

PROVERBIAL MODERNISM:  
DIFFICULT LITERATURE AND THE SELF-HELP HERMENEUTIC

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*For Aimée. May your advisors always be truthful and wise.*

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## ABSTRACT

### PROVERBIAL MODERNISM: DIFFICULT LITERATURE AND THE SELF-HELP HERMENEUTIC

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One point upon which modernism's early advocates and detractors could agree was that it had little useful wisdom to offer. James Joyce even trumpeted his "usylessly unreadable Blue Book of Eccles" in *Finnegans Wake*. As a result of this consensus, it seems unlikely to us today that modernist authors could have been implicated in self-help's peddling of popular advice. Few might suspect that Ezra Pound chanted the self-help motto "Wake up and Live!" every day for forty years, or that, before he wrote *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie yearned to be a modernist, moving to Paris in the 1920s to pen his magnum opus, *The Blizzard*. "Proverbial Modernism" argues that we cannot fully understand the stakes of modernist difficulty without considering the concomitant rise of self-help. Conversely, modernism's recalcitrance helps to make visible the neglected complexities of self-help's pragmatic reading method. This dissertation unearths a tradition of mutual critique between the novel and the success manual to illuminate modernism's overlooked embroilment in the practice of reading for advice.

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*“Could the most complex and sophisticated works of art legitimately be considered somewhat as proverbs writ large?”*

— Kenneth Burke, “Literature as Equipment for Living”

## INTRODUCTION

Described as difficult, elitist, and inaccessible, modernism is not generally known for its practical insights. Yet this dissertation uncovers modernism's historical involvement in the industry of practical advice. Self-help and modernism emerged contemporaneously during the late-nineteenth century, and vied for space on the same bestseller list until 1918.<sup>1</sup> Many of the formal qualities we now associate with modernism, such as fragmentation, parallax, and interiority, developed as correctives to self-help's formulaic advice. Whether in the case of Gustave Flaubert's deconstruction of cliché or Nathanael West's acerbic irony, the industry of self-help can clarify the nature and stakes of modernist difficulty, which emerged in response to the commodification of counsel in the popular sphere.

"Proverbial Modernism" investigates the inverse relation between the rise of popular advice and the apparent decline of literary advice in the modernist period. Initially, we might chalk this correspondence up to the old bugbear of modernist elitism: the literary maxim grew unfashionable just when it became associated with popular taste. However, the following chapters demonstrate that modernism's engagement with the popular advice industry is more complex than unilateral narratives of highbrow modernist elitism imply. Rather, the relation between modernism and self-help takes the form variously, and at the hands of different twentieth-century authors, of influence, resistance, kinship, rivalry, and revisionism. As it progresses, "Proverbial Modernism" adopts an increasingly dialectical trajectory in order to explicate the multifaceted interplay between

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: R.R. Bowker Company, 1946), 205.

the two discourses of modernism and self-help, which initially appear to maintain an oppositional relation but ultimately are animated by a reciprocity that culminates in online advice culture.

One of the most striking instances of how self-help shaped modernist history concerns a famous literary debate of the post-war years: the notorious dispute between Arnold Bennett and Virginia Woolf. Few are aware that, aside from his literary accomplishments, Bennett is one of the only canonized novelists in the history of English literature to have also enjoyed a prospering career as an author of self-help. In his lifetime, Bennett published several tremendously popular self-help guides, or “pocket philosophies” as he tastefully described them. These include: *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day*; *Literary Taste: How to Form It*; *Mental Efficiency*; *The Human Machine*; *Self and Self-Management*; and *How to Make the Best of Life*. The majority of Bennett’s pocket guides originated as short “Savoir Faire” columns in magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Woman*, and *T.P.’s Weekly*. He described his technique in a letter as “nothing but Marcus Aurelius and Christ assimilated and excreted by me in suitable form.”<sup>2</sup> However, Bennett’s account of his *Philosophy of Living Series* was not always so flippant:

When I proposed to republish them in book form I was most strongly urged not to do so, and terrible prophecies were made to me of the sinister consequences to my reputation if I did. I republished them. ‘How to Live on Twenty-Four Hours a Day’ sold very well from the start: it still has a steady sale, and it has brought me more letters of appreciation than all my other books put together. I

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<sup>2</sup> Arnold Bennett, quoted in James Hepburn, *Arnold Bennett: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1981), 43.

followed it up with a dozen or more books in a similar vein. And I do not suppose that my reputation would have been any less dreadful than it is if I had never published a line for plain people about the management of daily experience.<sup>3</sup>

Bennett's self-help guides achieved such monumental success that the American industrialist Henry Ford is reputed to have passed out 500 copies of *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day* to his employees.<sup>4</sup> In 1915, his book *Mental Efficiency* spawned an American self-help series of that same title.<sup>5</sup> Today, Bennett's guides are enjoying something of a renaissance thanks to forums such as Kindle, which has repackaged his organizational tips for overtaxed twenty-first century readers.

*How to Live on Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, was the first self-help book to achieve a place on the *Bookman's* bestseller list in 1912. In it, Bennett boasts that he can help readers save seven extra hours per week by convincing them that time is more of a commodity than money. As one of his first orders of business, he provides detailed instructions on how to set up one's tea and biscuits each night so that one can rise two hours before the servants. "These details may seem trivial to the foolish, but to the thoughtful they will not seem trivial." He continues, "The proper, wise balancing of one's whole life may depend upon the feasibility of a cup of tea at an unusual hour."<sup>6</sup>

Thumbing his nose at the avant-garde of the day, Bennett developed a formidable body of practical, journalistic writings that challenged modernism's most touted edict: its

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<sup>3</sup> Arnold Bennett, *The Author's Craft and Other Critical Writings of Arnold Bennett* (Lincoln Nebraska: The University of Nebraska Press, 1968), 264.

<sup>4</sup> Hepburn, 43.

<sup>5</sup> *Mental Efficiency* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1915).

<sup>6</sup> Arnold Bennett, *How to Live* (New York: The Bookman, 1910), 14.

anti-instrumentalism. His essays on the art of living were an affront to modernism's protest against the "crude" utilitarianism of public taste. In a piece called "Translating Literature into Life," Bennett implores,

take down any book at random from your shelves and conduct in your mind an honest inquiry as to what has been the effect of that particular book on your actual living. If you can put your hand on any subsequent period, or fractional moment, of your life, and say: "I acted more wisely then, I wasn't such a dupe then, I perceived more clearly then, I felt more deeply then, I saw more beauty then, I was kinder then, I was more joyous then, I was happier then—than I should have been if I had not read that book"—if you can honestly say this, then your reading of that book has not been utterly futile. But if you cannot say this, then the chances are that your reading of that book has been utterly futile.<sup>7</sup>

"The man who pores over a manual of carpentry and does naught else is a fool," he declaimed. "But every book is a manual of carpentry, and every man who pores over any book whatever and does naught else is deserving of an abusive epithet." Just imagine how Flaubert—the grandfather of high-modernist aestheticism—would have received such a pronouncement! Indeed, Bennett's insistence upon the life-import of the literary provides the subtext for Woolf's dismissal of "The middlebrow...who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money,

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<sup>7</sup> Arnold Bennett, "Translating Literature Into Life." *Things That Have Interested Me* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1926), 57.

fame, power, or prestige.”<sup>8</sup> Bennett’s ostracized status among the modernists was of course cemented by Woolf’s 1924 essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” which indicates the indebtedness of modernism’s self-definition to its disavowal of self-improvement regimes. Woolf’s denunciation of Bennett’s crass materialism coincides with her announcement of the rise of the modernist movement (she uses the term “Georgian” instead).<sup>9</sup>

The context of self-help enables us to see how Woolf’s writings for the public sphere—and indeed her broader essayistic style—represent an inspired rebuttal of Bennett’s practical philosophies. How can we read Woolf’s essays to the *Common Reader*, written during the same period as the Bennett disputes, apart from Bennett’s directives for the “Plain Man and His Wife”? Essays like her “How Should One Read A Book?” now appear as concerted rewritings of Bennett’s instructional handbooks such as *Literary Taste: How to Attain It*. Woolf opens *her* essay: “In this first place, I want to emphasize the note of interrogation at the end of my title. Even if I could answer the question for myself, the answer would apply only to me and not to you. The only advice, indeed, that one person can give another about reading is to take no advice, to follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions.”<sup>10</sup> We could say that the difference between Bennett and Woolf is the distinction between the declarative and the interrogative; it is the difference that question mark makes.

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<sup>8</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Middlebrow,” *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), 115.

<sup>9</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” *Collected Essays*. Edited by Leonard Woolf. Vol. 1. (London: Hogarth, 1966), 319-337.

<sup>10</sup> Virginia Woolf, “How Should One Read a Book?” *Collected Essays*, 258.

As such case studies make clear, modernism used commercial self-help to articulate its own pedagogic initiatives. The example of Woolf and Bennett helps us to see contemporary self-help readings of modernism not as present-day eccentricities but as the latest in a long history of engagement between the two fields. It is in part because of the alternative she represents to Bennettian didacticism that Woolf's wisdom has been embraced by contemporary authors like Ilana Simons, whose *A Guide to Better Living through the Work and Wisdom of Virginia Woolf* uses the Bloomsbury artist's oblique, diary-entry observations as occasions to ruminate on topics such as routine, solitude, and friendship.<sup>11</sup> In her rejection of her own contemporaries as potential sources of counsel, Simons enacts the "family romance" of feeling out of place in present circumstances; thus she turns back to modernism for idols instead. Fed up with commercial manipulation, propaganda and the false promises of economic success, our era is ripe for the modernists' brand of useful "anti-advice."

More than a trivial epiphenomenon, Simons's book is part of a developing genre of self-help appropriations of modernist texts also including *How Proust Can Change Your Life*,<sup>12</sup> *Why You Should Read Kafka Before You Waste Your Life*,<sup>13</sup> *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence*,<sup>14</sup> *What W.H. Auden Can Do For You*,<sup>15</sup> and

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<sup>11</sup> Ilana Simons, *A Guide to Better Living through the Work and Wisdom of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Alain de Botton, *How Proust Can Change Your Life* (London: Picador, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> James Hawes, *Why You Should Read Kafka Before You Waste Your Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Geoff Dyer, *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence* (New York: North Point Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Alexander McCall Smith, *What W.H. Auden Can Do For You* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013).

*Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Life in Joyce's Masterpiece*,<sup>16</sup> to name a sampling. Though it is crucial to attend to the textual ambiguity that such popular readings of modernism too often elide, they also disclose a historical logic of generic reciprocity that literary criticism has largely overlooked. Moreover, such applications of modernism signal a paradigm shift in what can be considered self-helpful, and so are revealing of our cultural needs and predilections today. Admittedly, modernism is neither the sole nor the most privileged object of self-help's attentions. But while self-help readings of Shakespeare, Montaigne, and Jane Austen abound,<sup>17</sup> the turn to modernism for advice is unique in that it undermines the authors' own explicit anti-utilitarian agendas. The deterrent complexity of modernist narrative forces readers to articulate, even reconsider, the expectations they bring to literary texts. Such recent applications act as useful reminders that the modernists did not eschew practical wisdom altogether, but developed a recursive, dialogic style of counter-advice.

### **The "Self-Help Hermeneutic"**

The self-improvement industry has been analyzed from a variety of disciplinary perspectives including sociology,<sup>18</sup> history,<sup>19</sup> and religion.<sup>20</sup> But its essential literariness

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<sup>16</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Life in Joyce's Masterpiece* (New York: Norton, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance: Laurie Maguire, *Where there's a Will there's a Way Or All I Really Need to Know I Learned from Shakespeare* (New York: Penguin Book, 2006); Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live: Or a Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2010); Lori Smith, *The Jane Austen Guide to Life: Thoughtful Lessons for the Modern Woman* (Guilford, CT: Pequot Press, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Steven Starker, *Oracle at the Supermarket: The American Preoccupation with Self-Help Books* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989).



has not received the attention it deserves. “Proverbial Modernism” takes as its opening premise the contention that self-help is fundamentally a mode of reading. I argue that self-help is intrinsically textual, and, in modernism, becomes inextricable from the fate of counsel in all written forms.

While self-help has been assessed through economic, feminist, and sociological paradigms, it has yet to be approached as its own “hermeneutic,” or as a patchwork mode of reading and juxtaposing the wisdom of the past. The best way to elucidate this self-help hermeneutic is by way of the historical anecdote that inspired this project’s development. There is no stronger proof of self-help’s overlooked transnational history than the writings of Scottish reformer Samuel Smiles, whose bestseller *Self-Help* (1859) was one of the first works to coin the term. With its argument for the import of industry, courage, and perseverance, Smiles’s handbook sparked an international eruption of autodidactic culture in late nineteenth-century Britain, which eventually resulted not only in the formation of labor unions but also an office-boy intelligentsia who surreptitiously read *The Iliad* and *Robinson Crusoe* under their desks. Peppared with quotations from authors such as William Shakespeare, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Stuart Mill, *Self-Help* was not only a guide to upward mobility but also, for innumerable working class laborers, an introduction to literature.

It is worth pausing on the example of Smiles because it illustrates self-help’s status as a vehicle for the transmission, circulation, and dissemination of literary texts. If,

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<sup>20</sup> Roy M. Anker, *Self-help and popular religion in modern American culture: an interpretive guide*. (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999).

as critics of the genre claim, the “self-help” approach to texts is “driven by impatience with—even contempt for—the actual experience of reading extraordinary works,”<sup>21</sup> it is also, for better or worse, a strikingly resilient interpretative mode, and an important means by which texts are circulated. A remarkable case in point is the Japanese reception of *Self-Help*, which, via the translator Nakamura Masanao, introduced modern, Western culture into the Japanese way of life.

After two hundred years of being a closed, feudal society, in the 1870s Meiji Japan opened itself to Western influences. Having missed out on two hundred years of modernization, Japan worried it had a great deal of catching up to do, and Smiles’s *Self-Help*, the first English book translated into Japanese, became a cheat sheet for this purpose. Japanese scholars agree that it is virtually impossible to underestimate the influence of Smiles’s book, as it “served positively as a guidebook for the industrialization of Japan.”<sup>22</sup> As the 92 year-old Japanese scholar Tetsuo Miura testified in his 2001 “Note on Nakamura Masanao”: “I ventured to write in unskillful English because I wanted to tell a great number of people that while in England both ‘Self-Help’ and Samuel Smiles have almost been forgotten, in Japan, Nakamura’s Japanese translation....has kept on today without breaking off...”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Steven G. Kellman, “James Joyce for Ordinary Blokes?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 21, 2009. <http://chronicle.com/article/James-Joyce-for-Ordinary/48427/> (accessed May 25, 2012), 6.

<sup>22</sup> Sukehiro Hirakawa, *Japan’s Love-Hate Relation with the West* (Global Oriental, 2004), 103.

<sup>23</sup> Tetsuo Miura, “A note on Nakamura Masanao: an exceptional Confucian who made the first Japanese version of Samuel Smiles’s ‘Self-help’ of worldly fame” (Tokyo, Japan: Seibundo 2001), 3.

In 1866, Smiles's Japanese translator Nakamura volunteered to supervise young students on a trip to London sponsored by the Tokugawa government. When in London, Nakamura asked his friend H.U. Freeland what he could bring back to Japan to teach people about the West, and Freeland gave him a copy of *Self-Help*. Nakamura memorized Smiles's text on the ship back home, and then he translated it upon his return in 1871. Samurai reportedly camped out in line overnight for a copy of Nakamura's translation, which was quickly staged as a Kabuki play, and even used as an ethics textbook in primary schools. Following the tremendous success of *Self-Help*, Nakamura next translated *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill (which he was introduced to via Smiles), and later in life he also translated Emerson's essay "Compensation" (encountered by Nakamura in Smiles's book on *Character*). While many in Britain dismissed *Self-Help* as popular and trite, in Japan Smiles was read and lauded by the elite.

At its worst, Smiles's international renown can be read as nothing but the imposition of Western, imperial values on foreign locales. It is impossible to separate the spread of Smiles's self-improvement ethos from the costs and casualties of the broader rise of industrialism and modernization that his popularity reflects. At the same time, we cannot discount the work of knowledge transfer accomplished by the circulation of self-help. Indeed, the list of terms that Smiles is said to have introduced to Japan almost defies credulity: the ideas of "liberty" and "individualism," women's rights,<sup>24</sup> and even patent

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<sup>24</sup> Influenced by Smiles's argument that educated women are essential to national prosperity, Nakamura argued for the importance of the education of women throughout his life, and as a result of his labors, schools for women were opened in Japan. See, for instance, Tetsuo Miura, "A note on Nakamura Masanao" and Barbara Rose, *Tsuda Umeko and Women's Education in Japan* (Yale UP, 1991), 32.

law.<sup>25</sup> However, perhaps the most remarkable fact for students of literature is the fact that Smiles's text *Self-Help* first imported Shakespeare to Japan.

Because Japan had been a closed society for more than two centuries, Shakespeare first arrived in Japan with Ibsen, Chekhov, Gorky, George Bernard Shaw and Trams...Of course Shakespearean poetic drama belongs to the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries and is not, in any historical sense, modern...Nevertheless, when the Japanese first encountered Shakespeare, the very fact that he was one of the greatest Western dramatists made him qualify, almost automatically, as a modern writer. His poetic dramas were studied alongside and produced in much the same ways as the plays of Ibsen. This basic confusion and the fatal lack of any proper historical perspective were characteristic of the whole process of the so-called modernization of Japan, and of modern Japanese culture and civilization in general.<sup>26</sup>

In a fascinating alternate literary history to the West's, Shakespeare stepped off the boat in Japan beside Ibsen, and it was the following quotation by Polonius, opening Smiles's chapter on "Money—Use and Abuse," that marked the very first published Japanese translation of Shakespeare's words: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be;/ For loan oft

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<sup>25</sup> As Sukehiro Hirakawa recounts, "In Japan it was Smiles's account of the life of a British inventor Heathcoat, which propagated the notion of patent. A very interesting story is told about Heathcoat's trial...The anecdote, which became common knowledge among Japanese readers of *Self-Help*, highlighted the importance of the patent system; consequently, the patent act, drafted by Takahashi Korekiyo, was promulgated in Japan on 19 April 1885," 108.

