke work is that Alvy sees more than his mother and the doctor see. Apparently, he sees more than Pinker, too, for Pinker is of the same mind as Dr. Flicker, who dutifully remarks that Brooklyn “won’t be expanding for billions of years yet Alvy . . .”

As Baudelaire would suggest, Allen’s comedy is “grotesque.” In his seminal essay “On the Essence of Laughter,” Baudelaire writes: “the laughter caused by the grotesque has about it something profound, primitive and axiomatic, which is much closer to . . . innocent life and to absolute joy than is the laughter caused by the comic in man’s behavior.”<sup>21</sup> Alvy’s grotesque innocence touches a range of profound possibilities: that no theodicy is true, that justice cannot be, that there is no final cause, no divine pattern, no God, nothing to accommodate the world to us. In his cosmic sweep, the grotesque comic is “absolute,” but “he can only be absolute in relation to fallen humanity.”<sup>22</sup> That is why Alvy’s mother argues, “What has the universe got to do with it? You’re here in Brooklyn! Brooklyn is not expanding!” Brooklyn is fallen humanity. But of course the grotesque comic leaves no room for analysis: “There is but one criterion of the grotesque, and that is laughter – immediate laughter.”<sup>23</sup> We grin immediately at Alvy’s axiomatic and naive explanation (“What’s the point?”) because at bottom it is profound and primitive. Pinker, it must be said, has lost track of his own subject. Feeling anxiety? *Don’t confuse two levels of analysis.*

Pinker finds human nature where he looks for it: on maps and charts, sets of data, lists of probabilities, and comic strips. Being a reductive kind of Darwinist, he cannot permit himself to speak of human teleology. He supplies moral precepts, and he supplies a statistical account of human nature, but he omits to consider that precepts will not work unless they motivate people to realize their best potential. Strictly speaking, he has no ethics. He makes do with a kind of analytic good sense: “For efforts at social change to be effective, they must identify the cognitive and moral resources that make some kinds of change possible.”<sup>24</sup> On the surface, this looks reasonable enough. But morality demands a great deal more than the resources of genetic science. The moral life as we live it eludes what John Stuart Mill called “the analysing spirit”<sup>25</sup> – which is why Mill suffered a crisis in his mental history. Morality is more particular than

“efforts at social change” that are guided by maps and charts, sets of data, lists of probabilities, and comic strips. So it is unsurprising that Pinker’s rules, injunctions, and pleadings for good behavior lack depth.

The last generation has seen the revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics, which offers the second of the alternatives before us.<sup>26</sup> The rivalry stems from the scale and gravity of the models. In Pinker and the New Darwinism, science would parlay its mixed blessings into “supreme cognitive authority”<sup>27</sup> over other disciplines. Pinker calls for giving “high priority to economics, evolutionary biology, and probability and statistics.”<sup>28</sup> By contrast, Aristotelian science is wrapped in a moth-eaten metaphysic.<sup>29</sup> But Aristotle stays closer to the concrete actuality of moral life. As opposed to Pinker’s scientific mono-vision, the legacy of Descartes, Aristotle’s diverse fields of knowledge reward the local workers, so that the discoveries of the scientist do not rule out the traditions of the poet. Most important, Aristotle considers the world from a central human vantage point, whether he is weighing rival perspectives in science and philosophy, or commenting on Homer. He is never alienated from himself, into a narrow specialization or an empire of facts. Because he defines true self-love in terms of noble acts, ideals can garner praise and public approval (*Nic. Eth.* 1169a7).<sup>30</sup> Aristotle therefore defies the atomization of moral life, and resists the mechanical worldview of Bentham or Pinker.

Since ethics begins with free will, let us approach Aristotle through *On the Soul*. Against the materialists of his era, and Democritus in particular, Aristotle held that the soul originates movement “through intention or process of thinking” (406b25). It was the first step toward a possible middle way between the idea of the soul as a subtle arrangement of material parts, such as we find in modern reductivist science, and the idea of the soul as a ghostly substance, such as we find in Plato and Descartes.<sup>31</sup> Writing in the *Monist*, Eliot sums up Aristotle’s position: “Soul is to body as cutting is to the axe: realizing itself in its actions, and not completely real when abstracted from what it does.” Eliot rightly comments that Aristotle’s “view is seen as an attempt to get away from the abstractions of materialism or of spiritualism with which we begin.”<sup>32</sup> But while his *Monist* account stands up, Eliot as poet joins the modernists in the broad Platonic tradition, where the soul precedes its bodily and social existence. Pinker is a materialist who grants “a wisp of mystery,” i.e., who grants a spirit named *wisp* power to cast out the devil *mystery*. Aristotle, as Eliot explains, approaches the soul through the body. “The affections of soul,” Aristotle says of the emotions, “are inseparable from the material substratum of animal life” (*On the Soul* 403b18). In consequence, he

affords the soul a degree of freedom, not “freedom to do anything it desires,” which is the extreme version of ensoulment that Pinker attacks.<sup>33</sup> The very words *soul* and *mind* are custodians of the human world and the human scale of things, the realm of beauty in the *Poetics* (1450b36). To quote the wisdom of R. S. Crane, the “humanities . . . are distinguishable from the natural and the social sciences by their special concern with those aspects of man’s achievements in sciences, in institutions, and in arts which are most distinctively human in the sense that their causes are not completely reducible either to natural processes common to men and animals or to superpersonal conditions and forces affecting all members of a given society.”<sup>34</sup>

*On the Soul* remains a highly controversial book, perpetually equipped to create factions. M. F. Burnyeat makes the point that Aristotle saw animal matter as being different in kind from other matter. Descartes took a new turn, and saw all matter as one substance. Analyzing Aristotle’s theory of perception, Burnyeat suggests that “the physical material of animal bodies in Aristotle’s world” has an ingrained awareness. Computers cannot “do to air” what animals “do to air,” which is to “make it smellable, hearable.”<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the current functionalist-materialist account of Aristotle, which frees “our mental life from dependence on any particular material set-up,”<sup>36</sup> cannot be true, because there is ultimately something mysterious and indispensable about animal life in Aristotle’s view. (Incidentally, computers show no signs of coming to consciousness, despite bold predictions.)<sup>37</sup> So I agree with Burnyeat in his critique of the current functionalist account of Aristotle. But I disagree with Burnyeat that we must line up behind the Cartesian mind-body dualism and “junk” the Aristotelian philosophy of mind. Dualism, “the ghost in the machine,” has too little to say about the interaction of mind and body.

To pursue the affinities between *On the Soul* and *The Principles of Psychology* would require an excursion well beyond the present work, but it is helpful here to underscore a fact that has been recently and memorably observed, namely, that Aristotle and James oppose the modern perspective on the mind-body problem established by Descartes.<sup>38</sup> James anchors the self, as a moral agent, in the physical conditions of our animal life. His understanding of emotion takes Aristotelian insights into modern physiology:

A disembodied human emotion is a sheer nonentity . . . The more closely I scrutinize my states, the more persuaded I become that whatever “coarse” affections and passions I have are in very truth constituted by, and made up of, those bodily changes which we ordinarily call their expression or consequence;



and the more it seems to me that, if I were to become corporeally anaesthetic, I should be excluded from the life of the affections, harsh and tender alike, and drag out an existence of merely cognitive or intellectual form.<sup>39</sup>

The passage stands in the profoundest contrast to post-Kantian aesthetic theory, which suspends the physical presence of the body in favor of the world-constructing faculties of mind. Modernist art is aesthetic art. Individual consciousness is the privileged medium of the modernist view of things. In Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett, ethics is itself a form of aesthetics. James's insight into the role of the body puts a radical question to Yeats's quest for "bodiless emotion,"<sup>40</sup> to the theory of "esthetic stasis" in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, to Eliot's moral idealization of "the mind of Europe," to Woolf's "moments of being," and to Beckett's abstract disgust at "the eudemonistic slop."<sup>41</sup> Woolf contrasts the Greeks and the moderns: "Accustomed to look directly and largely rather than minutely and aslant, it was safe for them to step into the thick of emotions which blind and bewilder an age like our own. In the vast catastrophe of the European war our emotions had to be broken up for us, and put at an angle from us, before we could allow ourselves to feel them in poetry or fiction."<sup>42</sup> These examples could be multiplied without end, and I have traced their Cartesian antecedents. Yet on the topic of emotional response, Antonio Damasio considers James to be "well ahead of both his time and ours," for the reason that James had "seized upon the mechanism essential to the understanding of emotion and feeling."<sup>43</sup>

"Let us assume," says Aristotle in the *Politics*, "that the best life, both for individuals and states, is the life of virtue, when virtue has external goods enough for the performance of good actions" (1324a). What is "the life of virtue"? To begin with, a virtue governs a passion: virtues and passions are "bound up" together in our "composite nature" (*Nic. Eth.* 1178a16). Aristotle defines virtue as "a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean" relative to each individual, since we are all different (*Nic. Eth.* 1106b36). The choice is determined by reason working with practical wisdom, which is an acquired talent for living well, for directing activity towards the most fruitful ends. Aristotle connects the virtues to their effect: the life of virtue is a state of flourishing called *eudaimonia* or "happiness." To be *eudaimon* is to experience the wholeness of a fortunate human life striving to achieve its full potential. Happiness is "a virtuous activity of soul" (*Nic. Eth.* 1099b27). Dealing with moral matters on their own level, Aristotle is blunt about the limits of his analysis: "We must be content . . . to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most

part true and with premisses of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better” (*Nic. Eth.* 1094b19). Aristotle’s moral judgment is never absolute, though neither is it relativist. I agree, in this instance, with Martha Nussbaum: “the Aristotelian virtues, and the deliberations they guide, unlike some systems of moral rules, remain always open to revision in the light of new circumstances and new evidence. In this way . . . they contain the flexibility to local conditions that the relativist would desire, but . . . without sacrificing objectivity.”<sup>44</sup> Aristotle observes a ground pattern of common feeling and behavior, on which a multitude of local patterns can be embroidered. For a global society built on the rapport of diverse nations and corporations and peoples, disregard for the ground pattern is potentially as dangerous as disregard for the local patterns.

In his commentary *Aristotle’s Ethics*, J. O. Urmson offers a lucid account of what Aristotle means by character. Urmson numbers four general states of character in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Each of these states is applicable to any particular emotion, with no emotion being, in itself, good or bad. He illustrates the four states with “a sort of table”:

	Want	Aim	Act
Excellence	Good	Good	Good
Strength	Bad	Good	Good
Weakness	Bad	Good	Bad
Badness	Bad	Bad	Bad

The table refers to merit in “emotional want, the aim or choice settled on after deliberation, and in action.” Urmson supplies an example that shows, I think, a nice comic touch: “The four states could get a modern illustration from the even-tempered man who has no difficulty in waiting coolly in a traffic jam, the hot-tempered man who successfully restrains himself, the hot-tempered man who tries to remain calm but cannot and the man who curses and hoots at all and sundry with complete self-approval.”<sup>45</sup> The even-tempered man possesses the virtue of self-control; he has driven the roads before, knows what to do, and willingly does it. The permanent authors, Homer, Plato, the Greek tragedians, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Dickens, abound in characters who fit the analysis. Other characters, tragic figures like Oedipus and Hamlet, and soul doctors like Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, test, expand, and defy our moral knowledge.<sup>46</sup> But in any case, moral legibility depends, at least in part, on readers who can readily understand Urmson’s example, *mutatis mutandis*.

What I shall call *the Aristotelian body* is central to western literature for four main reasons. First, it is integrated with a soul that has a purchase on reality, keeping art in close contact with actual life. Second, it is both individual and social, for man is a political animal and his good depends upon his life with others (*Pol.* 1253a2).<sup>47</sup> Third, it fosters ethical narrativity, the story of “a life that can be conceived and evaluated as a whole.”<sup>48</sup> And fourth, it has moral particularity written all over it. Emotions take place in the body, which physically acts out its moral life. Woolf censures Dickens’s “psychological geography” precisely because his eye seizes upon physical characteristics.<sup>49</sup> Pickwick, an “observer of human nature,”<sup>50</sup> shows how Dickens himself observes human nature: he watches the body acting. He is a mimetic writer who lays considerable stress on action.