<sup>26</sup> Tetsuo Kishi and Graham Bradshaw, *Shakespeare in Japan* (London: Continuum Press, 2005), 2-3.

loses both itself and friend, / And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.”<sup>27</sup> In Japan, *Hamlet* becomes a lesson on thrift, rather than an essay on the invention of the modern self, and *Self-Help* becomes a guidebook to the West, not an argument for self-industry. Both intra and inter-culturally speaking, the utilitarian mode of reading practiced by self-help—and the distortions that accompany it—emerges as the very grist of literary production and posterity.

And so, even as it is crucial to resist the Eurocentric tendency to regard all non-Western cultures as merely passive, belated recipients of Western texts, this project sees examples like Smiles’s as evidence of self-help’s status as a tremendously productive site of international influence and exchange. In this sense, it concurs with Sarah Knudson and Illouz that “therapeutic discourse and its reception, given the self-help genre’s impressive potency and scope, offer insight into an increasingly important site of culture in action.”<sup>28</sup> The self-help hermeneutic could be a generative locus for postcolonial criticism insofar as it is not always an imperialist imposition but can also take the form of a *détournement* that disrupts modernist ideologies and axioms, and encourages the articulation of local self-improvement initiatives. With their performative audacity and disregard for the logic of the primary text, we can read self-help interpretations of modernism not only as failed

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<sup>27</sup> I have found a variety of sources supporting this bizarre fact that Smiles introduced Shakespeare to Japan. These sources include: Toyoda Minoru, *Shakespeare in Japan: An Historical Survey* (Tokyo: Shakespeare Association of Japan by the Iwanami Shoten, 1940); Yasunari Takahashi, “Hamlet and the Anxiety of Modern Japan.” *Shakespeare Survey Online*, (Cambridge, 2007); Frederike Von Schwerin, *High Shakespeare, Reception and Translation: Germany and Japan* (London: Continuum, 2004); Tetsuo Kishi and Graham Bradshaw, *Shakespeare in Japan* (London: Continuum Press, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Eva Illouz, paraphrased in Sarah Knudson, “Crash Courses and Lifelong Journeys: Modes of Reading Non-Fiction Advice in a North American Audience” *Poetics* 41.3 (June 2013), 213.

commentaries, but also as challenging the continued authority and pervasiveness of modernism's self-account, as well as the very hierarchy of the text/reader relation. In this way, the self-help hermeneutic Smiles instantiates sheds new light on modernism's transnational composition and dissemination. The international trajectory of my research mirrors this transnational circulation of both modernism and self-help, beginning with Flaubert in France and the figure of the Victorian autodidact, taking a transatlantic turn with Wharton and James, pausing in the pre-independence Ireland of Joyce's youth, and concluding on America soil, with the self-help usage of such counterintuitive authors as Samuel Beckett and Nathanael West.

As Smiles helps us to see, self-help's curatorial function consists in its collection, quotation, and dissemination of the insights of other texts. Once, the collection and preservation of proverbs was the province of the most venerated historians and philosophers: Chrysippus, Plutarch, and Aristotle each compiled volumes of proverbs that have been lost to posterity.<sup>29</sup> But already by the time of the Renaissance, the proverb was so denigrated a form that Erasmus felt compelled to introduce his *Adages* with an impassioned defense of the import and nobility of proverbial insights. He insists on the proverb's almost holy, "native authentic power of truth," describing it as the oldest form of teaching.<sup>30</sup> Today, however, this curatorial/pedagogical function has fallen to the authors of self-help; it is they who recirculate the adages of the ancients, who act as

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<sup>29</sup> Jeremy Braddock has written a persuasive account of the continued import of the collection to modernism in *Collecting as Modernist Practice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012)

<sup>30</sup> *The Adages of Erasmus*. Selected by William Barker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 3, 12.

popular custodians of the maxims of the past. Instead of the personal version of literary use that the self-help commentators tend to invoke, in the academy a more concrete and political version of literary relevance and applicability holds sway. The contemporary academic effort to claim a social relevance for the discipline apart from personal or moral considerations is typically thought to have its origins in the New Critical construct of the autonomous text. However, this legacy elides the deeply moral impetus and aspiration of New Critical work.<sup>31</sup> As a result of this broken telephone lineage, the demand for “bibliotherapy” has found an outlet, not in the academy, which has long disavowed such a “naïve” reading practice,<sup>32</sup> but in the popular sphere.<sup>33</sup> Libraries in the UK are attempting to boost their membership by instantiating a new “Books on Prescription” program that pairs specific literary texts with readers’ maladies (“The Medicinal Power of Literature: Books on Prescription to Be Introduced.” *The Independent*, December 5, 2013). Likewise, Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin’s *The Novel Cure* (2013), a product of the School of Life, adopts the form of a medical handbook to pair everyday problems from “being short” to “loneliness” with relevant literary works.<sup>34</sup> There is no doubt a correspondence between the rise of ideology critique in the academy and the demand for proverbial wisdom in the popular sphere.

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<sup>31</sup> As Julie Thomson Klein observes, “The New Critics did not reject the moral and social function of literature, but they placed them within the internal structure of the text.” *Humanities, Culture, and Interdisciplinarity: The Changing American Academy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 85. Thomas Schaub describes the “New Critical marriage of human morality and aesthetic form.” *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 41.

<sup>32</sup> See Robert Pippin, “In Defense of Naïve Reading” *The New York Times*. October 10, 2010.

<sup>33</sup> However, the humanities are now beginning to recognize this demand with programs in “narrative medicine” and “applied humanities.”

<sup>34</sup> Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin, *The Novel Cure* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013).

## Scholarly Precursors

Unlike a dissertation on a better-worn subject or more fully embracing of a single methodology, this project relies on a patchwork of precedents. Studies have been loosely undertaken on modern literature and self-improvement culture from specific, localized angles such as Helen O'Connell's valuable work on Irish "fictions of improvement," or Carol Harrison's suggestive history of savant culture among the French bourgeoisie.<sup>35</sup> Though these sources have laid essential groundwork for the analyses that follow, such studies tend to be isolated and nationally circumscribed, with few opportunities for regional linkages and discursive overlap. Likewise, outside of the field of modernist studies, theorists from William James to Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Kenneth Burke, and Michel Foucault have independently investigated the commercial future of literary counsel that self-help represents, but these voices have not been provided with a dialogic forum in which their distinct approaches to the subject can be compared and juxtaposed.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of the transatlantic import and reach of self-help, the subject has been largely confined to the province of American Studies. For instance, Roland Marchand suggests that the proliferation of consumer choices in the United States of the 1920s and 30s produced a "vacuum of advice," at which point advertisers swept in to assume a "broader advisory role." He elaborates: "Mobility, generational discontinuities, more complex forms of social interaction, and the separation

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<sup>35</sup> Helen O'Connell, *Ireland and the Fiction of Improvement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Carol Harrison, *The Bourgeois Citizen in Nineteenth-Century France: Gender, Sociability, and the Uses of Emulation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).



of city dwellers from the shared knowledge of small communities had disrupted informal, intrafamily, and intracommunity channels of advice.”<sup>36</sup> Warren Susman argues correspondingly that a shift from “character to personality” took place in American culture around 1910, when advice texts ceased using terms like “*citizenship, duty, democracy, work...honor, reputation, morals*” and began invoking words such as “*fascinating, stunning, attractive, magnetic, glowing, masterful*.”<sup>37</sup> This project aims to apply the insights of these theorists to a broader range of texts and to thereby test their relevance outside of the circumscribed territory of American studies.

One thinker to tackle the problem of counsel from a more international and transtemporal perspective is Michel Foucault. However, Foucault dismisses the “Californian cult of the self,” which he deems “diametrically opposed” to the ancient culture of the self (in an interview for *Vanity Fair*, no less).<sup>38</sup> Though his dismissal of the self-help phenomenon is too hasty, Foucault’s late work on self care in *Hermeneutics of the Subject* explicates the transhistorical need for training, perfecting, and revising the self that, contrary to his disavowal, even the “Californian cult” manifests. He writes,

when today we see the meaning, or rather the almost total absence of meaning, given to some nonetheless very familiar expressions which continue to permeate our discourse—like getting back to oneself, freeing oneself, being authentic, etcetera—when we see the absence of meaning and thought in all these

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<sup>36</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising and the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 342.

<sup>37</sup> Warren Susman, *Culture as History: the Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 273-4, 277.

<sup>38</sup> Michel Foucault, “How We Behave: Sex, Food, and Other Ethical Matters.” Interview by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. *Vanity Fair* 46.9 (1983): 60-69.

expressions we employ today, then I do not think we have anything to be very proud of in our current efforts to reconstitute an ethic of the self...I think we may have to suspect that we find it impossible today to constitute an ethic of the self, even though it may be an urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task, if it is true after all that there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relation one has to oneself.<sup>39</sup>

By undermining contemporary clichés of self-realization, Foucault seeks to dissuade readers from complacently citing self-help discourse as proof of the continued attention allotted to self-care in modern life. Yet Foucault leaves a rare opening for political resistance in the drive toward self-knowledge that such clichés reflect; this is a drive, he would argue, self-help exploits and perverts. This question of self-help's accommodational versus progressive stance has defined academic discussions of the industry.<sup>40</sup> For instance, Micki McGee takes up Foucault's (minute) opening for political resistance, but she sees more potential in the self-help devotee's interminable quest for a new and better state: "the ideas that self-help is premised on—self-determination and self-fulfillment—continue to hold political possibilities that might be tapped for a progressive, even radical, agenda."<sup>41</sup> She continues, "One might hope that inside every person imagining himself or herself the creator of his or her own life-artworks—inside

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<sup>39</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 252.

<sup>40</sup> See, for other examples than McGee, Heidi Marie Rimke, "Governing Citizens through Self-Help Literature." *Cultural Studies* 14.1 (2000), 61-78, and Nicholas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>41</sup> McGee, 24.

every CEO of Me, Inc—is a belabored self finally weary and fed up enough to throw off the fantasy of self-sufficiency and to demand instead, sufficiency for each and all.”<sup>42</sup>

Like McGee’s study, “Proverbial Modernism” is interested in the lack or need self-help exploits, but it reads this lack as intimately tied to the socio-historical function of the literary, from Epictetus’s *Handbook* to Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. “Proverbial Modernism” is invested in how the lens of literature can focalize the problem of self-help in a way that other disciplines, whether economics, history, or religion, cannot. More than just a commercial byproduct of periods of economic prosperity and collapse, or a replacement for Judeo-Christian moral authority, it reads self-help as indicative of the social appetite literature has historically supplied for individualist models of how to live, and as a manifestation of the ongoing demand for written affirmations of the power of human will and agency. Contemporary scholars have by and large adopted a Foucauldian approach to the phenomenon of self-help as yet another regime of power masquerading as personal choice, and another kind of dissertation might have made this kind of observation its end point—i.e. that self-help domesticates subversive energies and becomes a tool of the hegemonic class. But a consideration of the political history of counsel, at least since the time of the Renaissance, when fools and courtiers used advice to influence the king, indicates contemporary, popular counsel’s potentially subversive energies.

Aside from Foucault, the theorist to most persuasively outline literature’s function as “equipment for living” is Kenneth Burke, whose seminal essay bearing that title argues

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 191.

that narratives be classed not according to genre or period but according to their different “strategies for dealing with situations.”<sup>43</sup> Alain de Botton adopts precisely this classification schema in his *School of Life* publications, which collate the insights of various philosophers on situations from work to family. Rather than the “early modern” or “eighteenth-century” specialists found in English departments today, Burke’s brand of sociological literary criticism might produce PhDs in “mourning” or “heartbreak.” The *longue durée* Burkean view places modernism within the narrative tradition of offering corrective guidance and formal countermeasures against the automatism of popular morality; it invites us to view modernist innovations, not as radical breaks from the normative past, but as attempts to make narrative counsel palatable to advice-saturated, twentieth-century culture.

### **A Joint History**

For fifteen days I was confined to my room, and I was surrounded by the sort of books that were fashionable then (this was sixteen or seventeen years ago)—I mean to say those books in which is treated the art of making people happy, wise, and rich in twenty-four hours. I had, then, digested,—I should say, swallowed whole,—all the lucubrations of all of these entrepreneurs of public happiness,—of those who counsel all of the poor to make themselves slaves, and of those who persuade them that they are all unthroned kings. You won’t be surprised to learn that I was in a state of mind close to dizziness or stupefaction[...]

And I went out with a great thirst. For a passionate taste for bad reading engenders a proportional need for fresh air and refreshments.

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<sup>43</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Perspectives by Incongruity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 103, 100.

Though this passage could have been written by a contemporary binge reader of Suze Orman, it actually expresses the frustrations of the modernist poet Charles Baudelaire, as recorded in “Assommons les Pauvres!”<sup>44</sup> Written in 1865, Baudelaire’s eulogy for self-help as “the sort of books that were fashionable...sixteen or seventeen years ago” was a little premature. At the same time, his prose poem supports this dissertation’s call for extending the temporal and geographical scope of the self-help industry. Self-help’s origins, I argue, reach much farther back than the interwar, “golden era” of success, and, contrary to what Baudelaire optimistically implies, its influence continues strong in the present day. Victorian, civic-minded self-help is by no means identical to the contemporary genre that includes such titles as *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* and *The Secret*,<sup>45</sup> just as Irish self-help has vastly different connotations from the self-help of Scotland or America. At the same time, as modernists like Baudelaire help us to see, late nineteenth-century self-improvement discourses and contemporary self-help have more than a nominal connection. As early as 1910 Bennett had published his bestselling *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day*, a title that could be inconspicuously included on any contemporary self-improvement shelf.

As the following chapters make clear, Baudelaire’s fascination with those books that detail “the art of making people happy, wise, and rich in twenty-four hours” was far from anomalous for his day. Authors no less discriminating than Edith Wharton, Gustave Flaubert, and Henry James each published their own early literary assessments of the

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<sup>44</sup> Charles Baudelaire, (“Thrash All Beggars!”) *Baudelaire in English* (London: Penguin, 1997).

<sup>45</sup> John Gray, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992); Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret* (Luxembourg: Atria Books, 2006).

self-perfection craze. D.H. Lawrence went so far as to undertake a complete rewriting of Benjamin Franklin's self-help maxims, confessing that they inspired him to develop his own, alternate moral philosophy.<sup>46</sup> Even Ezra Pound—that bastion of high modernist esotericism—is said to have chanted the self-help motto “Wake up and Live!” every day for forty years.<sup>47</sup> And the influence between the two movements went both ways: before he wrote *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie yearned to be a modernist, moving to Paris in the 1920s to pen his now-lost magnum opus, *The Blizzard*.<sup>48</sup>

Of course, the practice of reading for advice is not limited to the period of modernism but is as old as reading itself. Scholars trace the dispensation of textual counsel back to the sermons of the Bible, to the allegories of the Bhagavad Gita, or the theories of the “good life” circulating in Ancient Greece. But during the early twentieth century textual precepts became commercialized in an unprecedented way. The commercial self-improvement industry thrived during the precise decades of modernism's self-definition (1890s-1930s) spurred by the spread of mass literacy, the transcontinental book trade, the influence of theosophy and occultism, and the invention of mail-order subscription. Though popular counsel was on the rise, the maxim was disappearing from literary narratives during these same years.

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<sup>46</sup> In a literal instance of modernism rewriting self-help, Lawrence transcribed Franklin's list of virtues, and then inserted his own definitions underneath as rebuttals. Under “Industry,” Franklin originally writes “Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.” Lawrence changes it to: “Lose no time with ideals; serve the Holy Ghost, never serve mankind.” “Benjamin Franklin.” *Studies in Classic American Literature* (London: Penguin Books, 1923), 23.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Dirda, “Introduction.” *Ezra Pound, ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions Paperback, 2010), 4.

<sup>48</sup> “Dale Carnegie: Man of Influence.” *A&E Biography*, aired 1997.

Self-help's antagonism with the literary is startlingly depicted in Margaret Atwood's 2004 post-apocalyptic novel *Oryx and Crake*, whose protagonist writes his dissertation on "Self-Help Books of the Twentieth Century," and enjoys reciting amusing samples of his "research" to the local pub. For Atwood, that such a dissertation would be written signals the arrival of the apocalypse, the end of civilized life. In her futuristic world, biotech monopolizes society and the study of serious literature has been displaced by the analysis of books like *Improve Your Self-Image, You Can Have It All*, and *The Twelve-Step Plan for Assisted Suicide*.<sup>49</sup> However, a little historical perspective reveals that Atwood's novel is a contemporary exploration of a problem already raised by Gustave Flaubert's last novel, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (1881): that self-help represents the dystopic future of cultural production.

Time has proven that Flaubert's fears are not without cause. That authors as recalcitrant as Samuel Beckett and Nathanael West have been coopted by the commercial industry suggests that perhaps all literature is destined to be turned into self-help. Though print is widely in decline, self-help publications are on the rise (self-help became an \$11 billion industry in 2012).<sup>50</sup> This fact alone should pique the interest of scholars of the book. Typically conceived as existing at polar ends of the textual continuum, self-help and literature have in fact always been implicated in each other's promises and limits. From Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861),<sup>51</sup> which began as a critique of

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<sup>49</sup>Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (New York: First Anchor Books Edition, 2004), 195.