In contrast to the Aristotelian body, what I shall call *the modernist body* is an aesthetic body. It is an image in the mind, an incorporeal voice, a ghost of style. It is epitomized by the persona or mask.<sup>51</sup> To trace its nineteenth-century sources would require a wide survey, ranging from the continent to England to the US, but the major sources certainly include the post-Kantian legacy of transcendental idealism (the body as *Vorstellung*); the flaneurs, dandies, and dancers of the symbolist movement; pierrots and marionettes; Blake’s giant “spiritual forms”; Pater’s “imaginary portraits”; the speakers of dramatic monologues; minstrel shows; vaudeville; as well as phonograph,<sup>52</sup> radio, and early cinema. In “The Truth of Masks,” Wilde remarks: “A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.”<sup>53</sup> It follows that the modernist repertoire of masks and personae strikes Aristotle dumb. Character acts well or badly, but the mask reveals the ambiguities of art.

Influenced by Wilde and Nietzsche, Yeats developed his theory of the mask in opposition to the dull morality of the herd. “Active virtue,” he writes, “as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a code, is . . . theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask.”<sup>54</sup> In his 1918 review of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, Eliot singled out Yeats’s next sentence for approval: “Wordsworth . . . is so often flat and heavy because his moral sense, being a discipline he had not created, a mere obedience, has no theatrical element.”<sup>55</sup> It is the decadence of modern usage that allows “virtue” to suggest that an artist should always act artistically, as if practical wisdom had no bearing on the passions.<sup>56</sup> This confusion about “virtue” as well as “moral sense” breeds further confusion in the modernist lexicon. Yeats’s *personality* is roughly equivalent to Eliot’s *impersonality*: both men denigrate the practical self engaged in the business of life.<sup>57</sup>

Personality, writes Yeats, "is greater and finer than character . . . When a man cultivates a style in literature he is shaping his personality."<sup>58</sup> Eliot's transfusion into style is much the same: "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."<sup>59</sup> Or to revise: "great literature is . . . the transformation of a personality into a personal work of art . . ."<sup>60</sup>

Though Eliot and Yeats are poets of masks and disembodied voices, it is a peculiar fact about Eliot that as he aged he came to uphold standards that point in the direction of Aristotle: mimesis, the moral import of action, the agency of character. In his 1953 lecture "The Three Voices of Poetry," Eliot returned to the topic of the mask. He might have been ruminating on J. Alfred Prufrock, Tiresias, or the "brown baked features" of the "familiar compound ghost": "What we normally hear, in fact, in the dramatic monologue, is the voice of the poet, who has put on the costume and make-up either of some historical character, or of one out of fiction . . . [D]ramatic monologue cannot create a character. For character is created and made real only in action."<sup>61</sup> Unmasking the monologist, Eliot was in revolt against his own movement. He was trying to return character to its central place in the literary tradition. *The Waste Land*, a good counter-example, is the reverie of a mask, a bodiless voice incapable of action: "Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character,' is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest."<sup>62</sup> Here, Eliot's use of quotation marks ('character') calls the very concept of character into question, just as *The Waste Land* abandons the mimetic conventions behind the concept.

Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett espouse the doctrine of the mask as well. The Dublin of *Ulysses* is populated by masks, as Joyce forges his characters into the semblance of their Greek archetypes. In *Nighttown*, that man of many ways, Leopold Bloom, is the man of a thousand faces. Supported by cinematic effects, he races through his psyche's theatrical wardrobe, facing each new situation with a different mask. When Woolf describes "the bright mask-like look of faces seen by candlelight,"<sup>63</sup> she is salvaging art from the depredations of time. Beckett adopts the doctrine only to rail at it. After Molloy, Malone, and his other personae have departed, the Unnamable says, "Bah, any old pronoun will do, provided one sees through it."<sup>64</sup> The mask in Beckett comes full circle from Yeats. It no longer offers any improvement over nature or time or society. It is commonplace ("Bah" as in "baa"), the identity through which one "sees" the world and expresses oneself: in a world bereft of meaningful choices, there is only the meaningless play of masks.<sup>65</sup>

Matthew Arnold makes the last major defense of human nature in literature. He makes this defense in his critical writings; his poetry is a different subject. In his uses of Aristotle, Arnold raises permanent questions. Aristotelians and their critics will always debate the role of the state, the possibilities of human happiness, the existence of the virtues, and the limits of realism. What I need to establish, however, is that Arnold's thinking on human nature is broadly Aristotelian. Such a reasonable premise, which I hope to put beyond dispute, requires proof because of Arnold's damaging reception at the hands of the interested parties whom I discuss in Chapter 3.

The 1853 Preface, the central document of that reception history, is an expressly Aristotelian judgment against romantic excess. Arnold launches his critique of romanticism by way of Aristotle: "We all naturally take pleasure, says Aristotle, in any imitation or representation whatever; this is the basis of our love of poetry; and we take pleasure in them, he adds, because all knowledge is naturally agreeable to us; not to the philosopher only, but to mankind at large."<sup>66</sup> There is a certain looseness in Arnold's method. The persnickety have objected to it, but the Preface to a book of poems is not an essay in a philosophy journal.<sup>67</sup> Arnold takes the liberty of combining Book Four of the *Poetics* with the opening of the *Metaphysics*. In both instances, Aristotle begins with human nature, and Arnold echoes him with the adverb "naturally."

For Arnold as for Aristotle, imitation or mimesis relates primarily to action. It is not a correspondence theory of truth or simply a mirror held up to nature. It is an imitation of our passionate experience. Imitation is therefore largely a matter of feeling, which, as Aristotle remarks, is "not far removed from some feeling about reality" (*Pol.* 1340a24). Working from Aristotelian premises, Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that our feelings originate in our physical life as social animals: "The norms that govern feeling and determine its appropriateness or inappropriateness are inseparable from other norms of giving and receiving. For it is in giving and receiving in general that we exhibit affection and sympathy."<sup>68</sup> Inasmuch as the arts give form to feeling, it is highly germane to literature that our "great primary affections,"<sup>69</sup> to quote Arnold's Preface, should stem from our basic condition as social creatures.

Arnold's ethics is naturalistic and teleological. It is based on a contrast between potentiality and act. In *Culture and Anarchy*, for example, "culture," the actualizing of potential, refers to the grounds of human flourishing. Culture enables mankind to labor towards its end or *telos*, human nature complete on all sides. Arnold's analysis of "representative

men” follows an Aristotelian pattern. He says in his genial way, “my head is still full of a lumber of phrases we learnt at Oxford from Aristotle, about virtue being in a mean, and about excess and defect, and so on.”<sup>70</sup> He associates Hellenism, sweetness and light, with Aristotle, though he wants to revise the philosopher in a way favorable to “the mass of mankind.”<sup>71</sup> Arnold’s program for English education derives from the *Politics*, in particular Book Five, Chapter Nine, where Aristotle argues that education must suit the form of government if anarchy is to be avoided. In the same paragraph (1310a12–36), Aristotle corrects the “false idea of freedom . . . that freedom means doing what a man likes” (. . . ἐλεύθερον δὲ [καὶ ἴσον] τὸ ὅτι ἄν βούληται τις ποιεῖν). Hence, Arnold’s wariness of “doing as one likes.” Arnold’s “best self” has many sources, not least of which is Book Ten, Chapter Seven of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The use of “right reason,” which characterizes the best self, derives from Book Six, Chapter One (1138b25).

Arnold asks critics “to see the object as in itself it really is.”<sup>72</sup> Critics, in turn, have bridled at his request. Some see Arnold’s realism as a pedantic lie serving the peculiar obsessions of Arnold himself. Certainly, by ranking the artists above the critics, Arnold has gained few friends and many foes. But Arnold’s realism is consistent with his appreciation of literature. His compass points are adequate knowledge and human flourishing. When discussing the signifying power of language, he wisely refrains from aggressive metaphysical claims:

The grand power of poetry is its interpretive power; by which I mean, not a power of drawing out in black and white an explanation of the mystery of the universe, but the power of so dealing with things as to awaken in us a wonderfully full, new, and intimate sense of them, and of our relations with them. When this sense is awakened in us, as to objects without us, we feel ourselves to be in contact with the essential nature of those objects, to be no longer bewildered and oppressed by them, but to have their secret, and to be in harmony with them; and this feeling calms and satisfies as no other can . . . I will not now inquire whether this sense is illusive, whether it can be proved not to be illusive, whether it does absolutely make us possess the real nature of things . . . The interpretations of science do not give us this intimate sense of objects as the interpretations of poetry give it; they appeal to a limited faculty, and not to the whole man.<sup>73</sup>

Just to underscore the connection to Aristotle, one might describe Arnold as adopting the peripatetic idiom of *nous* or intuitive knowledge. But for the most part we can leave technical philosophy out of seeing the object as in itself it really is. Arnold most resembles Aristotle in his concern for the healthy effects of art: he starts with those effects, not with any rule or

metaphysic designed to achieve them. Similarly, he values criticism that “tends to establish an order of ideas, if not absolutely true, yet true by comparison with that which it displaces.”<sup>74</sup> And it is not just the pragmatic basis of Arnold’s realism that should be acknowledged. Arnold was acutely aware of the competition between science and humanism, and quick to put his finger on what is, comparatively speaking, science’s moral-emotional aphasia.

The ambition of T. H. Huxley, “Darwin’s bulldog,” inspired some of Arnold’s best remarks on humanism. In “Literature and Science,” Arnold holds “a genuine humanism is scientific.”<sup>75</sup> His argument is the “need of relating what we have learnt and known to the sense which we have in us for conduct, to the sense which we have in us for beauty.”<sup>76</sup> Deriving from Plato a defense of general culture and an innate desire for good, he builds a naturalistic foundation: “it is not on any weak pleadings of my own that I rely for convincing the gainsayers; it is on the constitution of human nature itself, and on the instinct of self-preservation in humanity.”<sup>77</sup>

In “Science and Culture,” Huxley makes his contending case for a “scientific ‘criticism of life.’”<sup>78</sup> He asks his audience to seek the truth “not among words but among things.”<sup>79</sup> This is the age-old rallying cry of scientists, of all who want to overthrow a musty, word-sick order, such as postmodernism is today. Science is knowledge, and humanism must pay heed. But Huxley does not establish an ethical position, *per se*, and in his late essay “Evolution and Ethics” he answers this defect with a prophetic error. For Huxley, “the cosmic process has no sort of relation to moral ends.” It follows from this ultimately Cartesian view that “the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, . . . but in combatting it.”<sup>80</sup> We should not gloss over “Ethics and Evolution” too lightly, for the work represents a considered judgment, by a qualified thinker, that verges on the ethics of modernism. It is richly ironic, in light of the New Darwinism, that Clarissa Dalloway’s “favourite reading as a girl” included Huxley.<sup>81</sup> Clarissa’s friend Peter Walsh summarizes her take on things: “. . . As we are a doomed race, chained to a sinking ship . . . , as the whole thing is a bad joke, let us, at any rate, do our part; mitigate the sufferings of our fellow-prisoners (Huxley again). . . .”<sup>82</sup> More, we should take careful note of a scientific capacity for irrationalism, inasmuch as the Cartesianism of Huxley sounds uncannily like the anti-Cartesianism of Pinker, whose separation of “ultimate causation” from “proximate causation” is another call for separating nature from ethics. Either ethical naturalism is possible or it isn’t. Either human nature emerged from our

evolutionary past or ethical naturalism is a social construct. If you are proposing a naturalistic ethics, don't be surprised that nature takes time. And if you are absolutely put off by the specter of religion raising its ghastly head, the words of Thomas Nagel may offer comfort: "there is really no reason to assume that the only alternative to an evolutionary explanation of everything is a religious one." But, of course, as Nagel dryly observes, "this thought may not be comforting enough."<sup>83</sup>

Arnold believed that naturalistic ethics gave weight to his judgments on poetry. He could not explain how we come to feel the emotional effect of a line from Homer, "for an enduring heart have the destinies appointed to the children of men."<sup>84</sup> But he grasped the fact that some authors *naturally* speak with more depth and authority than others. His position is typical of his Aristotelianism, and it finds support in the work of contemporary virtue ethicists: our emotions and our ethics have the psychological force of gravity, joining us to the natural order – such as it is.<sup>85</sup> Arnold's response to the Victorian crisis in values is every bit as relevant today as it was during his lifetime, for the armada of science is still breasting the void, only its weapons are louder.