<sup>50</sup> Kathryn Schulz, "The Self in Self-Help" *New York Magazine*, January 6, 2013.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1942).

*Self-Help* by Samuel Smiles (1859),<sup>52</sup> to David Foster Wallace's pastiches of recovery movements,<sup>53</sup> the two industries have always enjoyed a symbiotic if antagonistic dynamic. Since it is the business of authors to pay attention to textual fads and the changing demands of the reading public, it is not surprising that turn-of-the century novelists would have been attuned to the early sparks of the self-improvement craze, which streamlines the bare bones of textual transaction: reification, identification, and escapism.

There is no single cause of the rise of the commercial self-help industry at the end of the nineteenth century that so elicited Flaubert's and Woolf's contempt, but rather many interrelated conditions that conspired to facilitate the genre's formation. As I discuss in Chapter One, the spread of mutual improvement societies provided a collective forum for male autodidacts to share and discuss their research, even in remote rural environs in England, France, and beyond. In Britain and Ireland, the Education Act of 1870, addressed more fully in Chapter Three, enabled the spread of mass literacy and the growth of entrepreneurial ambitions among the working classes, who turned to success manuals for models of upward mobility. The advent of pocket books promoted self-edification on the go, a shift Bennett documents in *Clayhanger*, where, despite his aesthetic reservations, the protagonist Edwin is delighted by how these new portable tomes enable him to "read smaller works in odd moments, at any time, thus surpassing

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<sup>52</sup> See Jerome Meckier, "Great Expectations and Self-Help: Dickens Frowns on Smiles." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 100.4 (October 2001), 537.

<sup>53</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little, Brown, 1996).



his [self-improvement] programme.”<sup>54</sup> Judith Hilkey has extensively analyzed the import of subscription book selling—begun after the Civil War with Veterans as salesmen—to the rise of the gilded age “success manual” in the U.S. This new practice of door-to-door salesmanship enabled booksellers to reach formerly remote locales populated by people who had never entered a bookshop: a demographic uniquely receptive to the promises of class change.<sup>55</sup>

The transcontinental book trade further facilitated self-help’s trafficking in human imperfection. In addition to precursors like Smiles, whose texts were routine bestsellers in the United States, Bennett traveled to America where his self-help series was even more lauded than in Europe. Spiritual gurus such as George Gurdjieff and Emile Coué traversed the Atlantic ocean, from Armenia and France, respectively, peddling their secrets to self-realization on American soil. The seeming exoticism of these advisors only heightened their spiritual authority and appeal.

Aside from improved technologies of travel and communication, another key phenomenon contributing to the late-nineteenth-century rise of self-help was the mystical theosophy of the British Annie Besant and the American New Thought philosophy of Phineas Quimby and Annie Payson Call. Spurred by the spread of secularism and the undermining of traditional value systems and beliefs, New Thought advocated the power of individual agency through the art of positive visualization. New Thought’s emphasis on individual empowerment above divine subjugation offered a means of asserting

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<sup>54</sup> Arnold Bennett, *Clayhanger* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1954), 305.

<sup>55</sup> Judith Hilkey, *Character is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

control over the irrational, unpredictable forces of nature and the economy. No longer the arbitrary decree of a divine and remote authority, failure and success were planted firmly into the sphere of individual accountability.

William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, which Nathanael West cites as his source text for *Miss Lonelyhearts*, devotes a great deal of space to defending the New Thought movement. It observes:

foolish as [the mind-cure message] may sound upon its surface, and seeing its rapid growth and influence, and its therapeutic triumphs, one is tempted to ask whether it may not be destined (probably by very reason of the crudity and extravagance of many of its manifestations) to play a part almost as great in the evolution of the popular religion of the future as did those earlier [religious] movements in their day...<sup>56</sup>

In addition to New Thought, the late-Victorian obsession with the occult also branched off into Freud's hypnotherapy, Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science, and eventually into self-help texts such as Norman Vincent Peale's influential *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952). The multifaceted engagements of avant-garde writers with these new "varieties of religious experience" corroborate the reappraisal of modernist secularism undertaken by Pericles Lewis and others, who argue for a less oppositional understanding of the modernists' position on religion. Scholars of self-help have also complicated the secularization narrative, invoking Max Weber's seminal study of the Protestant ethic to describe how capitalism converts the religious vocation into the obligation to improve,

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<sup>56</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in *Writings 1902-1910*. (New York: Library of America, 1987), 104-5.

irreparably merging the spheres of work and leisure.<sup>57</sup> For T.J. Jackson Lears, “the crucial moral change was the beginning of a shift from a Protestant ethos of salvation through self-denial toward a therapeutic ethos stressing self-realization in this world — an ethos characterized by an almost obsessive concern with psychic and physical health defined in sweeping terms.”<sup>58</sup> According to McGee, the Protestant ethic does not lead to self-realization, contrary to the promises of the therapeutic self-help industry Lears outlines, but rather to the interminably “belabored self” of modernity.<sup>59</sup> Together, these sources facilitate a new understanding of modernist interiority as depicting the psychological damage of compulsory self-betterment.

## Chapter Summaries

First, though, a note on my title. “Proverbial Modernism” has two meanings. First, “proverbial” means relating to or resembling a proverb. Discussing the genre of the proverb and its various classifications, Kenneth Burke inquires: “Could the most complex and sophisticated works of art legitimately be considered somewhat as proverbs writ large?”<sup>60</sup> It is to these “most complex and sophisticated” works that I turn in order to put Burke’s proposition to the test with modernism. Clearly, this is a counterintuitive approach to an aesthetic that defines itself in opposition to the moralizing mode. I unpack how this mode of reading proverbially really works by examining the modernist

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<sup>57</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Translated by Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>58</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, “From salvation to self-realization: Advertising and the therapeutic roots of the consumer culture, 1880-1930.” In *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, Edited by Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, 4.

<sup>59</sup> McGee, 18, 26.

<sup>60</sup> Burke, 103.

texts where it meets with the greatest resistance. Second, “proverbial modernism” refers to the stereotypical status of modernism itself as a critical *idée reçue*. It is this clichéd, proverbial version of modernism that self-help readings tend to deploy. Of course, the fate of modernism to become domesticated into benign precepts is not specific to self-help but a danger implicit in all knowledge transfer, as Friedrich Nietzsche observed when he said that all knowledge is nothing but a rendering familiar of the strange.<sup>61</sup>

Arguing that a work’s legacy is just as meaningful as its provenance, or, as Roland Barthes says, that a “text’s unity lies not in its origins but in its destination,”<sup>62</sup> “Proverbial Modernism” does not purport to provide a comprehensive historical survey of modernism or self-help, but instead tracks the correspondences and associations between the two industries, from the moment of their synchronous emergence to their present interrelations. The dialectical trajectory of this inquiry evolves from an oppositional to a reciprocal account of the relation between the two discourses. It begins with a reading of Flaubert that takes at face value his profound contempt for early do-it-yourself philosophies as a foundational moment of modernism’s self-definition. It then proceeds to examine the cases of Wharton and James, two early and wary witnesses of both modernism and self-help who undermine the axiomatic account of modernism’s opposition to popular therapeutic discourse. The third chapter further develops this dialectical perspective of modernism and self-help through the close study of *Ulysses*, the

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<sup>61</sup> “What do they [the common people] want when they want knowledge? Nothing more than this: Something strange is to be reduced to something familiar...Is it not the instinct of fear that bids us to know?” (“The Origin of Our Notion of Knowledge” in *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 300-301.

<sup>62</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” in *Image—Music—Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 148.

paradigmatic modernist text, which structurally and thematically responds to early self-help culture and the reading practices it engenders. The contemporary outcome of this mutually revisionary relation is explored in Chapter Four, which uses the cases of Beckett and West to discuss what happens when modernism meets with readers who refuse to accept its anti-didactic pose. Finally, the conclusion describes how this dialectic comes to fruition on the internet, with online advice culture increasingly adopting modernist techniques of fragmentation, estrangement, and perspectivism.

More specifically, Chapter One explores the instructional impetus of Gustave Flaubert's final narrative, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, described by some critics as a great "how-not-to book." Influenced by British Victorian utilitarianism and the spread of autodidactic culture in Europe, Bouvard and Pécuchet apply the same pragmatic reading methodology to gardening handbooks, romance novels, and Hegelian philosophy, each with equally abysmal results. I frame Flaubert's burlesque of the do-it-yourself ideology within Karl Marx's critique of "self-activity" under capitalism and Theodor Adorno's condemnation of "pseudo-activity." Flaubert's novel suggests that the origins of the modernist inventory might lie not in the disinterested descriptions of the enlightenment encyclopedia but in the fanaticism of the nineteenth-century self-improvement zealot.

While Flaubert established his aesthetic ideals in vehement resistance to the bourgeois utilitarianism that self-help represents, Wharton and James bring to the fore the affinities between modernism and self-improvement discourse, which the modernist programmatic conceals. For Wharton, self-help and modernism are fundamentally linked through their embrace of selfish individualism, stream of consciousness technique, and disregard for form and history. In "The Jolly Corner," modernism's fetishism of

interiority and self-help's exploitation of possibility meet in the figure of the "black stranger" who haunts Spencer Brydon's regret-filled imaginary. James shows self-help's obsession with professional and economic potentiality to be the flip side of modernist interiority. Though Wharton and James are not automatically associated with self-help, making such an association stretches our sense of the scope of these authors' cultural engagements, as well as the temporal parameters of the self-improvement industry.

My final chapters delve deeper into the influence of modernism on the trajectory of current advice, and outline some contemporary repercussions of this intertwined history. Chapter Three maintains that recent disputes between Joyce's specialized and populist critics are reenacting nineteenth-century Irish debates over the didactic province of the literary. Joyce came of age during a divisive period in Irish letters, marked by utilitarian and romantic political extremes. The transition from parochial Irish culture to the rise of Irish modernism was not seamless, but rather took the form of an ugly and protracted scuffle between Charles Gavan Duffy and W.B. Yeats over the New Irish Library, an anthology intended to define Ireland's future literary identity. I argue that these Irish debates over the moral education of "common" readers provide a crucial background for understanding contemporary applications of Joyce's work such as Declan Kiberd's *Ulysses and Us* (2009). This chapter explicates how, far from a source of alienation, didacticism offers a means of reclaiming modern literature for popular readers.

My concluding chapter contends that instead of creating a moral-free art, modernism ushered in a new era of advice. It argues that West and Beckett inaugurate the rise of the "reluctant oracle" figure: a new style of counselor who must be coaxed into

offering his insights. The reluctant oracle has now been embraced by contemporary self-help counselors for the way that it mediates popular wariness of the authoritarian potential of advice. Beginning by unpacking interpretations of West's story by professional advice columnists Ann Landers and Dear Abby, it proceeds to explore the appropriation of Samuel Beckett's "fail better" mantra by corporate authors. While Abby and Landers incite us to reconsider the influence of Susan Chester's advice column upon "Miss Lonelyhearts," Beckett's businessmen-interpreters offer an occasion to excavate the critique of the Protestant work ethic that binds his oeuvre. This chapter inquires, to what extent can Beckett and West be seen as responsible for their future cooptation by self-help culture? These case studies lay bare the paradoxes inherent in self-help's attempt to insert modernist negation into an affirmative program.

Believing, along with Renaissance scholars Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes,<sup>63</sup> that it is better to be openly presentist than to purport to be unbiased, "Proverbial Modernism" concludes with a consideration of contemporary online culture's inheritance of modernism's reader-centered approach to advice. In so doing, it points to the disjointed homilies of the internet as one potential outcome of the ambivalent dialectic between modernism and self-help. More than simply version 1.0 of contemporary digital culture, modernism's deconstructed life wisdom is revealed to be essential for understanding the "history of the present,"<sup>64</sup> and the objectivized status of literary counsel today.

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<sup>63</sup> Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, *Presentist Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>64</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Random House, 1977), 31.

## Conclusion: Self-Help and the New Modernisms

While many scholars are usefully “expanding” modernism, to use Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz’s term of choice to characterize the “New Modernist Studies,”<sup>65</sup> I am more interested in the mechanisms of the movement’s popular simplification. My tracing of modernism’s reified circulation in self-help handbooks necessarily invokes and relies upon the fairly canonical definition of the movement that holds sway in the popular imaginary. For the non-specialist, modernism might possess a romantic allure akin to what it signifies for the protagonist of Woody Allen’s film *Midnight in Paris*, who identifies with the glamorous artists populating Les Deux Magots, seeking love advice from Salvador Dali, and career guidance from Gertrude Stein.<sup>66</sup> Paradoxically, though, attending carefully to these simplifications ultimately shows us just how complex modernism really is, and demonstrates the movement’s unlikely investment in practicality, popular discourse, and transnational exchange.

In some ways, then, this inquiry can be associated with those monographs on “middlebrow modernism” that uncover the movement’s neglected indebtedness to popular culture and mass cultural forms. Lisi Schoenbach’s *Pragmatic Modernism*, Laura Frost’s *Modernism and Pleasure*, Liesl Olsen’s *Modernism and the Ordinary*: these texts each strive to nuance the ossified narrative of modernism’s opposition to the popular and everyday.<sup>67</sup> Though *Proverbial Modernism* partakes of their suspicion of the facile

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<sup>65</sup> Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, “Expanding Modernism” *PMLA* 123.3 (May 2008), 737-748.

<sup>66</sup> *Midnight in Paris*. Dir. Woody Allen. Gravier Productions, 2011. Film.

<sup>67</sup> Lisi Schoenbach, *Pragmatic Modernism* (New York: Oxford UP, 2012); Laura Frost, *Modernism and Pleasure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Liesl Olsen, *Modernism and the Ordinary*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009).



opposition between the highbrow and the mundane, it also seeks to register the insights of scholars such as John Carey, Sean Latham, and Jonathan Rose, who document the deep animus between avant-garde authors and working people in twentieth-century social life.<sup>68</sup> My aim is not to collapse the movements of modernism and self-help but to tease out the history of their productive antagonism, while also pointing to some present and future manifestations of this dynamic and multifaceted relation.

Premised upon the rejection of self-help, yet offering a didactic alternative to it, modernist formal techniques equip readers to approach self-improvement with suspicion. However, as the latter half of this dissertation demonstrates, contemporary purveyors of commercial counsel are increasingly turning to modernism's anti-advice as a model for satisfying the demands of the sophisticated and wary reading public. My research into modernism's contemporary reception has been informed, in part, by recent accounts of the import of the "therapeutic paradigm" to contemporary literature and culture (see, for instance, Timothy Aubry and Eva Illouz).<sup>69</sup> Following the monumental success of *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, therapeutic readings of modernism—and literature more generally—are proliferating at an accelerated rate.

In considering the implications of this growing trend, I have been aided by many entertaining polemics written against the culture of self-help, such as Steve Salerno's

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<sup>68</sup> Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1992); Sean Latham, "Am I a Snob?" *Modernism and the Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

<sup>69</sup> Timothy Aubry, *Reading As Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does For Middle Class Americans* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011); Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

*SHAM: The Self-Help and Actualization Movement*,<sup>70</sup> Wendy Kaminer's *I'm Dysfunctional You're Dysfunctional: The Recovery Movement and Other Self-Help Fashions*,<sup>71</sup> and Barbara Ehrenreich's *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking Ruined America*.<sup>72</sup> Though it is sympathetic to these authors' concerns regarding the repercussions of self-help's startling ascent, my dissertation refrains from such arbitrations of taste or legitimacy. Instead, "Proverbial Modernism" argues for the social influence and reach of self-help interpretations of modernist texts. In articulating the cultural import of misreadings without validating their omissions, I take my cue from Marcel Proust's defense of bad novels:

A book of bad romances, worn out by over use, ought to touch us like a cemetery or a village. What does it matter if the houses have no style, if the tombs are overladen with inscriptions and ornaments in bad taste? From this dust there may arise, in the eyes of an imagination friendly and respectful enough to silence for the moment its aesthetic disdain, the flock of souls holding in their beaks the still verdant dream that gave them a foretaste of the other world and filled them with joy or tears in this one.<sup>73</sup>

It is in this spirit that I approach the self-help readings of modernism to follow. In language less lofty than Proust's, self-help texts are objects of study akin to Émile

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<sup>70</sup> Steve Salerno, *SHAM: The Self-Help and Actualization Movement* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005).

<sup>71</sup> Wendy Kaminer, *I'm Dysfunctional You're Dysfunctional: The Recovery Movement and Other Self-Help Fashions* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1992).

<sup>72</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking Ruined America*. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009).

<sup>73</sup> Marcel Proust, "In Praise of Bad Music." *Pleasures and Days*, Translated by Andrew Brown (London: Hesperus Classics, 2004), 127-8.

Durkheim's "social facts," which develop a life and social import as "things" independent of aesthetic judgment and the intentions of specific human actors.<sup>74</sup> Instead of seeking to merely correct the popular image of modernism, in other words, "Proverbial Modernism" is interested in the cultural work allotted to its caricature.

In sum, "Proverbial Modernism" advances several ambitious claims. It argues for expanding the temporal and geographic definition of both modernism and the self-improvement industry. It uses self-help to revitalize old debates about modernism's engagement with the common reader, and it maintains that historically didacticism has attracted popular readers to literary narratives, rather than repelling them. It shares with reception theorists an interest in how non-professional interpreters respond to and refashion narratives for new, sometimes subversive ends.<sup>75</sup> It contends that self-help is an interesting and important object of study for Marxist, postcolonial, and humanist critics, and one with continued, significant repercussions for contemporary literature and theory. A consideration of the context of self-help is crucial to any serious inquiry into modernism's vexed engagement with the problem of social use.

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<sup>74</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: Free Press, 2013).

<sup>75</sup> For instance Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), Norman Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), Herta Herzog, "On Borrowed Experience: An Analysis of Listening to Daytime Sketches" *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, 11: 65-95.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### *Bouvard and Pécuchet: Flaubert's D.I.Y. Dystopia*

Fed up with muggy Paris, tired of their insufferable officemates, Bouvard and Pécuchet yearn for the simpler pleasures of village life. Published in 1881, one year after his death, Gustave Flaubert's last narrative recounts the schemes of two Parisian copy clerks who, thanks to a sudden inheritance, pack up their belongings and move to the country to pursue their hobbies full time. Modern middle-class city dwellers will empathize with their fantasy of early retirement in some rural abode: "They would awake with the meadowlark's song to follow the plows, would go with their basket to pick apples, watch butter being churned, grain being threshed, sheep being shorn...No more writing! no more bosses!"<sup>1</sup> However, the reality is not quite so picturesque:

Up at dawn, they worked until nightfall, rush baskets around their waists. In the cold spring mornings, Bouvard wore his woolen jacket beneath his coveralls, Pécuchet his old frock coat under his apron, and the people passing by the lattice fence could hear them coughing in the fog.

Sometimes Pécuchet pulled his manual from his pocket and studied a paragraph, standing, with his spade beside him, in the pose of the gardener decorating the book's frontpiece. He found the resemblance quite flattering, and his respect for the author increased. (37)

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<sup>1</sup> *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, Translated by Mark Polizzotti (Paris: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), 14. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

“Coughing in the fog” with their Parisian constitutions, Bouvard and Pécuchet are ill equipped for the hardships of agricultural labor. When Pécuchet “studies a paragraph” he is not reading but posing, and what he is thinking about is not receiving new knowledge, but his received idea of himself. Far from a pedagogic object, the text becomes mere stage prop in this gardening tableau. A pantomime of the do-it-yourself mentality, Pécuchet’s posture with his manual encapsulates Flaubert’s concern with the utilitarian future of the text. The clerks apply the same pragmatic reading methodology to gardening handbooks, astronomy textbooks, romance novels, and Hegelian philosophy, each with equally abysmal results. Flaubert’s trans-textual critique is not directed at a particular field, but at the utilitarian hermeneutic more broadly. Like the fungus that will eventually ruin the copy clerks’ apricot trees, instrumentalism is for Flaubert a parasite corrupting the purest of expressions. “Habent sua fata libelli,” goes the saying: “every book has its destiny.” But Flaubert warns that this destiny may be self-help.

Although it may seem a stretch to apply neologisms like “self-help” or “DIY” to Flaubert’s turn-of-the-century text, when Flaubert was composing *Bouvard and Pécuchet* at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the self-improvement industry had already begun to emerge. Contemporary do-it-yourself handbooks are not all that different from the Roret manuals on hygiene, home libraries, and gardening that Flaubert scrupulously consulted in composing *Bouvard and Pécuchet*.<sup>2</sup> Twentieth-century theorists question the political autonomy of this do-it-yourself ideology in ways that Flaubert had already begun to do

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of the specific manuals Flaubert consulted see Stephanie Dord Crouslé, “Flaubert et les Manuels Roret ou le paradoxe de la vulgarization,” *Le partage des savoirs* (XVIIIe-XIXe siècles), Edited by Lise Andries. 2003: 93-118.

with the manuals of his time. Destroying more than they produce, wasting more than they ever save, Bouvard and Pécuchet do not subvert labor exploitation through their hobbies, but become all the more enslaved. With his refusal to accept the progressive politics of the bespoke, Flaubert's critique is more relevant than ever today. The radicalism of Flaubert's position has to do with his ruthless insistence upon the futility of all do-it-yourself endeavors—from jam-making to revolutions—in a way that is particularly troubling to neoliberalism's glorification of the grassroots and homemade. One can hear echoes of Flaubert's disdain for the savants in Theodor Adorno's condemnation of "pseudo-activities,"<sup>3</sup> and in Slavoj Žižek's attack on middle-class philanthropy.<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu's description of the pathos of the autodidact aptly summarizes the Flaubertian stance: "The apparent heterogeneity of his preferences, his confusion of genres and ranks, operetta and opera, popularization and science, the unpredictability of his ignorance and knowledge, with no other connections than the sequence of biographical accidents, all stem from the particularities of a heretical mode of acquisition." Autodidacts are, Bourdieu adds, "like the heroes of TV quiz games whose misplaced erudition makes them ridiculous in cultivated eyes."<sup>5</sup> With its account of the damages wrought by the clerks' frenetic dabbling in different fields, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* dramatizes the aesthetic repercussions of the bourgeois self-improvement ideal.

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<sup>3</sup> Theodor Adorno, "Free Time" in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays On Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways reflections* (New York: Picadour Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), 329.

“Self-help” is a term perched upon the reticent tip of Flaubertian criticism’s tongue. Emma Bovary “reads literally, and out of pure self-interest,” Rita Felski notes,<sup>6</sup> while Frances Ferguson recently described Bouvard and Pécuchet as “committed to self-improvement and improvement in all things.”<sup>7</sup> For Leo Bersani, the “eminently practical” clerks are risible because “they would put knowledge to use.”<sup>8</sup> As the *Gustave Flaubert Encyclopedia* puts it (a construction whose perversity would not have been lost upon the author): “while instructional manuals seek to codify information and instruct the reader, Flaubert uses many how-to books to produce *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, a great “how-not-to” book.”<sup>9</sup> Flaubert described the *Dictionary of Received Ideas* appending the narrative as an amalgamation of “everything one should say if one is to be considered a decent and likable member of society.” “If properly done,” he continued, “anyone who read it would never dare open his mouth again, for fear of spontaneously uttering one of its pronouncements.”<sup>10</sup> When constellated under Flaubert’s opposition to bourgeois improvement discourse, *Madame Bovary*’s disdain for textual escapism and *Bouvard and Pécuchet*’s parody of pragmatism appear as a cohesive, unified critique.<sup>11</sup> Essentially,

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<sup>6</sup> Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.), 81.

<sup>7</sup> Frances Ferguson, “Too Much Information: Flaubert’s Bouvard and Pécuchet,” *Modern Language Notes* 125 (2010), 783.

<sup>8</sup> Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Laurence M. Porter, ed., *A Gustave Flaubert Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 73.

<sup>10</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert: 1830-1857*, trans. Francis Steegmuller (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1979), 176.

<sup>11</sup> One exception to this critical reticence is Mary Orr, who notes, “BP is the ironic fictional version of a potted self-help series (encyclopedia or compendium) on every topic known to man” in *Flaubert: Writing the Masculine* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 119. Orr’s aside notwithstanding, self-help’s status as a target of Flaubert’s prescient wrath has never been fully addressed.

self-help is aestheticism's worst nightmare, and the apotheosis of processes Flaubert anticipated with dread: the reduction of literature to use, the mass-production and commodification of print, the vulgarization of knowledge and art. Though Flaubert did not live to see self-help's startling ascent, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* suggests that the utilitarian impulses the genre exploits were menacingly present during his time.

Flaubert's fantasy of liberating art from the practical, communicative imperative reflects the influence of Immanuel Kant.<sup>12</sup> While Kant's notion of aesthetic disinterestedness initially referred to the experience of the spectator, his views on the non-instrumental nature of the beautiful are taken by subsequent authors as *prescriptions* to be followed amidst the composition of a "pure" art. "Beware of Lily of the Valley!" Flaubert would scribble to himself in his notes, reminding himself to avoid the excessive cathexis Balzac felt towards his work.<sup>13</sup> As if momentarily reproducing the dogmatism of his copy clerks, Flaubert takes Kant's description of the experience of beauty and turns it into a programmatic decree.

Because of the enthusiastic embrace of his theories by later artists, it is easy to overlook the fact that Kant's description of aesthetic disinterestedness never referred to "fine art," but was directed to ornamental art and objects of the natural world, "flowers, birds or crustacea, works of decorative art such as wallpapers and borders..."<sup>14</sup> Unlike

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<sup>12</sup> We know that Flaubert read Kant from his letters. See *The George Sand-Gustave Flaubert Letters*, trans. Aimee L McKenzie (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1921), 248. See also, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert: 1857-1880*. Edited by Francis Steegmuller (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1982), 248.

<sup>13</sup> *A Gustave Flaubert Encyclopedia*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant, quoted in Paul Guyer, *Art and Ethical Criticism*, ed. Gary Hagsberg (UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 18.



with nature, which he describes as “pure beauty,” Kant believed that “our pleasure in a work of art can never be enduring or self-sustaining unless that work has some moral content sufficient to sustain our satisfaction in it.”<sup>15</sup> The modernist legacy reflects a Manichean interpretation of Kant; either the work contains a moral and panders to the desires of the philistine masses, or it must ruthlessly strip itself of all even remotely applicable insights. Perhaps the increased commodification of the modern literary marketplace leaves little room for the nuances of Kant’s version of an unmotivated yet ethical aesthetics; Proust wittily described books with theories inside as gifts with the price tag attached.<sup>16</sup>

While Flaubert undermines the aesthetic instrumentalism of his characters, their postures also operate as foils revealing the limits of his hermetic approach. Bouvard and Pécuchet’s travesties of aesthetic identification expose the insincerity at the heart of aestheticism’s denial of its own intersubjective, enabling conditions. The self-help methodology is threatening for Flaubert precisely because it is an unsightly reminder of the kinds of externalizations without which possibility would be meaningless and art impossible. Although they pretend to disdain public opinion, Bouvard and Pécuchet’s need to exhibit their projects reveals their reluctant awareness of the unsatisfying meaningfulness of action detached from a communicative, social context.

Some of Bouvard and Pécuchet’s projects are undone by the confusing nomenclature in the instruction manuals, but others are destroyed by their readerly habits

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<sup>15</sup> Kant, quoted in Guyer, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Marcel Proust, “Time Regained,” *In Search of Lost Time*, Volume VI. Translated by Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin (London: Modern Library Edition, 1993), 278.

of literalism, solipsism, and projection. The clerks' botched attempt at following Amy Boué's *Guide for the Geological Traveler* illustrates the pattern of ineptitude well. Boué advises amateur geologists to acquire the appropriate equipment prior to undertaking their first expeditions: "First you need a good rucksack, then a chain measure, a file, tweezers, a compass, and three hammers slipped into a belt that can be hidden under your coat, 'thus preventing you from standing out, which one must avoid when traveling'" (*BP* 75). The copy clerks always begin their DIY experiments with the requisite paraphernalia of expertise, investing these accessories with an almost totemic ability to transmit knowledge from afar. The manual's prescriptions are not strictly limited to geology, but cover the basics of travel as well: "Know the language of the country you are to visit...Maintain modest attire... Do not carry too much money on your person.... Finally, to avoid a variety of misadventures, it was advisable to claim 'the occupation of engineer'" (76). Boué implies that there is something shameful—perhaps even dangerous—about the kind of amateurism the clerks undertake. Since no one wants the stigma of depending upon a book for their achievements, the guide must offer instructions in its own concealment.

These precautions lead the clerks astray: "Several times they were taken for peddlers, given their accouterments; they explained that they were engineers" (76). Just as in the gardening episode, Flaubert exploits the disparity between external perspective and self-conception. The geology expedition becomes farce when the clerks are investigating a perpendicular cliff, and a gust of wind begins to blow, making small pebbles bounce around their feet. Lightheaded from the day's expedition, Bouvard's

thoughts turn to the threat of a cataclysm, and he starts to flee. As he is fleeing, the “rucksack” Boué had insisted upon detaches from its ostensive use: “Bouvard kept running, in a panic. His convertible umbrella fell to the ground, the flaps of his coat streamed behind him, and the rucksack bounced against his back. He looked like a winged tortoise galloping among the rocks; then he disappeared behind a larger one” (79). As is so often the case in the narrative, the specialized outerwear the clerks so optimistically don quickly becomes an impediment. Wrested by nothing other than a little gust of wind from their flimsy pretense of necessity, the clerk’s accoutrements are exposed as the “ceremonial” emblems of what Thorstein Veblen terms “conspicuous leisure.”<sup>17</sup> Flaubert’s reader is struck by the sharp contrast between the clerks’ copious tools and superficial preparations and their fundamental, experiential unfitness. A grotesque of the reader/guidebook relation, the scene documents self-help’s capacity to ridicule its reader.

This insufficiency fostered by DIY stems in large part from its blurring of the line between autonomy and dependence. You are rarely as dependent on external sources as when you attempt to “do-it-yourself.” Few occasions call for a more radical surrendering of one’s intellectual agency than, for instance, an Ikea diagram. The genre is premised on the paradoxical promise of an autonomy only attainable via a radically dogmatic subservience to someone else’s—usually textual—aid.

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<sup>17</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 35.

Tied to Victorian liberalism, self-help did not begin as the valorization of individualism it resembles today, but had roots in “mutual improvement societies” devoted to the uplift of the working class.<sup>18</sup> Inspired by the British “mutual-aid” or “self-help” societies in vogue during Flaubert’s time, French provincial towns began producing “emulation societies,” also known as “learned societies” or “sociétés savantes.” The social structure of the French learned societies was “similar, though by no means identical” to those of provincial Britain.<sup>19</sup> But with their focus on independence, competition, and upward mobility, savant societies were rough French counterparts to the British self-help associations. “For the education and uplift of the working class,” triumphantly remarked the president of the Mulhousian Emulation Society in 1868, “We have no further reason to envy the English.”<sup>20</sup>

These provincial societies were voluntary, exclusively male associations, related to the gentleman’s club or “*Cercle*,” regarding which Flaubert sarcastically notes in his *Dictionary of Clichés*, “one must always belong to one.”<sup>21</sup> According to Fox, “The proliferation of the *sociétés savantes* is one of the most startling and neglected cultural phenomenon of nineteenth-century France.”<sup>22</sup> Science held a privileged place in these associations, but their understanding of “science” was so capacious as to at once

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<sup>18</sup> Samuel Smiles’s bestseller *Self-Help*, one of the first works to coin the term, expanded on an address Smiles gave to the Mutual Improvement Society of Leeds on “The Education of the Working Class.”

<sup>19</sup> Robert Fox, “The savant confronts his peers,” in *The Organization of Science and Technology in France 1808-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Carol Harrison, *The Bourgeois Citizen in Nineteenth-Century France: Gender, Sociability, and the Uses of Emulation* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 85.

<sup>21</sup> Gustave Flaubert, “On doit toujours faire partie d’un cercle” (Suffel, *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues*,” 340).

<sup>22</sup> Fox, 244.

encompass physics and aesthetics, chemistry and history. “Philosophical speculation, even literary production could be included in the totalizing ambitions of emulation societies,” Carol Harrison notes.<sup>23</sup> This broad conception of science adopted by the emulation societies explains why Flaubert wanted to subtitle *Bouvard and Pécuchet* “On the Lack of Method in the Sciences,” even though the discipline of science proper is only one branch of the clerks’ experiments. As Bersani puts it, “what happens to horticultural or jam-making expertise is identical to what happens to theological doctrine” in Flaubert’s last work.<sup>24</sup> With their focus on data, detail, and observation, the savant societies reflected the increasing scientization of all disciplines, including art. Self-taught and often explicitly utilitarian, these groups displayed what Fox calls a “determined, aggressive independence” amid the authoritarian educational context of the second-empire regime.<sup>25</sup> Stressing fieldwork above research and formal education, these dilettantes were less interested in novel or unprecedented theses than in the immersive pleasure of first-hand observation.

Inspired by Flaubert’s offhanded description of his narrative as “a farcical encyclopedia” (*BP* xxx), Flaubertian criticism has been dominated by a view of *Bouvard and Pécuchet* as a parody of the *library-encyclopedia*. Hugh Kenner and Michel Foucault both emphasize the labyrinthine intertextuality of Flaubert’s last novel, describing it as a book constructed from other books, a metaphor for language’s structure of infinite regress. Contesting this critical heritage, Eugene Donato argues for the supremacy of the

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<sup>23</sup> Harrison, 67.

<sup>24</sup> Bersani, 129.

<sup>25</sup> Fox, 241.

museum as a paradigm for the Flaubertian taxonomy. According to him, the *Encyclopedia-Library* is merely “one non-privileged term in an indifferent series” in Flaubert’s last work. The fact that some of Bouvard and Pécuchet’s projects are undone, not by textual excess, but by natural forces, such as a fire that ruins their wheat crop, indicates for him that Flaubert is not launching a purely linguistic or textual critique. He argues instead that it is “through the category of Museum that questions of origin, causality, representation, and symbolization are most clearly stated” in *Bouvard and Pécuchet*.<sup>26</sup> While it is true that the encyclopedia is too inert and static a medium to encapsulate all of Bouvard and Pécuchet’s endeavors, their “chronic acquisitiveness” seems closer to the heterogeneous museums of the sociétés savantes than to the orderly collection of the *Louvre*, for instance. In the savants’ museums, “Committee members were far more interested in chromolithography, photography, and the Industrial Design School than in traditional fine arts like paintings.”<sup>27</sup> And unlike the institutional museums, participants in these groups preferred to catch their own butterflies, find their own shells and dig their own fossils, rather than purchasing from external collectors.<sup>28</sup> If the library is at the center of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, as Foucault and Kenner claim,<sup>29</sup> this is not the organized, alphabetized, Diderotian library of encyclopedic specialization, but the bargain basement, *bric-à-brac* collections of the local sociétés savantes. As Donato

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<sup>26</sup> Eugene Donato, “The Museum’s Furnace,” *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, Edited by Josue V. Harari (New York: Cornell UP, 1979), 220.