Walter Pater, Arnold's rival and the major Victorian forerunner of the ethics of modernism, discovered his aesthetic outlook in the fissures of Lockean empiricism. Book II of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* shows Locke developing his epistemology: "Our observation employed either, about sensible objects, or about the internal operation of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the *materials* of thinking."<sup>86</sup> Aestheticism begins in the rift between the observation of the sensible object and its impression on the mind.<sup>87</sup> Distinguishing himself from Arnold, Pater writes, "'To see the object as in itself it really is,' has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly."<sup>88</sup> Impressionism, for Pater, is a "step" into the mind's internal operation, away from the general criteria that guide the mass of men. The change registers in his vocabulary as a preference for *seeming* over *seeing*.

Pater supplies, as moral substitute for what is lost, an exhortation to realize the impression "distinctly." In support of this standard, he deploys the word *virtue*:

the function of the aesthetic critic is to distinguish, to analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or



in a book, produces [its] special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced. His end is reached when he has disengaged that virtue, and noted it, as a chemist notes some natural element, for himself and others . . .<sup>89</sup>

Virtue here means “power” or “occult efficacy,” as in “speaking of an herb, a wine, a gem.”<sup>90</sup> Pater adapts this pleasing archaism to the idiom of modern science, of objectivity and method. The difference between the appreciation of the fine arts from Aristotle to Wordsworth, on the one hand, and the aestheticism of Pater, on the other, is a refinement that prescind the virtue of art from the other virtues.

Pater disapproved of “critical efforts to limit art *a priori*.”<sup>91</sup> The term *a priori* has stuck to Arnold, converting his authority into authoritarianism. If the charge is not entirely misplaced, let us try to deduce its meaning. Arnold learned a dialectic from Goethe, by which classicism guards against the dangers of romantic art: its sickness, self-indulgence, and formlessness. It is fair to turn the tables and say that romanticism guards against the dangers of classicism. Pater sums these up very well in a chapter from *Marius the Epicurean* called “Euphuism,” which is a recasting by Pater of his argument with Arnold: “Certain elderly counsellors, filling what may be thought a constant part in the little tragi-comedy which literature and its votaries are playing in all ages, would ask, suspecting some affectation or unreality in that minute culture of *form*: – Cannot those who have a thing to say, say it directly? Why not be simple and broad, like the old writers of Greece?”<sup>92</sup> The character Flavian, granted authorship of the (anonymous) *Pervigilium Veneris*, serves as a mirror for reflection on the burdens of the past: “It was all around one: – that smoothly built world of old classical taste, an accomplished fact, with overwhelming authority on every detail of the conduct of one’s work.”<sup>93</sup> There is violence lurking in Flavian’s complaint against the *a priori*, for Pater’s “minute culture of form” cannot be separated from his desire to overthrow established canons. It is a kind of sophisticated primitivism, a neo-Platonic longing for purity of form, but lacking the true lifeblood of myth. It is found in Wilde, as well. The aesthetic movement bequeaths to modernism a cult of intimate pure beauty, which is hostile to the Aristotelian world of common standards. Yeats, living the fate of the last romantics, came to recognize Arnold’s foresight and the end of the modern era’s “morbid effort,” its isolating search for aesthetic perfection.<sup>94</sup> Eliot found it more convenient to address the situation in France: his 1948 lecture “From Poe to Valéry” is a farewell to an *art poétique* where “the subject is little, the treatment everything.”<sup>95</sup>

Arnold was not a reactionary, if by that term we mean a man who defines himself with a knee-jerk reaction against change. He decried the “want of correspondence between the forms of modern Europe and its spirit, between the new wine of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the old bottles of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, or even of the sixteenth and seventeenth . . .”<sup>96</sup> He was modern and cosmopolitan in the best sense: “The critic of poetry should have . . . the most free, flexible, and elastic spirit imaginable; he should be indeed the ‘ondoyant et divers,’ the *undulating and diverse* being of Montaigne.”<sup>97</sup> Arnold’s upholding the Greek classification of kinds of poetry, “epic, dramatic, lyric, and so forth,”<sup>98</sup> against Wordsworth’s attempt at a new order of classification, represents a classical judgment and a pragmatic defense. What counts is what works best over time: the grounds of human flourishing. Modernism renders experience too personal, too diverse, too self-conscious, for classification according to genre. But the modernists could not replace the old genres, which haunt their creative writings and fortify their criticism – even as points of departure, as in Woolf’s “Modern Fiction.”

Is modernism the victory of Pater over Arnold? Did Pater’s “art for art’s sake” win out over Arnold’s “moral ideas?” Frank Kermode helped establish the orthodox view, that while Pater and Arnold were equally preoccupied with the moral function of art, it was Pater who “found answers which were at once more congenial to artists who wanted to go on being artists, and more liable to debasement.”<sup>99</sup> One can respect Kermode’s framing those answers in terms of personal culture and “the moral function” of aesthetic pleasure. But Arnold is suddenly timely: he asks us to remember human nature. And it is not just a matter of Arnold’s relevance today, for the modernists did not forget human nature as their critics are wont to do. From the era of Graham Hough’s *Last Romantics*, through Kermode, Bloom, and David Bromwich, romanticist readings of modernism have settled the aesthetic issue in Pater’s favor.<sup>100</sup> But such readings are themselves aesthetic, unmindful of human nature, and they miss what Arnold meant by “relating” scientific knowledge to our sense of goodness, to our sense of beauty. A wind of forgetfulness blows through all such readings. To pigeonhole or to neglect the Aristotelian basis of Arnold’s position is, in effect, to forget the modernist effort to transform human nature through the use of art – the modernist moral project.