<sup>27</sup> Harrison, 80.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, “La Bibliothèque fantastique,” introduction to *Flaubert, La tentation de Saint Antoine*, Edited by Henri Ronse (Paris: Gallimard, 1967); Hugh Kenner, *The Stoic Comedians: Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett*. (Boston: Beacon, 1962).

does in his essay, historians often “ignore learned societies altogether as they trace a teleological movement away from the cabinet of curiosities towards the ‘disciplinary museum’.”<sup>30</sup> However, Flaubert’s engagement with the phenomenon of the savant societies suggests that the origins of the modernist inventory might lie, not in the disinterested description of the enlightenment encyclopedia, but in the fanaticism of the nineteenth-century self-improvement zealot.

### **Idle Curiosities**

“Savants.—Mock them. To be a savant, one needs only memory and work.”  
-*Dictionary of Clichés*, 375.<sup>31</sup>

Learned societies continue as active participants in French towns today, now even including Flaubert among their subjects. At their worst, these associations are marked by “the idle curiosity of pension-fund retirees,” as Charles Louandré described them in 1846,<sup>32</sup> indicating just how typical Bouvard and Pécuchet were for their time. Louandré continues to lament that these societies are usually comprised of

lost children of haphazard theories of political economy, law, history, science, and literature. Magnetism, phrenology, fourierism, homeopathy, humanitarian

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<sup>30</sup> Harrison, 79.

<sup>31</sup> “Savants.—Les blaguer. Pour être savant, il ne faut que de la mémoire et du travail,” Gustave Flaubert, “*Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues*,” (Suffel 375).

<sup>32</sup> “la curiosité oisive des rentiers désœuvrés.” “De l’ Association littéraire et scientifique en France. Les sociétés savants et littéraires de la province,” *Revue des deux mondes* (1846), 528. Translations of this text are my own.

progress, all these things that there have their tribunal, each is allowed to share his ideas, and to contradict those of others.<sup>33</sup>

Despite their prolific output, the general historical consensus is that the savant societies did little or nothing to advance the development of knowledge in their fields, antagonizing both the government and the academy. Fox describes their contributions to science as “decidedly patchy,”<sup>34</sup> while Harrison observes that “learned societies in general contributed very little to the progress of science or letters in nineteenth-century France.”<sup>35</sup> Sociétés savantes were particular irritants to the Ministry of Public Instruction, which attempted to assimilate them, copy them, and quash them. Fox notes, “the sociétés savantes became the focus for one of the most intense of mid-century debates about the proper extent of ministerial prerogatives.”<sup>36</sup> The societies’ antagonistic relation to the Ministry’s monopoly in education adds an historical dimension to Leo Bersani’s suggestion that Bouvard and Pécuchet’s frenetic dabbling may contain the seeds of a politically subversive critique. “The instability of Bouvard and Pécuchet as characters,” he notes, “points to a kind of resistance to strategies of power.”<sup>37</sup> However, Bersani’s reading elides Flaubert’s insistence upon the incontrovertible futility of the clerks’ pursuits; Bouvard and Pécuchet will never be more than irritating gadflies to French professional life. The extreme particularity of the savants’ epistemological pursuits produced a paradoxical breed of disinterestedly utilitarian research. Papers were

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 521

<sup>34</sup> Fox, 257.

<sup>35</sup> Harrison, 79.

<sup>36</sup> Fox, 243.

<sup>37</sup> Bersani, 132.



presented to the Emulation Society of Doubs on subjects including, “Inscription on a stone needle of the Ornans territory”; “Note on an error in Péclet’s *The Sharing of Heat*”; “An unedited letter by Voltaire”; “On deformities, infirmities, and maladies reproduced in artworks”; and “What is music?”.<sup>38</sup>

In her historical study of the learned society in France, Harrison recounts the following anecdote from the archives of the town of Jura. The story concerns a paper submitted to the society by an amateur scientist entitled “Singular Inflammation of Phosphorous in the Body of a Chicken.” During a celebratory Mardi Gras supper, the author, father of the family, sat down to carve a chicken at the table. When he cut into the chicken, plumes of smoke emerged, along with an odd smell. He recounts:

O great prodigy! With what great astonishment we saw a brilliant phosphorous flame rise from the upper region of the insertion of the neck and spread itself in an instant from one end to another, with a few atoms falling in flames on the table. This sad apparition killed the appetite...Most of the diners refused to eat this infernal dish. Some of the more courageous (myself included) hazarded a taste and finding neither the odour nor the taste of phosphorous, but, on the contrary, a tender and succulent meat, ate with pleasure.<sup>39</sup>

After proceeding to dissect the chicken at the dining room table, the author of the paper describes his astonishment at finding no abnormalities in the carcass. The mystery is explained when the author finally remembers an experiment he conducted a few days

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<sup>38</sup> M.A. Kirchner, archiviste. *Mémoires de la Société D’Émulation du Doubs, 1841-1905*, “Table Générale Récapitulative,” University of Michigan, 2, 41, 39, 12, 12. My translations.

<sup>39</sup> This episode is described and quoted in Harrison, 50.

earlier with some phosphorous, whose smell offended him, and which he threw out the window in disgust. He deduces that a chicken in the yard must have found the phosphorous and eaten it, and he uses the incident to present some hypotheses regarding phosphoric acid and its effect on the alimentary system to his local emulation society.

If this episode of the infernal chicken did not actually exist, Flaubert would have had to invent it.<sup>40</sup> Bouvard and Pécuchet yearn to undertake their own phosphorous experiment with a local mutt: “They could inject the dog with phosphorous, then shut it in a cellar to see if it would breathe fire through its snout. But how would they inject it? And besides, no one would sell them phosphorous.” Their experiments seem sadistic enough when the guinea pig is the village mongrel—“They thought of trapping it under an air pump, having it breathe various gasses, making it drink poison. That might be so much fun!” (59)—but it is the ease and rapidity with which the clerks move from testing on dogs to testing on the town locals that is even more troubling. Despite their village interventions, “the hunchback did not stand any straighter. The tax collector quit inhaling, as it was making his wheezing twice as bad. Foureau complained about the aloe pills, which gave him hemorrhoids. Bouvard developed stomach cramps and Pécuchet had terrible migraines” (610). The clerks have no qualms about meddling with others’ health for the sake of their “science,” even developing their own kidney and liver conditions from the medical fads they entertain (65). What’s more, the dog they had experimented upon breaks free, and they live in fear of its rabid retaliation. Since many of their experiments are undertaken for the sake of science or the “public good,” these

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<sup>40</sup> Harrison herself connects the episode to Flaubert’s character Homais, 50.

questionable experiments serve to undermine the philanthropy of their more explicitly charitable enterprises.

Just as, in *Sentimental Education*, Flaubert's detached bemusement with social rules gives his world the quality of a game, as Bourdieu says,<sup>41</sup> Bouvard and Pécuchet treat their town as their personal laboratory. Flaubert's different texts share in common a concern with the casualties of uncommitted study.<sup>42</sup> Flaubert even confessed once, "How often I have regretted not being a savant, and how I envy their calm existences spent studying the feet of flies, stars or flowers!"<sup>43</sup> Flaubert's preoccupation with savants predates *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, going back to *Madame Bovary*'s town chemist, Homais. "Member of several learned societies," as Homais adds to his signature ("in fact, he belonged to only one"), he is an "apostle of progress and a local patriot."<sup>44</sup> While Emma's sentimental romances are the explicit targets of the text, Homais' clichéd manuals and treatises are the subtler villains of *Madame Bovary*. "The happiest of fathers and luckiest of men," "whom everything conspired to bless,"<sup>45</sup> Homais is responsible for almost every misfortune that occurs in the narrative. The fallout zone of Homais' "success" is ever increasing. It is Homais' disquisition on the benefits of art that inspires

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<sup>41</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art, Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Translated by Susan Emanuel (California: Stanford Press, 1995), 21.

<sup>42</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education*'s Frederic "thought of the plot of a play and of subjects for paintings," "dreamt of symphonies," "wanted to paint" and attempts "to write a novel called *Sylvio, A Fisherman's Son*, etc." Assembled in Bourdieu, *Rules of Art*, 5.

<sup>43</sup> "Combien je regrette souvent de n'être pas un savant, et comme j'envie ces calmes existences passées à étudier des pattes de mouche, des étoiles ou des fleurs!". Gustave Flaubert, Lettre à Mademoiselle Leroyer de Chantepie, 1er mars 1858. *Oeuvres Complètes de Gustave Flaubert*.

<sup>44</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, Translated by Raymond N. MacKenzie (Hackett Publishing, 2000) 359, 186.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

Charles to take Emma to the opera, where she sees Leon and renews her acquaintance with him. The disaster of Charles's clubfoot surgery occurs at Homais' instigation, and Homais plants the idea of arsenic in Emma's head. When the *sociétés savantes* are mentioned by Flaubert's critics, it is almost always in regards to Homais' sign-off, although the clerks are more fully fleshed out versions of this same provincial type. It was Flaubert's friends Maxime Du Camp and Louis Bouilhet who convinced him to make a suicidal housewife the subject of his text,<sup>46</sup> but the character of Homais steals the spotlight as soon as he appears. As *Madame Bovary* progresses, Emma's readings appear increasingly as an alibi for interrogating the alternate future for applied literature embodied by Homais.

The clearest expression of Homais' ruthless instrumentalism occurs at the end of *Madame Bovary*, when his ointments fail to cure a blind local beggar of his facial sores, and so the chemist desperately seeks to conceal this evidence of his failure. (This is the same blind man whose image has tormented Emma throughout the narrative, appearing at the moment of her death). Inventing stories for the local *Beacon* about the blind man's threat to village serenity, describing his "leprous and scrofulous diseases" as blights upon village life, Homais finally succeeds at getting the blind man imprisoned for life.<sup>47</sup>

Harrison notes how beggars "were an obsession of the General Associations," charitable groups organized by the savant societies. Much like Homais, these associations saw charity as part of their prerogative as agents of local progress. However, this charity

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<sup>46</sup> See "Introduction," *Madame Bovary: Provincial Lives*, x.

<sup>47</sup> *Madame Bovary*, 355.

of the savants viewed the poor chiefly as obstacles to modern progress and development.

As Harrison recounts,

The ‘extirpation of mendicity’ was the first priority of the Bisontin association. Before the close of its first year, the association convinced local authorities to criminalize public begging...Mendicity was a moral, rather than an economic, problem. Its practitioners rejected the solutions of work and family that bourgeois philanthropists offered to the ills of pauperism.<sup>48</sup>

The savants had little tolerance for any art, group, or lifestyle that did not directly contribute to their modernizing agenda; like Homais, they did not hesitate to imprison beggars in order to “improve” the village. Since, as Slavoj Žižek observes, “capitalism cannot reproduce itself on its own,” “it needs extra-economic charity to sustain the cycle of social reproduction.”<sup>49</sup> As Žižek puts it, “Charity is the humanitarian mask hiding the face of economic exploitation.”<sup>50</sup> This is a form of bourgeois hypocrisy Flaubert knew well:

A magnificent dream consumed [Bouvard and Pécuchet]. If they succeeded with their pupils’ education, they would found an institution whose purpose would be to rectify minds, straighten our personalities, ennoble hearts. They were already talking about subscriptions and building new wings. (250)

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<sup>48</sup> Harrison, 169-70.

<sup>49</sup> Žižek, 20.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 19.

Such self-serving initiatives enact the worst possible interpretation of the DIY ideology to mean a diversion from a more conscientious form of social participation. “Do-it-yourself” has come to mean “do it to others”—guilt free.

Homais’ successes as village guardian and budding journalist embolden him, and he soon tries his hand at more grandiose occupations. Flaubert describes his trajectory in *Madame Bovary*, in a paragraph that offers a condensed version of the entire epic of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*:

Now for a book, an opus! Accordingly, he compiled a *Statistical Survey of the Canton of Yonville, with Climatological Observations*. Statistics led him into philosophy. He turned his mind to the questions of the day, to social problems, to the ‘moralization’ of the lower classes, to fish-breeding, rubber, railways, and so on. He began to feel ashamed of being a bourgeois; he aped the artistic temperament; he smoked! And he bought a smart pair of Pompadour statuettes to grace his drawing room. (*MB* 356)

A cascade effect links Homais’ dabbling with lower class morality to his forays with rubber and railways, just as Bouvard and Pécuchet will not only experiment with chemistry and geology, but will dabble in education, village politics, and medicine. What is important for Flaubert is that social justice is just another item in the list of Homais’ self-serving ambitions; charity has no nobler a motive than fish breeding, and benevolence is not exempt from the callousness of the dilettante. From the perspective of the savant, Pompadour statuettes and problems of social class are equivalent; poverty is merely one more discipline to check off the list. No comment or critique from Flaubert is

required; the mere framework of the list is enough to indicate the full scope of his character's instrumentalism.

Just as Bouvard and Pécuchet eventually grow unable to tolerate stupidity (“Then their minds developed a piteous faculty, that of perceiving stupidity and being unable to tolerate it”) (205), a point that critics of the narrative like to stress, Homais ‘began to feel ashamed of being a bourgeois,’ in a way that should discourage readers from interpreting Bouvard and Pécuchet’s increasing self-awareness as a sign of their moral improvement. While one would be hard-pressed to find anything redeeming about Homais’ self-serving schemes, some critics, spurred by the clerks’ increasing intolerance for stupidity, regard Bouvard and Pécuchet as mouthpieces for Flaubert’s political critique.<sup>51</sup> Rather than relying on the expertise of authorities, Bouvard and Pécuchet insist upon testing all knowledge firsthand, and so are seen as rebelling against the narrowness of disciplinary stratification. Marx might say that Bouvard and Pécuchet’s DIY projects reflect their frustration with the “one-sided development” of the division of labor: “If the circumstances in which the individual lives allow him only the one-sided development of a single quality at the expense of all the rest, if they give him the material and time to develop only that one quality, then this individual achieves only a one-sided, crippled development.”<sup>52</sup> Sentenced by their jobs to copy all day long, the clerks yearn to express their autonomy through their leisure.

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<sup>51</sup> See, for instance, Richard Terdiman, “Counter-Humorists: Strategies of Ideological Critique in Marx and Flaubert.” *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 9, no. 3 (1979): 18-32, and Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*.

<sup>52</sup> Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (London: GBR, ElecBook, 1970), 147.

But the heroism of the DIY method of capitalist subversion is questionable at best. Experimenting first with making their own liquor, then with preserving food in tins, the clerks “began to suspect fraud in all food products.” “They quibbled with the baker on the color of his bread. They made an enemy of the grocer by claiming that he adulterated his chocolate” (48). Today DIY reflects a wariness of assembly line anonymity, but within the context of nineteenth-century France, the clerks’ complacency is an insult to the craftsmen and specialists who have devoted their lives to the trades which the clerks so haphazardly appropriate. It is when the DIY spirit becomes privatized as leisure activity that it is most pernicious; when DIY enters the modern home it is not as an undermining of the relations of production, but as the elusive quest for the perfect, purest product.

The clerks proudly invite some villagers over to taste their homemade wares, but the response is distressing. In a preview of many similar scenes to follow in the wake of the twenty-first century Brooklyn artisanal movement, Flaubert recounts the outcome of the clerks’ experiments in home preserving:

Pécuchet opened a bottle of his Malaga, less out of generosity than in hopes of hearing it praised. But the laborer made a grimace and said it was “like licorice syrup.” And his wife, “to get the taste out of her mouth,” demanded a glass of brandy...Pécuchet, tormented by the mishap with the Malaga, took the tins from the armoire, opened the lid of the first, then a second, then a third. He tossed them aside in a rage and called Bouvard over...



Their disappointment was complete. The slices of veal looked like boiled shoe soles. A murky liquid had replaced the lobster. The fish stew was beyond recognition. Mushrooms were growing on the soup. And the entire laboratory reeked with an intolerable stench. (50)

According to Marx, the bespoke impulse reflects the desire for “self-assertion” which life under capitalism produces; alienated from the outcome of their labor, in their leisure people want to stamp their individuality on the objects they produce. However, as long as economic exchange under capitalism continues, Marx warns that this desire for self-assertion will always be futile. In Marx’s ideal communist society, every individual would be well rounded and proficient in different fields, the idealized versions of which Bouvard and Pécuchet are the sad and inadequate reality. But this productive, generative form of autodidacticism would only be possible in a society driven by community, rather than self-interest, where people’s skills are freely developed, rather than imposed by the economy as necessary respite from alienated labor. “Within communist society, the only society in which the original and free development of individuals ceases to be a mere phrase, this development is determined precisely by the connection of individuals,” and it is a product of “the necessary solidarity of the free development of all,” Marx says.<sup>53</sup> This free development is not something that can be willed by the individual in her leisure time; it must be a well roundedness that the empirical conditions of social life demand. On the one hand, Marx believes that it is only when communism has arrived that anything like a true self-help would be possible. On the other, though, the revolution can only occur

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<sup>53</sup> Marx, 163.

through the autonomous efforts of the people, a position that leads to the well-known contradiction between the need for action and the insistence upon economic determinism in Marx's thought.

And so, lest we over-idealize the clerks' pursuits, Marx reminds us of the do-it-yourselfer's inexorable subjection. Similarly, according to Adorno, the danger of the DIY spirit is the possibility of a kind of false consciousness in regards to the extent of one's emancipation from the conditions one is protesting. Speaking of DIY, Adorno trenchantly muses, in a passage worth quoting in full,

'Do it yourself,' this contemporary type of spare time behaviour fits however into a much more far-reaching context. More than thirty years ago I described such behavior as 'pseudo-activity'. Since then pseudoactivity has spread alarmingly, even (and especially) amongst those people who regard themselves as anti-establishment. Generally speaking there is good reason to assume that all forms of pseudo-activity contain a pent-up need to change the petrified relations of society. Pseudo-activity is misguided spontaneity. Misguided, but not accidentally so; because people do have a dim suspicion of how hard it would be to throw off the yoke that weighs upon them. They prefer to be distracted by spurious and illusory activities, by institutionalized vicarious satisfactions, than to face up to the awareness of how little access they have to the possibility of change today. Pseudo-activities are fictions and parodies of the same productivity which society on the one hand incessantly calls for, but on the other holds in check and, as far as the individual is concerned, does not really desire at

all.<sup>54</sup>

Pseudo-activities are daydreams borne of middle-class malaise. *Bouvard and Pécuchet* is an experiment in what would happen if one had the opportunity to render the DIY imaginary real: what if you were granted that sudden windfall, that early retirement, the country house you had been yearning for? It is likely that, just as for Flaubert's characters, the desk job would acquire a whole new kind of appeal, and you would soon be plotting your return to the shackles of menial labor. DIY is a paradigmatic expression of the desire for self-expression that capitalism produces but can never fulfill. To view the clerks as models of subversive agency would be to treat their pseudoactivity as consequential, and to ignore Flaubert's prescient insistence upon the insufficiency of the do-it-yourself imaginary.

In a fairly mordant critique of the virtuousness of the homemade, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* do not transcend consumerism through their projects but become all the more indebted and enslaved. What is shocking about Flaubert's position is the capaciousness of his critique of the pragmatic tendency; for him, political plotting and home preserving are equally "spurious" and "illusory," to use Adorno's terms. Part of Flaubert's agenda in setting *Bouvard and Pécuchet* thirty years in the past was to document the retrospective futility of revolutionary hopes. While the early half of the nineteenth century in France was defined by revolutionary aspirations, by 1870, when Flaubert was writing, the emergence of the Paris Commune and the defeat of the Battle of Sedan meant that "enthusiasm dropped, institutions vegetated, decadence began to take hold in historical

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<sup>54</sup> Adorno, 194.

and social thought,” as Claudine Cohen recounts. According to her, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* became for Flaubert, “ a kind of observatory from which it was possible...to judge with a certain cynicism the revolutionary, romantic hopes placed in the success of science and the progress of the human spirit.”<sup>55</sup> Like *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, *Sentimental Education* and *Madame Bovary* are defined by a refusal to hierarchize the fields of human endeavor. This is not merely an elitist denigration of amateur curiosity in favor of professionalism, but a panoramic meditation upon the farcical futility of all human efforts at warding off the inevitable omnipotence of the natural world. Indeed, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*’s deranged literalism shows up the dogmatism of all, even the most established, disciplinary fields. Flaubert confessed to Guy de Maupassant, “I want to show that education, no matter what it is, does not signify much, and that nature does everything, or almost everything” (*BP* xxxi-ii). Driven by the desire to master the vagaries of the market, the body, and the social world, the self-help spirit appealed to Flaubert’s interest in the pathos of “human aspiration: the age-old desire to be more than oneself, to reach fulfillment, to find happiness” (*BP* x). *Bouvard and Pécuchet* raises the difficult problem of what kind of activity would count as “authentic” self-help in the face of the idle ostentation of “conspicuous leisure.”

### **Cultivating Gardens**

“The end of *Candide*—‘let us cultivate our garden’—is the greatest moral lesson that exists,”  
- Flaubert to Edmond de Goncourt, (“Preface,” *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, xxix):

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<sup>55</sup> Claudine Cohen, “Bouvard et Pécuchet réécrivent les sciences,” *Alliage*, numéro 37-38, 1998: 2.

The July revolution of 1830, combined with the rise of industrial progress, created a cultural privileging of the utilitarian in France that many savants endorsed, but others wanted to resist. As M. Charles Louandre observed: “A new era has commenced for the sociétés savantes with the July revolution...When you compare, to thirty years ago, the research of the sociétés savantes, the thing that first strikes you is the predominance of positivist and purely scientific studies above literary subjects, and the complete effacement of philosophical research.”<sup>56</sup> In his “Discours du President” before the *Société Impériale des Sciences, de l'Agriculture et des Arts de Lille*, Auguste Lamy lyrically pleaded with his constituency, “An eloquent oratorical movement, a beautiful poetic composition, a natural scene seized in a flash of truth by a painter, a soft melody, a magisterial harmony that touches us, moves us, fills us with admiration, and it never occurs to us to ask: what use does it serve?”<sup>57</sup> Lamy emphatically continues, “The most seemingly useless theoretical research...can become, with time, the source of the most important applications for the well-being of man.”<sup>58</sup> While the savants saw it as their mission to educate the lower classes about French scientific progress and industry, they also styled themselves as guardians of the inutile, protectors of the pure, disinterested research that was being threatened by the predominance of manual labor. One savant dramatically exclaimed, “There is no longer an office of the mind, but an office of

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<sup>56</sup> Charles Louandre, “De L’Association Littéraire et Scientifique en France: Les Sociétés savantes et littéraires de Paris.” *Revue Des Deux Mondes* XVI Année. Nouvelle Série, (Tome XVI, 1er Octobre, 1846), 520.

<sup>57</sup> Auguste Lamy, *Mémoires de la Société Impériale des Sciences, de l'Agriculture et des Arts de Lille*, 2nd ser. 9, 1862, xlii.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, xli.

recipes; the products of thought are priced like merchandise in a boutique.”<sup>59</sup> It is in this climate, amid these debates, that Flaubert writes his final narrative. “Bouvard and Pécuchet are great consumers of guides and manuals of practical science, which they use like books of recipes,” as Cohen observes.<sup>60</sup>

During this period, one of the most intense sites for debates regarding the merits of utilitarian versus speculative research was the garden. In the provinces, where the societies flourished, horticulture was a primary focus. Harrison notes,

Bourgeois associations claimed that horticulture was as vital to the public good as agriculture and hence that their activities were as useful as those of agricultural societies. The Bisontin association paid for a ‘professor of horticulture’ to tour the department giving lectures on ‘rational methods’ to replace old routines.’...In addition to sponsoring lectures, the Mulhousien society assembled a horticultural library and a collection of wax fruit that established a standard of perfection for all gardeners.<sup>61</sup>

While the horticultural societies described their principle aim as being to teach the lower classes the science of gardening, in fact these lectures were attended by a distinctly bourgeois demographic. Instead of promoting the uplift of the town—their original purpose—the society’s garden quickly became a privileged respite from the dinginess of

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 522.

<sup>60</sup> Cohen, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Harrison, 107.

the rest of the village, a place where bourgeois men could fraternize away from the inquiring eyes of the local peasants.<sup>62</sup>

The garden was also the place for the gender politics of bourgeois leisure pursuits to make themselves felt. While “decorative” gardening was considered a distinctly feminine pursuit, the sociétés savantes sought to promote the more “masculine” public utility of their horticultural endeavors. Harrison explains, “Floriculture was an agreeable distraction for ladies, but men who grew vegetables were ‘contributing to the improvement of gardens for...the well-being of the population, and thus providing yet another assurance of the maintenance of the good order and prosperity of France’.”<sup>63</sup> Yet with its portrayal of the masculine degradation of the aesthetic, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* challenges the critical narrative which views Emma Bovary’s consumptive reading approach as a uniquely feminine phenomenon. Rita Felksi claims that for Flaubert and other modernists, “woman is the archetypal naïve reader who is unable to distinguish between texts and life,” arguing that Emma Bovary’s textual literalism is “symptomatic of a particular ideology of femininity.”<sup>64</sup> However, the continuities between Emma’s reading methodology and the clerks’ suggests that Flaubert’s critique is not directed at a particular gender, but at the broader utilitarian climate they reflect.

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<sup>62</sup> Žižek notes, of the hypocrisy of charity, “The exemplary figures of evil today are not ordinary consumers who pollute the environment and live in a violent world of disintegrating social links, but those who, while fully engaged in creating conditions for such universal devastation and pollution, buy their way out of their own activity, living in gated communities, eating organic fruit, taking holidays in wildlife preserves, and so on” (27).

<sup>63</sup> Harrison, 107-108.

<sup>64</sup> Felksi, 85.

Although they consult local specialists, the clerks do not attend local lectures on how to garden; instead, their source of authority is a Roret manual, although Pécuchet dreams that he will one day be “a member of an agricultural society, would shine at exhibitions, be quoted in the newspaper” (38). However, after a great storm destroys the clerks’ farming efforts, tearing their latticework and fruit to the ground, the manual’s authority is undermined, and its prescriptions adopt a questionable air:

The authors recommend stopping up the ducts. If not, the sap gets blocked and the tree suffers. To thrive, it really shouldn’t bear fruit at all. Still, the ones that are never pruned or manured produce better fruit—smaller, maybe, but more flavorful. I demand that someone tell me why that is! And it’s not just each variety that requires specific care, but each individual tree depending on the climate, the temperature, and God knows what else! So then, where’s the rule?

And what hope do we have of any success or profit? (*BP* 38)

Flaubert’s aesthetic critique of the instruction manual has two grounds. First, the manual can’t account for the infinite particularities of actual life—it can’t anticipate all the contingencies of temperature, locale, reader, etc., that may arise. Second, the manual needlessly meddles with the natural order; what little advantage it provides simultaneously creates more problems that need to be solved. By unnaturally forcing a tree to produce fruit, you create an excess of sap, which in turn needs to be managed or stopped, reflecting self-help’s complicity in producing the demand for ever more manuals, consumption, and work.



Consulting multiple, often contradictory volumes at once, the clerks' projects are undone by their very excess of enthusiasm, which ultimately serves to undermine the authority of the instigating text. Their overzealous embrace of the self-help spirit leads to its implosion. At the same time, it is this very failure to perfectly inhabit the self-help ethos that ensures the continuance of the clerks' textual engagements. Like Pécuchet with his gardening manual, Emma also practices a form of talismanic identification, and she is similarly susceptible to the influence of the pictorial. Just as Pécuchet admires a gardening manual for its cover, Emma decides, "She wanted to become a saint. She bought rosaries, wore amulets, and asked for a little reliquary set in emeralds to be placed at the head of her bed, that she might kiss it every night."<sup>65</sup> Emma's fantasy of acquiring sainthood by imitating it resonates with the modern injunction to "dress the part" or "dress for success." A similar sensibility is associated with the character Martinon in *Sentimental Education* who, "wanting already to appear serious, wore his beard cut like a collar around his neck."<sup>66</sup> Emma's focus on ornament rather than ideals is an example of what Jonathan Culler calls her "misplaced concreteness,"<sup>67</sup> a disorder the copy clerks suffer from as well. Her fixation on accessories reflects her superficiality, but it also represents Emma's wish for a shortcut to the rewards and markers of meaningful experience.

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<sup>65</sup> *MB*, 225.

<sup>66</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education* (New York: Dover, 2006), 17.

<sup>67</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974), 196.

Earlier, “Emma wanted to learn Italian: she bought dictionaries, a grammar book, and a provision of white paper. She tried serious reading, history, and philosophy.”<sup>68</sup> The constructions of the sentences about sainthood and Italian are almost identical. Both sentences begin with an abrupt declaration of desire (in the French, in both cases, “Elle voulut...”), and then proceed to list the acquisitions imagined to be necessary for its fulfillment. Discussed in isolation, such narrative moments appear almost inconsequential; the reader might even applaud the character’s resolve. When compiled and compared, however, and by sheer virtue of their multiplicity, the declarations adopt a kind of Sisyphean fatalism, where their very familiarity belies the resolution being described. The same formula appears with slight variations (from the passé simple to the imperfect “Ils voulaient...”) in *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. On ancient history: “They wanted to read the original sources, Grégoire de Tours, Monstrelet, Commines, all those authors with strange and enticing names.”<sup>69</sup> Or later, speaking of Bouvard, “He wanted to learn, to further his knowledge of mores. He reread Paul de Kock, skimmed through an old copy of *The Hermit of the Chaussée-d’Antin*.”<sup>70</sup> The effect of this structure is to highlight the belatedness of the textual aids, which, as in the scene with the gardening manual, are consigned to an afterthought because they are always dependent upon the desires they serve. In addition, the aesthetic object’s singularity is nullified by virtue of the list-like sequence in which it appears. Like with Emma, the clerks’ future projects are driven not by choice but by a kind of accidental necessity; they need new exploits to

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<sup>68</sup> *MB*, 137.

<sup>69</sup> *BP*, 106.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

distract them from previous failures, and from the ontological emptiness that their projects are meant to conceal.

Disillusioned with the gardening manual whose cover he had so admired, Pécuchet attempts to conceal his barren fruit trees, the embarrassing reminders of his horticultural inadequacy, with the help of Boitard's *The Garden Architect*, a Roret guide to different landscaping styles. Boitard divides gardens into different types; there is the "Melancholic or Romantic" garden, which incorporates ruins and tombs, the "Dreadful" type of landscape, which uses hanging rocks and shattered trees, the "Exotic," "Pensive," "Fantastic," "Majestic," and "Mysterious" styles of gardens (*BP* 39). In the actual handbook, Boitard introduces the section "On Conventions and Scenes," which the clerks use to construct their own landscape, with the remark that "it is necessary to establish a principle that applies to all, without which we would create only ridiculous or absurd compositions: we want to speak about the rule of convention."<sup>71</sup> One can imagine how this schooling in conventionality would have appeared to the author of the *Dictionary of Clichés*! Later on, though, Boitard admits, "If we wanted to preview and describe every convention or more this chapter would be too long, and even had we chosen to turn it into a thick volume, it would still be incomplete, for there are a thousand conventions for each state, for each position in the world, and maybe for each man."<sup>72</sup> It is the inherent inability of the instruction manual to anticipate every contingency that Bouvard and Pécuchet's disastrous pastimes bring to the fore.

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<sup>71</sup> M. Boitard, *Manuel de L'Architecte des Jardins: L'art de les composer et de les décorer*. (Paris: Chez Leonce Laget, 1834), 32.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

Flaubert's protagonists are characterized by their susceptibility to passing fads, and Boitard's landscaping "moods" present no exception. Deciding on the "Dreadful" type of landscape, due to the regional accessibility of rocks and moss, Pécuchet even incorporates a fallen tree into his landscaping tableau. Once finished, he proudly displays his garden to a crowd of the village elite:

In the light of dusk, it was something terrifying to behold. The mountainous boulder occupied the entire lawn, the tomb formed a cube in the middle of the spinach, the Venetian bridge made a circumflex over the beans—and beyond that, the cabana was a huge black blot, for they had scorched its roof to render it more poetic. (44)

The villagers are not impressed. "Madame Bourdin burst out laughing, everyone else followed suit. The priest emitted a kind of clucking, Hurel coughed, and the doctor had tears in his eyes... So much disparagement was due to the blackest envy," the copy clerks surmise (45-47). Pécuchet is oblivious to the inappropriateness of the setting of the vegetable garden for the poeticism of his landscaping art; his garden is the monstrous outcome of the attempt to combine functionalism and aesthetics. One cannot plopp a gothic tomb in the middle of a bed of spinach, merge the lyricism of the Venetian bridge with the pedestrian pods of beans, without regard for the unsightly commingling of the utilitarian and the poetic. The scene parodies the role of the garden in autodidactic culture as a site for indecision over the proper function of aesthetics.

What would it mean to read Flaubert's famous *Dictionary of Clichés*—the sarcastic guide to social conformity that was to conclude *Bouvard and Pécuchet*<sup>73</sup>—in the context of Boitard's insistence upon the need for following convention in designing landscaping tableaux? Ridicule is the risk haunting Boitard's every instruction; it is the punishment for not following his instructions well, the fine line separating a successful and a failed emulation. "Never risk a grand picturesque composition," Boitard warns, "for, if by the force of art, you evade local improprieties and ridicule, you will end up necessarily with the monotonous, particularly if you are without water."<sup>74</sup> Far from encouraging independence of mind and spirit, Boitard's emphasis is on pandering to trend, propriety, and the irrational whims of patrons.

Boitard writes, "In all decorations, you must submit to the taste of the day, to the trends of the moment. These trends are not always very reasonable, we know, but nevertheless, like with a despotic queen: one must obey."<sup>75</sup> Read alongside Boitard, Flaubert's *Dictionary of Clichés* acts as a critique of self-help's schooling in conformity. Flaubert offers in this work a parody of the homogeneity that the self-help manual exploits. For instance, under the entry for "Olive Oil" Flaubert's reader is advised, "Never good. You should have a friend in Marseille who sends you a small barrel of it" (68). Under "Newspapers" he instructs,

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<sup>73</sup> Flaubert had largely completed the *Dictionary* by 1850, prior to beginning *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. From his letters and notes it seems he may have planned for the *Dictionary*, alongside the *Catalogue of Fashionable Ideas*, to compose an entire second volume to *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, "consisting almost entirely of quotations" (*Letters: 1857-1880*, 263). He died, however, before the Volume was complete, leaving the much shorter appendix that is often published with *Bouvard and Pécuchet* today.