Some of Pater’s most important “answers” to the moral question come in response to Arnold’s distinctive phrasing. The method has the immediate effect of stylizing ethics, of bringing ethics into aesthetic territory. This happens when Pater picks up Arnold’s repetition of the word

“machinery” in *Culture and Anarchy*. Examples from the book include: “. . . we worshipped our machinery so devoutly”;<sup>101</sup> “. . . an inward working, and not machinery, is what we most want”;<sup>102</sup> and faith “in machinery . . . is our besetting danger.”<sup>103</sup> The word gets into Arnold’s Aristotelianism: “applying Aristotle’s machinery of the mean to my ideas about aristocracy . . .”<sup>104</sup> Pater takes rhetorical advantage to contrast his own “higher ethics” against Aristotelian “machinery.” In his essay on Wordsworth, he says that machinery “covers the meanness of men’s daily lives, and much of the dexterity and vigor with which they pursue what may seem to them the good of themselves and others; but not the intangible perfection of those whose ideal is rather in *being* than in *doing* . . .”<sup>105</sup> Pater’s distinction between “machinery” and “intangible perfection” restates the Cartesian bias against human nature. His moral-minded aestheticism looks forward to the modernist goal of transforming life in the image of art: “To treat life in the spirit of art, is to make life a thing in which means and ends are identified: to encourage such treatment the true moral significance of art and poetry.”<sup>106</sup> But while his identification of means and ends anticipates the modernist obsession with style and the revolt against plot, his practice is not in keeping with the modernist push toward revolutionary change. Pater’s chronic flaw, the failure of the higher ethics that the modernists would have to rectify, is the gap between the contemplative world of the aesthete and the active world of society. In *Marius the Epicurean*, the proposed solution is a bridge between one’s impressions and one’s conscience. It is a bridge buttressed not by reason, but by “instinctive election.”<sup>107</sup> Pater restricts his role to a new kind of Wordsworthian solitary, the aesthetic saint. Where modernism evicts the landlord, Pater leaves his dreamy harvest at the gate, “for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.”<sup>108</sup>

Pater elaborates his moral outlook in a strange genre that he called “imaginary portraits.” The chief example is *Marius*, but “The Child in the House” supplies a good example on a smaller scale. It describes the “brain-building” of Florian Deleal, starting with the gradual inscription of his home on the Lockean “white paper” or *tabula rasa* of his young mind. Pater details the boy Florian’s life of perfumes and colors. His family flits through the house like bats. His father’s death in India is remembered for its effect on his aunt, “how it seemed to make the aged woman like a child again . . .”<sup>109</sup> His mother is remembered for the curious impressions she leaves. Like *Marius*, Florian seems to suffer from a mild case of autism. His primary affections are locked in “his house of thought,”<sup>110</sup> secured by

“that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us . . .”<sup>111</sup> Florian welcomes the physical world, the human body and its senses, but he welcomes them as means to the impressions he cultivates. His body is aesthetic, not Aristotelian. His narrative is a story of thoughts and impressions, not acts.

By rejecting the Aristotelian-Arnoldian “machinery” in favor of the higher ethics, Florian becomes a *higher self*. He converts his refined taste into moral superiority: “And thinking of the very poor, it was not the things which most men care most for that he yearned to give them; but fairer roses, perhaps, and power to taste quite as they will, at their ease and not task-burdened, a certain desirable, clear light in the new morning, through which sometimes he noticed them, quite unconscious of it, on their way to their early toil.”<sup>112</sup> The working poor are trapped, “unconscious,” lacking in taste. Florian watches them from his window like a visitor from fairyland, vainly wishing them entry into his ideal world. The gap between the observer and the observed is virtually ontological, like a difference between species.

The higher ethics is an ultra-refined form of consciousness, which typically expresses itself through feelings of pity. When Florian encounters the ruined Marie Antoinette in a drawing by the French painter David, “meant merely to make her look ridiculous,” Pater describes the compassionate effect on him: “The face that had been so high had learned to be mute and resistless; but out of its very resistlessness, seemed now to call on men to have pity, and forbear; and he took note of that, as he closed the book, as a thing to look at again, if he should at any time find himself tempted to be cruel.”<sup>113</sup> Pater might have been recalling Edmund Burke: “I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult.”<sup>114</sup> But where Burke would leap to his feet, Florian effects a subtle, sadomasochistic identification – a delicate impression of desire. He has pity, and he has his way with it. Saint Florian, his namesake, was horribly scourged and martyred during the Diocletian persecution, and the name serves to weave together the idea of aesthetic sainthood and the feeling of sadomasochistic identification.

As Florian comes to suffer the pangs of his highly morbid sensuality, what saves him from his own fears and compulsions is his memory and dreams. In his inner world, “the sense of security could hardly have been deeper, the quiet of the child’s soul being one with the quiet of its home, a place ‘inclosed’ and ‘sealed.’”<sup>115</sup> This hermetic space or form is closed to flesh and blood, like Yeats’s “condition of fire,” like Eliot’s “ideal order,”

like Lady Lasswade's library, where "the brown books in their long rows seemed to exist silently, with dignity, by themselves, for themselves."<sup>116</sup> For the rest of Florian's days, the uncanny object of his deep desires will be his own mind, housing the pleasure of its impressions, safe until death. This kind of aesthetic solipsism worries Mrs. Ramsay: "How then . . . did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were?"<sup>117</sup> It is a problem that infects moral judgments: "*Mr. M's Bungalow. A view spoilt for ever. That's murder . . .*"<sup>118</sup> Why should a thing be good or bad, except insofar as it answers to the needs of the aesthetic mind? The higher ethics legislates from a place of exile, affirming its perspective over that of the lower world. The bodiless voice that resents the injury to its impressions has a point, but its angry moral judgment is closed to other considerations.

In their criticism of habit, Pater has an advantage over Arnold. As both were doubtless aware, Aristotle, following Plato, derives the word for virtue (ἡθικὴ) from the word for habit (ἔθος). Aristotle makes this connection the cornerstone of his ethics: "Neither by nature . . . nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit . . . It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference" (*Nic. Eth.* 1103a14–1103b26). The ethical movement from potential to realization depends on the intervention of habits, which are indispensable to society. The law, for example, is said to have "no power to command obedience except that of habit" (*Pol.* 1269a20). But to a romantic, habit is immediately suspect.