<sup>74</sup> Boitard, 32.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

You must leave them about in your drawing room, taking care to cut pages before hand. Marking certain passages in blue is also impressive. In the morning, read an article in one of these grave and solid journals; in the evening, in company, bring the conversation around to the subject, and shine. (66-67)

A critique of the guidebook's ideological complicity, the *Dictionary* parodies self-help's affirmation of the status quo. Indeed, the title "Dictionary" for Flaubert's little volume is a misnomer. Instead of the denotative explanations of clichés one might expect from a dictionary, Flaubert's entries assume a sardonically prescriptive form. "MONOPOLY: Thunder against" (64), "SELFISHNESS: Complain of others people's; overlook your own" (80), "YAWNING: Say, 'Excuse me, it isn't the company, it's my stomach'" (92) etc. Jacques Barzun observes, "The cliché, as its name indicates, is the metal plate that clicks and reproduces the same image mechanically without end. This is what distinguishes it from an idiom or a proverb."<sup>76</sup> But rather than supporting this distinction, Flaubert's *Dictionary* reveals the inextricable complicity between the two modes: many of the clichés Flaubert incorporates are unmistakably proverbial, grounded in the superstitious automatism of the masses (E.g. "BACK: A slap on the back can start tuberculosis") (17). The trajectory of Flaubert's narrative from description to prescription formally documents the self-help "fate" of the literary, or the prescriptive destination of the aesthetic, that occupied his late work.

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<sup>76</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *The Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, Translated & with introduction and Notes by Jacques Barzun (Canada: New Directions Book, 1968), 8.

The *Dictionary*'s ironic engagement with the self-help manual also vulgarizes the novel's traditional investment in social generalities and prescriptions. This is something Flaubert had already begun to address in *Madame Bovary*, in which every single figure of counsel giving is undermined. The inane prescriptions of the curé, the doctor, and the town accountant have repercussions just as dire as any sentimental story Emma reads. Although the *Dictionary* sarcastically registers the proximity between the novel and the guidebook, it is far from a passive concession to the inexorable didacticism of the text. Flaubert concludes his epic critique of textual instrumentalism by offering a heap of clichés where, in a different kind of work, a moral or proverb might reside. Denaturalizing the ritual of proverbial summation, the dictionary of clichés parodies the conceit of the concluding message, turning the proffering of a moral prize into a buffet of useless utterances. The trajectory of *Bouvard and Pécuchet* from narrative to manual, like that of *Madame Bovary* from Emma to Homais, seems to enact language's instrumental fate. It offers a sarcastic retort to the classical desire for textual wisdom, documenting the utilitarian degradation of the literary, the shift from the art of the self to the art of self-management.

## **Conclusion**

In contrast to self-help's insistence upon "mind-power," or the capacity of the will to influence circumstance, Flaubert's narrative documents the futility of human agency and control before the dictates of nature and time. *Bouvard and Pécuchet* is the ruin's ironic retort to the utilitarian interpretations imposed upon it. Imagining the perspective

of the rain, rebuking the gardener's false mastery, it voices chance's guffaw at the merchant's string of good luck, or the fire's disdain for a bountiful harvest of wheat. His sense of the paltriness of human aspiration bleeds into Flaubert's awareness that every aesthetic utterance risks complicity with the worst possible interpretation of it that can arise. He commented, "Books...are made like pyramids. There's some long-pondered plan, and then great blocks of stone are placed one on top of the other, and it's back-breaking, sweaty, time-consuming work. And all to no purpose! It just stands like that in the desert! But it towers over it prodigiously. Jackals piss at the base of it, and bourgeois clamber to the top of it, etc."<sup>77</sup> Describing his impression of the ruins of Carnac on a trip to Brittany, Flaubert returns to the problem of art and utility:

We understood perfectly then the irony of these granite boulders that, since the age of the Druids, have laughed in their green lichen beards at seeing all the imbeciles that came to stare at them. Savants have spent their lives in attempting to determine their past usages; don't you admire this eternal preoccupation of the unfeathered biped with finding some sort of usefulness for everything? Not content with distilling the ocean to salt his stew, and assassinating elephants to

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<sup>77</sup> Les livres ne se font pas comme les enfants, mais comme les pyramides, avec un dessein prémédité, et en apportant des grands blocs l'un par-dessus l'autre, à force de reins, de temps et de sueur, et ça ne sert à rien ! Et ça reste dans le désert ! Mais en le dominant prodigieusement. Les chacals pissent en bas et les bourgeois montent dessus, etc., continue la comparaison. Gustave Flaubert, quoted in Albert Thibaudet's *Gustave Flaubert* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit et cie, 1922), 136.



make knife-handles out of them, his egotism is again provoked when he is faced with some debris or other whose utility he can't figure out.<sup>78</sup>

Bourgeois "egotism" emerges in response to the inability to recognize an object's use. However, this inability to ascertain an object's use is for Kant a precondition for appreciation of the beautiful.<sup>79</sup> Thus, self-help is threatening for Flaubert because its insistence on use robs us of a precious opportunity for beauty. At the same time, their unprecedented confidence in the durability of the utilitarian hermeneutic (brought about by its increasing commodification) granted authors like Flaubert, and later Joyce, West, and Beckett, a margin for aestheticist deviation that would not pose a threat to their writings' social integration. These authors were free to critique, undermine, and divert the self-help hermeneutic because they had witnessed first hand the tremendous ubiquity and persistence of the utilitarian compulsion.

To conclude, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* lays important groundwork for the analyses that follow. It dispels the taint of the anachronistic by exemplifying how the do-it-yourself ethos provides a productive occasion to question the very sustainability of one of the earliest and most foundational experiments in modernist negation. The narrative further indicates how a subject so seemingly trivial as self-improvement actually touches upon such themes as the intractability of death and nature, while also laying bare the dependence of the ideal of aesthetic autonomy on the pervasiveness of the utilitarian

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<sup>78</sup> *Oeuvres Complètes de Gustave Flaubert, Vol. X. Correspondence II (1850-1859)* (Paris: Club de l'honnête homme, 1974-1976), 99.

<sup>79</sup> He writes, "of all these three kinds of satisfaction [the pleasant, the good, the beautiful], that of taste in the beautiful is alone a disinterested and free satisfaction; for no interest, either of interest or reason, here forces our assent" Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), 44.

spirit. If Bouvard and Pécuchet grew out of savant culture, theirs is another kind of do-it-yourself activity. Flaubert's narrative documents a crucial moment of social change when the communal improvement spirit becomes privatized as a form of domestic, leisure activity, when the locus of self-help shifts from the public square to the private garden. It depicts how this privatization of self-help corresponds to its textualization, for what Flaubert's novel indicates above all is the literary import of this newly instrumentalized reading method. Thoroughly attuned to the earliest glimmers of the self-improvement craze, Flaubert, the founder of high modernist aestheticism, feared the brute, assimilative power of bourgeois utilitarianism to absorb even the most recalcitrant of literary and philosophical objects.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Chasing Healthy-Mindedness in Wharton and James

The antediluvians Henry James and Edith Wharton are not authors typically associated with the modern discourse of self-help. Doing so stretches our sense of both the scope of these authors' cultural engagements, as well as the temporal parameters of the self-improvement industry. Yet their critiques of the early self-improvement ethos could almost be mistaken for contemporary polemics. To point this out is not to dehistoricize their works but rather to paint a picture of the late-Victorian pre-history of self-help, which for these authors encapsulates anxieties over the generational continuity between Victorian moralism and the new therapeutic ethic.

While Flaubert's proto-modernist aestheticism is premised upon his merciless derision of the do-it-yourself epistemology, Wharton and James develop a more dialectical account of modernism's engagement with self-help's triumphalist discourse. In "The Jolly Corner" (1908) modernism's fetishism of interiority and self-help's exploitation of possibility meet in the figure of the "black stranger" who haunts Spencer Brydon's regret-filled imaginary. James shows self-help's obsession with professional and economic potentiality to be the counterfactual other of modernist psychology. Wharton's novel *Twilight Sleep* (1927) further and more sardonically troubles modernism's oppositional stance toward self-improvement discourse. For Wharton, self-help and modernism are fundamentally linked through their embrace of individualism, stream of consciousness, and seeming eschewal of history and tradition.

At first glance, no aesthetic movement seems further removed from self-help practicality than modernist abstraction. If, as Marshall Berman writes, modernity is a “crystal palace” in which no one wants to live,<sup>1</sup> then trying to inhabit modernism is like trying to snuggle up comfortably in an Eames fiberglass chair. The inhospitality of modernism is parodied in Frank King’s beloved 1930 comic strip *Gasoline Alley*, which depicts an uncle and his nephew at an exhibit of modernist art. “Modernism is a bit beyond me. I’d hate to live in the place that picture was painted,” Uncle Walt confesses, only to find himself trapped inside a modernist painting, roaming amidst a nightmarish cubist landscape of harsh angles and crooked streets.<sup>2</sup> Do we need our art to be habitable, as *Gasoline Alley* suggests, or does art’s value lie in its uncanny inutility, in its capacity to expose what Robert Musil calls the “other condition” that underwrites the everyday? Such, for instance, is the contention of Philip Weinstein in *Unknowing*, which describes European modernism as the systematic revelation of the “blind spots” of self-knowledge.<sup>3</sup> For Wharton, James, and even contemporary authors such as David Foster Wallace, self-help comes to stand for this problem of the everyday viability of the modernist stance.

As a result of the literature’s reputation for esoteric impracticality (or better, anti-practicality), when self-help arises in modernism it produces a crisis of cognitive dissonance, or what sociologist Erving Goffman calls a “role dilemma.” Self-help marks a neediness that you can’t write your way out of. As Goffman writes,

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 242.

<sup>2</sup> Frank King, “Gasoline Alley,” © *The Chicago Tribune*, 1930. *The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics*. Edited by Bill Blackbeard and Martin Williams (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977), 108.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Musil, “Toward a New Aesthetic” *Precision and Soul* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 207. Philip Weinstein, *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 1.

Often important everyday occasions of embarrassment arise when the self projected is somehow confronted with another self which, though valid in other contexts, cannot be here sustained in harmony with the first. Embarrassment, then, leads us to the matter of “role segregation.” Each individual has more than one role, but he is saved from role dilemma by “audience segregation,” for, ordinarily, those before whom he plays out one of his roles will not be the individuals before whom he plays out another, allowing him to be a different person in each role without discrediting either.<sup>4</sup>

Self-help produces embarrassment—not merely about the triviality of its methods—but also about intellectualism’s limits, as I shall explore more fully in the conclusion to this chapter. If modernism’s impersonality, interiority, and aestheticism represent different strategies for opposing self-help culture, Wharton and James undermine this role segregation. Their narratives bring out the matrix of speculation, aspiration, and paralysis that unites the two discourses.

### **Spencer Brydon Tries Positive Thinking**

Scholars have long suggested that Henry James may have provided the model for the “sick soul” described by his brother William James as the “nerveless sentimentalist and dreamer, who spends his life in a weltering sea of sensibility and emotion, but who never does a manly concrete deed.”<sup>5</sup> But little work has been done on the reverse

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<sup>4</sup> Erving Goffman, “Embarrassment and Social Organization.” *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-Face Behavior* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2005), 108.

<sup>5</sup> William James, *Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1918), 125). Speaking of this passage, Ross Posnock notes “it is difficult not to detect in this description

question: how William James's promotion of the early self-help philosophy of "mind-cure" inspired Henry James's critique of popular strategies of self-realization. Against the success paradigm that prospered during the years of its composition, "The Jolly Corner" addresses the familial and psychological casualties, the role of chance, habit and futility, left out of popular narratives of professional achievement. Attending to James's engagement with the rising field of self-help emphasizes the author's prospective orientation, rather than his retrospective glances, and enables a new reading of modernist interiority as representing the "immaterial labor" of compulsory self-betterment.<sup>6</sup> In James's story, the interminability of self-perfection and that of modernist revisionism converge.

Advertising *What You Can Do With Your Will Power* (1917),<sup>7</sup> the success manuals of James's time incorporated biographical profiles and pictures of successful individuals, hunting for clues to prosperity in the wrinkles of Cornelius Vanderbilt's brow, for instance, or for inklings of future authorial prowess in Shakespeare's youthful perseverance as a wool-comber. Translating class constraints into a mere matter of personality, success manuals emphasized the role of strategy, perseverance, and sociability in professional achievement. As John Torrance explains, "Since...unplanned economic processes appear to the individual as chance, he tries to combat mischance or

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a caricature of Henry" *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 64.

<sup>6</sup> By "immaterial labor," I mean the intangible, extracurricular work demanded by life under capitalism. A contemporary example would be social networking. The concept is discussed in some depth by Maurizio Lazzarato in "General Intellect: Towards an Inquiry into Immaterial Labour," *Immaterial Labour, Mass Intellectuality, New Constitution, Post Fordism and All That* (London: Red Notes, 1994), I-14.

<sup>7</sup> Russel H Conwell, *What You Can Do With Your Will Power* (New York: National Extension University, 1917).

‘failure,’ by following rules that are supposed to increase the probability of success.”<sup>8</sup>

Paving the way for modernists to follow, “The Jolly Corner” captures the intimate aftermath of self-improvement’s false promises.

Centering upon a crisis where the protagonist comes face to face with the specter of his lost potential, “The Jolly Corner” explores how everyday inertia can foster unwitting resignation to a career whose reality we might never have consciously chosen. This theme of the contingency of career upon which so much of self-help is premised is one that modernists also exploit. Modernism’s use of irony, estrangement, and interior monologue make it particularly suited to expressing the feeling of occupational ambivalence. *Ulysses*, for instance, draws to a close with the following rumination:

What future careers had been possible for Bloom in the past and with what exemplars?

In the church, Roman, Anglican, or Nonconformist: exemplars, the very reverend John Conmee S.J., the reverend T. Salmon, D.D., provost of Trinity college, Dr Alexander J. Dowie. At the bar, English or Irish: exemplars, Seymor Bushe, K.C., Rufus Isaacs, K.C. On the stage, modern or Shakespearean: exemplars, Charles Wyndham, high comedian, Osmond Tearle († 1901), exponent of Shakespeare.<sup>9</sup>

Lawyer, thespian, reverend priest, Shakespearean interpreter: all these careers once mingled upon Bloom’s professional horizon. However, by the time we meet him in *Ulysses*, Bloom is snugly ensconced in his identity as advertising salesman. How then to

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<sup>8</sup> John Torrance, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Ideas* (Cambridge UP: 1995), 323.

<sup>9</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses: The Corrected Text*. Edited by Hans Walter Gabler et al. (New York: Random House, 1986), 17.788.

account for this fatal disproportion between youthful potential and the seeming irreversibility of vocation?

One has to have had a lot of luck in life to even be in a position to luxuriate in lost chances as modernism's protagonists do. One has to have survived accidents, catastrophes, even to have attained some degree of occupational success, however unfulfilling it may be. There are gradations of tragedy, in other words, and that of merely aging comfortably may seem the least deserving of our sympathy. Joyce's "Ithacan" narration pokes fun at Bloom's hubris in imagining that he could have been successful in all of these different fields. But "Ithaca" also depicts that very human need, felt more urgently as one grows older, to imbue the accidental quality of life with some semblance of necessity. "A paradigm for the organization of personality,"<sup>10</sup> career becomes a form of "self-understanding" in nineteenth-century fiction,<sup>11</sup> synonymous with the very act of self-definition. Thus, it is unsurprising that the feeling of the arbitrariness of vocation corresponds to uncertainty regarding the necessity of national, familial, and social attachments; in other words, to an undermining of the stability of the self and the constituent elements of identity. Since, as Magali Larson notes, "career is a pattern of organization of the self,"<sup>12</sup> the precariousness of occupation and identity are intertwined.

Like Joyce, Joseph Conrad similarly establishes a link between self-knowledge and occupational remorse. He writes,

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<sup>10</sup> Alan L. Mintz, *George Eliot and the Novel of Vocation in England* (Columbia University Dissertation, 1975), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Dames, "Trollope and the Career: Vocational Trajectories and the Management of Ambition." *Victorian Studies* 45.2 (Winter 2003), 248.

<sup>12</sup> Magali Sarfatti Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California, 1977), 229.



No man engaged in a work he does not like can preserve many saving illusions about himself. The distaste, the absence of glamour, extend from the occupation to the personality. It is only when our appointed activities seem by a lucky accident to obey the particular earnestness of our temperament that we can taste the comfort of complete self-deception.<sup>13</sup>

If wisdom is a product of workplace dissatisfaction, the opposite of this self-aware malcontent might be the professional who embraces his institutional role unquestioningly, who gingerly mounts the rungs of the corporate ladder without so much as a passing glance at the abyssal possibilities below. Conrad, Joyce, and James develop a morality of regret in response to the narrow optimism of institutional ambition. They describe occupational ambivalence as a defense against historical presentism and its attendant ethical presumptions. This morality of regret is no doubt connected to the aftermath of the Boer and First World Wars, which generated suspicion of narratives of power, control, and the glorification of human achievement. As we will see, Wharton also associates self-help's virulent optimism with war propaganda. For her, as for James, self-help represents the potential monomania of present aspirations, a phenomenon the war emphasizes in a particularly dramatic and consequential way.

By staging narratives of career contingency, modernism at once accommodates and critiques self-help's exploitation of professional malaise. Karl Marx describes the retrospective questioning of one's vocation as a symptom of capitalist demoralization. The "accidental character" of career, he notes, "appears only with the emergence of class,

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (New York: Barnes and Nobles Classics, 2007), 97.

which is itself a product of the bourgeoisie.”<sup>14</sup> An unstable job market, unhappiness with the monotony of one’s work, disillusionment with one’s youthful ideals, all these circumstances can incite mid-life fantasies of career revision, and can bring into relief the contingency of the vocation one has chosen. Thus, the accidental character of career appears another product of capitalism’s empty promises. Constrained by class, parental status, educational background, racial and gender identity, the individual erroneously imagines that success or failure is his own personal responsibility. And the self-help industry positively thrives amid these circumstances. James documents how the success ideology is lived as misplaced guilt at failing to inhabit life’s seemingly infinite possibilities.