The word *habit* shows up fairly often in *Culture and Anarchy*. Arnold succeeds well enough, on Aristotelian grounds, when he points out the effects of bad habits: "If our habits make it hard for us to come at the idea of a high best self, of a paramount authority, in literature or religion, how much more do they make this hard in the sphere of politics!"<sup>119</sup> But to get at the building up of good habits is not so easy:

In all our directions our habitual courses of action seem to be losing efficaciousness, credit, and control, both with others and even with ourselves. Everywhere we see the beginnings of confusion, and we want a clue to some sound order and authority. This we can only get by going back upon the actual instincts and forces which rule our life, seeing them as they really are, connecting them with other instincts and forces, and enlarging our whole view and rule of life.<sup>120</sup>

Since their romantic habits forbade the Victorian critics from giving habit a warm welcome, Arnold needed all the flexibility at his command to get

his point across. His appeal to “order and authority” is, however, precisely the type of language that led Pater to protest in his Conclusion to *The Renaissance*: “The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of [our] experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us.”<sup>121</sup> Pater effectively closes the door on Arnold, and therefore on Aristotle as well. Roughly speaking, Arnold’s “whole view” is the *telos*, his “rule of life” is practical wisdom or *phronesis* (*Nic. Eth.* 1140b4), and the task of connecting “actual instincts and forces” with “other instincts and forces” is the ethical task of creating new “habitual courses of action” in order to realize the culture’s potential. For Arnold, the appeal to “sound order and authority” expresses a healthy, Aristotelian dislike of anarchists, sophists, and demagogues. For Pater, the same appeal threatens to intrude on the individual’s freedom, and to sever life from art.

Pater’s criticism of habit looks back in particular to Carlyle’s criticism of custom. In *Sartor Resartus*, Professor Teufelsdröckh observes: “Custom is the greatest of Weavers . . . What is philosophy throughout but a continual battle against Custom; an ever-renewed effort to transcend the sphere of blind Custom, and so become Transcendental?”<sup>122</sup> In his Conclusion to *The Renaissance*, where Pater professes his “love of art for its own sake,” he describes our best hope in life as an artistic consciousness, alert to “that continual vanishing away, that strange perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves.” The weaving echoes Carlyle, but for Pater it is the individual self – more crucially than passing institutions of church or state – that is apparitional. Pater pursues not transcendence but “ecstasy”: “How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?” The question hovers rhetorically, and then Pater begins his next paragraph with an ontological leap of self-consciousness, marked at the start by an infinitive and then by an adverb of infinity: “To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame is success in life.” Habit, like cliché, is a fall, a loss in style, energy, and vision: “In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike.”<sup>123</sup> Habit is the enemy of what Pater calls “virtue” and “*ascêsis*,” which manifest the particular alone.

The intervention of Wilde, “the Apostle of Aestheticism,” becomes highly relevant at this juncture. In “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde envisages

the downfall of a gifted young man who “either falls into careless habits of accuracy, or takes to frequenting the society of the aged and well-informed.”<sup>124</sup> In “The Artist as Critic,” he secures art and the higher self from matter and determinism: “By revealing to us the absolute mechanism of all action, and so freeing us from the self-imposed and trammelling burden of moral responsibility, the scientific principle of Heredity has become, as it were, the warrant for the contemplative life.”<sup>125</sup> He affords himself a wide margin of aesthetic distance, from which as a playwright he can mock the charming absurdity of plot, character, and feeling. As Woolf would say, “The plot was only there to beget emotion.”<sup>126</sup> Taking up Pater’s quarrel with Arnold, Wilde enlivens it with paradox: “the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not.”<sup>127</sup> With Pater’s “golden book” in hand, he fleers at “ignoble considerations of probability, that cowardly concession to the tedious repetitions of domestic or public life.”<sup>128</sup> The golden book is *Marius the Epicurean*, with its fantastically improbable romance of Cupid and Psyche, which Pater translates beautifully from Apuleius. Wilde condemns habit, nature, and probability in order to set “the record of one’s own soul”<sup>129</sup> over the mimetic order. In short, he sets the soul against the machinery of Aristotle.<sup>130</sup>

Wilde’s soulfulness is gnostic: “one only realises one’s soul by getting rid of all alien passions, all acquired culture, and all external possessions be they good or evil.”<sup>131</sup> And though it is not fashionable to read *A Picture of Dorian Gray* as a spiritual allegory, I do not think we can understand Wilde’s mediation of Pater unless we restore Wilde to his soul. When Lord Henry Wotton finds “there was no motive power in experience,”<sup>132</sup> he is rejecting practical wisdom and naturalist ethics. When he quotes the Gospel of Matthew to Dorian (“‘what does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose . . . his own soul?’”), he is deploying Wilde’s gnostic theory of denaturalized art as the soul’s realm. Dorian, whose picture is denaturalized art, replies to Lord Henry that the “soul is a terrible reality,” one he is “[q]uite sure” of.<sup>133</sup> Yeats, Eliot, Woolf, Joyce, and Beckett have this Wildean strain inbred in their aestheticism.

Through the agency of Wilde, Pater’s unweaving of habit becomes a means of revealing the soul. For Yeats, the visionary horizons of mind-reading experiences overcome “mere habit.”<sup>134</sup> He frees himself from the shackles of matter: “The soul cannot have much knowledge till it has shaken off the habit of time and place . . .”<sup>135</sup> He frowns on character because it “is made up of habits retained, all kinds of things.”<sup>136</sup> Holding forth at the National Library, another mystical aesthete strikes a familiar pose: “As we, or mother Dana, weave and unweave our bodies . . . from

day to day, their molecules shuttled to and fro, so does the artist weave and unweave his image" (*Ulysses* 9. 376).<sup>137</sup> By contrast, Pater's rival makes a mechanical and graceless appearance: "A deaf gardener, aproned, masked with Matthew Arnold's face, pushes his mower on the sombre lawn watching narrowly the dancing motes of grasshalms" (1. 172). Woolf rebels against habit in order to illuminate "the dark places of psychology." The "great Russian writers . . . have lost their clothes,"<sup>138</sup> she writes in "The Russian Point of View," using clothes as a metaphor to denote habit, since the word in its original sense simply means clothing. In return, the Russians gain the soul: "It is the soul that matters, its passion, its tumult, its astonishing medley of beauty and vileness."<sup>139</sup> The mystic Bernard of *The Waves* sheds the habits of character and narrative, rewriting Pater as "I am made and remade continually."<sup>140</sup>

One solution to the problem of habits is to see them *sub specie aeternitatis*. "Eliot," writes Yeats, "has produced his great effect upon his generation because he has described men and women that get out of bed or into it from mere habit . . ."<sup>141</sup> The reference, I think, is to "Preludes," but Yeats ignores the dramatic contest of spirit and matter that shapes the poem: "His soul stretched tight across the skies / That fade behind a city block, / Or trampled by insistent feet . . ."<sup>142</sup> He ignores, in other words, Eliot's place in the choir of gnostic aestheticism. Joyce sketches the Sunday habits of the Dublin crowd: "Like illumined pearls the lamps shone from the summits of their tall poles upon the living texture below which, changing shape and hue unceasingly, sent up into the warm grey evening air an unchanging unceasing murmur."<sup>143</sup> Joyce's passage is close to Eliot's, only richer (belletristic word): it exemplifies what Harry Levin, following the insights of John Synge, calls "a dialectical synthesis of the naturalistic tradition and the symbolistic reaction."<sup>144</sup>

In his book *Proust*, Beckett describes habit as an "automatic adjustment of the human organism to the conditions of its existence." Like Wilde, he thinks of habit as centered in the body's motor activities, which are thoughtless.<sup>145</sup> Habit, therefore, has no "moral significance."<sup>146</sup> It is "the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit."<sup>147</sup> At the end of the aesthetic movement, Beckett sees life and art itself as disgusting habits.<sup>148</sup> Vladimir comments to himself as Estragon dozes, "habit is a great deadener."<sup>149</sup> The language echoes William Paley's 1802 treatise, *Natural Theology*: "Habit, the instrument of nature, is a great leveller; the familiarity which it induces, taking off the edge both of our pleasures and of our sufferings." Beckett found Paley's sentence in the *OED*, under *habit sense 9b*: "Custom, usage, use, wont." It is a *usage* that speaks across aesthetic and



ethical boundaries. As Pater saw, questions of habit can give art a real moral liveliness. But the movement that Pater started concludes in Beckett's reaction against aesthetics, which he condemns for its usages and habits.<sup>150</sup>

Pater's quarrel with Arnold begins with Arnold's dissent from an aestheticizing judgment: "A true allegory of the state of one's own mind in a representative history is perhaps the highest thing that one can attempt in the way of poetry."<sup>151</sup> If we reject habit, and if we reject the "theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of [our] experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or what is only conventional," we may find that all we have is our minds or souls, because they are all we believe in. If we take Pater's aesthetic as an ideal of authenticity,<sup>152</sup> we generate a vicious circle: we reject habit and other interests to arrive at an authentic self; our union of life and art becomes conventional; the self demands the rejection of habits in order to regain its authenticity. In time the authentic self has exchanged creation for liberation, leaving in its trail, like broken husks, the habits, primary affections, and friendships that happiness desires. And to remain free, one must remain skeptical of whatever would limit present freedom. One is compelled to make an ethic of personal liberation serve the "highest thing," a union of art and life designed for spiritual or psychological ecstasy, even as it expunges the Aristotelian body.

The principle of "fair balance," which stems from the virtue of justice, prompts MacIntyre to criticize Aristotle's *megalopsychos* (*Nic. Eth.* 1123a33), the proto-Nietzschean, self-sufficient Alpha Plus who denies "the possibility of there being any genuine virtues of acknowledged dependence."<sup>153</sup> The *megalopsychos*, it turns out, is a hubristic fraud, who starves the virtue of truthfulness. And now I reach my last point about Pater's influence: since we are mutually dependent (in truth and in justice), it follows that our acknowledgment or denial of our mutual dependence affects our sensibility and taste.

No doubt it is Dickens who strikes us as sentimental. Wilde famously quipped: "One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing."<sup>154</sup> For orphans like Little Nell and David Copperfield, the ties of affection, being in constant crisis, can form the focus of lachrymose attention. Modernist sentimentality occurs in reaction against ordinary emotion: "Either we are cold, or we are sentimental," writes Woolf in *Jacob's Room*, on the Paterian premise that life is but "a procession of shadows," an affair of "sudden vision" and sudden vanishing.<sup>155</sup> It would be more accurate to say that modernism oscillates between

extremes of restraint and release, between dispassionate coldness and feverish intensity. Both extremes are “sentimental” because they set emotion apart from the moral life.

Death is the foremost occasion for the modernist sentiment of coldness. Cuchulain kills his son and dies in terrible isolation. Stephen Dedalus refuses his mother; he will not console her and is estranged at her deathbed. No one actually mourns Rose Pargiter. Because its subject is an insect (albeit a symbolic one) and not a person, “The Death of the Moth” lays bare the impersonality of feeling that prevails when Yeats declaims to horsemen or Krapp watches the blind go down. Here, to be sure, is a friendless and loveless and independent end: “The body relaxed, and instantly grew stiff. The struggle was over. The insignificant little creature now knew death . . . The moth having righted himself now lay most decently and uncomplainingly composed. O yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am.”<sup>156</sup> If emotional perspective returns, it is not in a susceptible shudder, but in a sense of incongruity – even of parody: “The struggle was over.” Too much style has been lavished on dispatching an “insignificant little creature.” The tragedy is ridiculous – absurd. One must have a heart of stone not to laugh at the death of the “little” moth. Near the other extreme, Beckett greets life’s ordinary emotions with a deliberately grotesque embrace, as when Estragon longs for an erection or when Nell waxes nostalgic. And there is his own sentimental “(Exit weeping),” in the second of the “Three Dialogues.”<sup>157</sup> Beckett comes late, doubtful of the modernist shtick, but even he defers to the first law of modernist pathos: the harder the prison – nature, body, habit, language, self – the greater, more daedal, more authentic the art.