If it seems anachronistic to read “The Jolly Corner’s” protagonist Spencer Brydon as one who has internalized too many motivational tracts, who has listened to too many diatribes about the power of positive thinking, it is only because our view of self-help is too narrowly confined to interwar, Dale Carnegie-era America, when Carnegie was really the culmination of self-help movements that originated much earlier, particularly in the school of “New Thought” endorsed by Henry’s brother William James. Inspired by Transcendentalism, New Thought was a late nineteenth-century mystical movement that espoused the principle of “mind-cure,” or the belief in the infinite power of the psyche. Just as William James’s embrace of pragmatic “healthy-mindedness” contains a thinly veiled critique of his brother’s morbidity, Henry’s narratives interrogate the unhealthy psychological consequences of mind-cure’s “wish-fulfillment” fantasies. Ross Posnock

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<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (*The German Ideology*, Vol. I. New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 87.

touches upon this when describing how Henry James's "project of mimetic cultural and psychic renovation emerges as both parody of and alternative to the late nineteenth-century effort of therapeutic Protestantism to help the bourgeoisie find relief from the tensions of modernity."<sup>15</sup> Henry James was not entirely aloof from early self-help discourse; he was a devotee of the popular nutritional fad known as "fletcherism," which advocated the exhaustive chewing of one's food.<sup>16</sup> But a full century before Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) launched her diatribe against the economic repercussions of compulsory optimism, and before Micki McGee (2005) lamented the "belabored self" produced by the self-improvement industry, "The Jolly Corner" dramatized the spiritual burden engendered by New Thought's positive thinking ideology.

"The Jolly Corner" describes Spencer Brydon's trip back from Europe to America to inherit his childhood home. Seeing his old house inspires in Brydon a taste for remodeling, which gets him thinking about what would have happened if he had stayed in America to be a businessman or an architect, as his father had desired, and if he had married his childhood sweetheart Alice Staverton, rather than emigrating to Europe to pursue his "selfish frivolous scandalous life" in the arts. James writes, "He found all things come back to the question of what he personally might have been, how he might have led his life and 'turned out,' if he had not so, at the outset, given it up."<sup>17</sup> This counterfactual obsession is described by James's protagonist in highly self-critical terms, as "vain egoism," "a morbid obsession," "absurd speculation," as a "habit of too selfishly

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<sup>15</sup> Posnock, *Trial*, 237.

<sup>16</sup> See Jennifer Fleissner on this subject in "Henry James's Art of Eating." *ELH* 75 (2008): 29-64.

<sup>17</sup> Henry James, "The Jolly Corner" in *The Portable Henry James* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 294. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

thinking,” even “rank folly.” Brydon derives a noticeably onanistic “secret thrill” from his nightly routine of creeping into his empty house, chasing the apparition of his other self (292, 293, 298, 296). And so, although James was a writer notoriously obsessed with possibility, as his revision histories attest, his late story “The Jolly Corner” largely endorses the view of counterfactual thinking as a form of pathology. This apparent inconsistency makes more sense when it becomes clear that James was reacting to the distortion of possibility engendered by the success manual.

Brydon’s obsession with his alter ego perversely personifies the injunction of self-help literature to exploit and develop your latent possibilities, to strengthen your will and “maximize your potential.”<sup>18</sup> This theme of human potentiality also preoccupied William James during the period “The Jolly Corner” was being written, the same years that William was advocating the practical benefits of mind-cure at universities across the land.<sup>19</sup> “Compared with what we ought to be,” William wrote, “[w]e are only half awake. Our fires are damped, our drafts are checked. We are making use of only a small part of our possible mental and physical resources.” And he exhorts, “the human individual thus lives usually far within his limits; he possesses powers of various sorts which he habitually fails to use.”<sup>20</sup> Dale Carnegie quotes this line from James some thirty years later in his Introduction to *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. He exclaims, “Those powers which you ‘habitually fail to use!’ The sole purpose of this book is to help

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<sup>18</sup> For instance, in 1907 Frank Channing Haddock first published his *Power of Will*, which purported to teach both “Supreme personal wellbeing and Actual Financial Betterment” through self-direction. *Third Edition* (Massachusetts: The Power-Book Library, 1909).

<sup>19</sup> James’s text, “The Energies of Men” originated as lectures at Columbia in 1906. “The Gospel of Relaxation” was first published in “Talks to Teachers on Psychology: and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals” (Henry Holt & Co, 1899).

<sup>20</sup> William James, *On Vital Reserves* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1899, 1911), 12.

you discover, develop, and profit by those unused assets.”<sup>21</sup> The most famous self-help book ever written, then, is but a gloss on William James.

“The Jolly Corner’s” Spencer Brydon is literally haunted by the specter of surplus potentiality that William James and Dale Carnegie dangle before their readers’ noses. As Brydon puts it, “it’s only a question of what fantastic, yet perfectly possible, development of my own nature I mayn’t have missed” (294). And this dormant possibility is manifest in Brydon’s imagination in the form of his billionaire alter ego who stayed in New York to accumulate capital, rather than moving to Europe to pursue a life in the arts. Brydon’s equation of money with potential reflects the trends of his time; the first recorded definition of success as wealth occurred in the 1891 *New Century Dictionary*.<sup>22</sup> Throughout James’s story rings Brydon’s refrain, “What would it have made of me, what would it have made of me? I keep for ever wondering, all idiotically; as if I could possibly know!” (292). This pounding anaphora of the counterfactual motif is conspicuous: “If he had but stayed at home he would have anticipated the inventor of the sky-scraper. If he had but stayed at home he would have discovered his genius in time to really start some new variety of awful architectural hare and run it till it burrowed in a gold mine” (287). Brydon’s thought patterns demonstrate the consequences of internalizing the ideology of unlimited potentiality. As Bruce MacLelland’s 1907 *Prosperity Through Force* declared, the year before “Jolly” was published, “you make your own misery; you make your own unhappiness,” and further, “anyone can make of

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<sup>21</sup> Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), xx-xxi.

<sup>22</sup> Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 34.

himself whatever he chooses.”<sup>23</sup> New Thought believed that the individual could tap into the “cosmic abundance” through proper psychological alignment, with the implication that failure to achieve wealth was the symptom of some spiritual defect or negativity. Such arguments betray New Thought’s inheritance of the Protestant Ethic view of worldly success as an indication of salvation. MacLelland advised readers to constantly repeat positive precepts such as “I have courage” or “I am fearless”;<sup>24</sup> instructions for which Brydon’s obsessive questioning of his lost potential stands as the neurotic counterpoint.

As if confirming Franco Moretti’s complaint that for the modernists “life as ‘actuality’ has become far less meaningful than that parallel form of life, life as ‘possibility’,”<sup>25</sup> and Georg Lukács’s critique of modernism’s “flight from the present,”<sup>26</sup> the more time Brydon spends stalking his possible self, the more of a shade he becomes in his actual social milieu. Analogously, Kenneth Burke took note of self-help’s exploitation of fantasy: “The reading of a book on the attaining of success is in itself the symbolic attaining of that success. It is while they read that these readers are ‘succeeding.’”<sup>27</sup> Inhabiting this speculative escapism shared by the modernist and self-help imaginary, the more time Brydon spends in the “jolly corner,” the less interested he becomes in reality:

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<sup>23</sup> Bruce MacLelland, *Prosperity Through Force* [1907]. (Rpt. New York: Cosimo, Inc, 2007), 31.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>25</sup> Franco Moretti, “The Spell of Indecision,” *New Left Review* I.164 (July-August 1987): 27-33. Here, 31.

<sup>26</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, Trans. by Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 116.

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth Burke, “Literature as Equipment for Living,” in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941), 299.

He was a dim secondary social success—and all with people who had truly not an idea of him. It was all mere surface and sound, this murmur of their welcome, this popping of their corks—just as his gestures of response were the extravagant shadows, emphatic in proportion as they meant little, of some game of *ombres chinoises*. He projected himself all day, in thoughts, straight over the bristling line of hard unconscious heads and into the other, the real, the waiting life; the life that, as soon as he had heard behind him the click of his great house-door, began for him on the jolly corner, as beguilingly as the slow opening bars of some rich music follows the tap of the conductor's wand. (297)

James's aural imagery induces Brydon's trance-like stupor in his reader, gliding from popping corks to the house-door's click to the conductor's taps, mimicking the beats of a hypnotist's metronome. In so doing, the passage intimates fiction's complicity in the escapism James critiques in the field of New Thought, a complicity Wharton, as I show in the next section, will carefully elucidate. The term "projection" aligns James's passage with the photographic metaphors employed by New Thought philosophers to describe the process of positive visualization. Several of New Thought's most vocal proponents were onetime businessmen and clerks, individuals who felt disillusioned with the world of social pretense, and with the rise of corporate culture. In response, mind-cure texts like Annie Call's *Power Through Repose* promoted the development of spiritual above external resources, through meditation and positive visualization.<sup>28</sup> Baffled by William James's admiration for Call's book, scholar Robert Richardson attributes it to a bout of good humor brought about by his flourishing reputation, "amid all this flattering attention

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<sup>28</sup> Annie Payson Call, *Power Through Repose* (Boston: Little Brown, 1904), 181.

he was open to the merits of a simple self-help book that most scholars found, and still find, beneath notice.”<sup>29</sup>

Self-help’s exploitation of the inward turn is aptly summed up by the pronouncement of late nineteenth-century mind-cure guru Henry Wood, whom William James cites at length in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which Henry read in 1902, six years before “Jolly” was published.<sup>30</sup> “The soul’s real work is that which it has built out of thoughts, mental states, and imaginations,” Wood maintains.<sup>31</sup> Wood was a successful businessman before he suffered a nervous breakdown and embraced the mind-cure movement. Brydon’s practice of “project[ing] himself all day, in thoughts...into the other, the real, the waiting life” evokes the visualization techniques Wood advocated. In fact, Wood’s *Ideal Suggestion Through Mental Photography, A Restorative System for Home and Private Use* (1893), a leading text of the New Thought movement, might as well be a blueprint for James’s story. Wood recommends that his reader retire each night alone to a corner of his house to stare at select “suggestions” printed in block letters at the end of his book:

#### PRACTICAL DIRECTIONS FOR IDEAL SUGGESTION

Instructions for the use of the Suggested Ideals below:

FIRST—Retire each day to a quiet apartment, and be alone IN THE SILENCE.

SECOND—Assume the most restful position possible, in an easy chair, or

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Richardson, *William James in the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2006), 311.

<sup>30</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in *Writings 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 111-112. For a letter in which Henry references reading William’s work, see F.O. Mattheissen’s *The James Family* (New York: AA Knopf, 1947), 338.

<sup>31</sup> Henry Wood, *Ideal Suggestion Through Mental Photography: A Restorative System for Home and Private Use* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1893), 28.



otherwise; breathe deeply and rather rapidly for a few moments, and thoroughly relax the physical body, for by suggestive correspondence this renders it easier for the mind to be passive and receptive.

THIRD—Bar the door of thought against the external world, and also shut out all physical sensation and imperfection.

FOURTH—Rivet the mind upon the “meditation,” and by careful and repeated reading absorb its truth. Then place the “suggestion” (below it) at a suitable distance from the eyes, and fasten them upon it for from ten to twenty minutes. Do not merely look upon it, but wholly GIVE YOURSELF UP TO IT, until it fills and overflows the entire consciousness....

Ideals will be actualized in due season.<sup>32</sup>

As Steven Starker comments, “The after-images produced by all that staring must have been startling, even convincing to some.”<sup>33</sup> Such “after-images,” or “*ombres chinoises*,” go a long way toward explaining the climax of “The Jolly Corner,” which takes place when, after a great deal of meditation and repetition, Brydon’s “ideal” is finally “actualized,” and he comes face-to-face one evening with an apparition of the person he would have become if he had never left America. Brydon’s conjuring of the “black stranger”—that photographic negative of himself—is the result of nights of concentrated practice: “He had known fifty times the start of perception that had afterwards dropped; he had fifty times gasped to himself “There!” under some fond brief hallucination” (305). Finally one night, Brydon feels the “central vagueness diminish,” and he conjures his

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

<sup>33</sup> Steven Starker, *Oracle at the Supermarket: The American Preoccupation with Self-Help Books* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 29.

wretched “other self,” the personification of the “triumphant life” (311-312). But instead of mind-cure’s happy subconscious, brimming with unused potential, Brydon’s deformed, greedy alter ego bears a closer resemblance to the impulsive id described by Freud. His “hallucination” is the manifestation of a mind-cure meditation gone awry.

Aside from William’s work on mind-cure, another intimate precedent for Brydon’s apparition is Henry’s father. Henry James Sr. notoriously subscribed to the pseudo-religion of Swedenborgism, a movement with affiliations to New Thought and Transcendentalism. Premised upon accounts of the mystical appearances of Christ to Emmanuel Swedenborg, an eighteenth-century Swedish scientist and theologian, Swedenborgism was circulating in the circles of early self-help precursors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Carlyle (Carlyle was, along with Smiles, one of the first to use the term “self-help”),<sup>34</sup> both of whom Henry Sr. knew. Henry Sr. was converted to the movement of Swedenborgism through a “vastation,” which he described as “a perfectly insane and abject terror, without ostensible cause, and only to be accounted for, to my perplexed imagination, by some damned shape squatting invisible to me within the precincts of the room, and raying out from his fetid personality influences fatal to life.”<sup>35</sup> Tellingly, however, unlike for Henry Sr, Spencer Brydon’s “vastation,” takes financial, not spiritual, form. Brydon’s apparition is not proof of Christ but a reminder of the

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<sup>34</sup> In 1831, Carlyle described “self-help” as “the highest of all possessions” *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröockh In Three Books* (London: Chapman and Hall Limited), 92.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in George William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 79.

financial and industrial “power” he has abjured by leaving the United States (294).<sup>36</sup>

When mysticism meets American capitalism, spirituality is corporatized.

Like Brydon’s alter ego, the success ethos prospered on U.S. soil, though it did not originate there. In this respect it is significant that “The Jolly Corner” belongs to James’s “late phase,” a series of works including *The American Scene* that record the impact of his visit to America in 1904. James said that he returned to his native land in order “to make myself a notion of how, and where, and even what, I was.”<sup>37</sup> But if James did “make himself” during his voyage to America, the self he made is defined by its rejection of American improvement discourse. James tellingly relates his retort to American industry and urbanization, “...the great monotonous rumble of which seems forever to say to you: ‘See what I’m making of all this—see what I’m making, what I’m making!’” To which James responds, “I see what you are *not* making, oh, what you are ever so vividly not; and how can I help it if I am subject to that lucidity?—which appears never so welcome to you, for its measure of truth, as it ought to be!”<sup>38</sup> James’s return to America is not a nationalist voyage of self-discovery but an act of self-making that repeats the original renunciation of his native place. With their digressive indirection and complexity, James’s late works strive to articulate precisely what is left out of American improvement rhetoric.

New Thought had erupted in the United States with over 100 magazines and newspapers dedicated to the movement in circulation by the time of “The Jolly Corner’s”

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<sup>36</sup> Alice says, “What you feel and what I feel for you is that you’d have had power.”

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Matthew Peters, “Henry James, American Social Change, and Literary Revision,” in *The Cambridge Quarterly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>38</sup> Henry James, *The American Scene in Collected Travel Writings: Great Britain and America* (New York: Library of America, 1993), 734.

composition.<sup>39</sup> Mind-cure's emphasis on inner equilibrium was advertised as a remedy for the external shocks of urbanized American life. Industrialization, the press, technology, and mass transit were considered so threatening to the individual psyche that the condition "Americanitis" was coined by physicians, and subsequently appropriated by the mind-cure school.<sup>40</sup> In his reflections upon American society, Henry James was as critical of the effects of Americanitis as the nation's most vocal detractors. Just as mind-cure purported to offer relief from urban life, his meditations in "The Jolly Corner" offer Brydon respite from the "awful modern crush" of business and streetcars, those "terrible things that people scrambled for as the panic-stricken at sea scramble for the boats" (287).

Although considered the golden land of self-invention, in "Jolly Corner," America is persistently linked to the passive tense of identity construction. Brydon speculates, "I might have been, by staying here, something nearer to one of these types who have been hammered so hard and made so keen by their conditions" (293). If he had stayed in New York, Brydon's personality would have been "hammered into" him; he wonders "what would it have made of" him to stay, how he would have "turned out." For James and the modernist authors who follow in his wake, expatriation is a means of turning the passive experience of identity formation into an active construction. Since few circumstances seem as accidental or as consequential as one's birthplace, expatriation operates as a particularly dramatic rejection of the inertia of the everyday. In rejecting American self-

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<sup>39</sup> Starker, 34.

<sup>40</sup> Payson Call, 13.

fashioning, James asserts his own version of agency, an agency formed of expatriate asceticism rather than American consumption.<sup>41</sup>

Though unusually receptive to the movement, even William at times lamented New Thought's spiritual reductionism, but he argued that this should not dissuade us from taking its benefits seriously. At the same time as he recognized the pragmatic utility of mind-cure's positive outlook, William also lamented how "The mind-cure principles are beginning to so pervade the air that one catches their spirit at second-hand. One hears of the 'Gospel of Relaxation,' of the 'Don't Worry Movement,' of people who repeat to themselves, 'Youth, health, vigor!' when dressing in the morning, as their motto for the day."<sup>42</sup> This trivialization of spiritual enlightenment is echoed in the saccharine finale to "Jolly Corner," which has long puzzled critics with its clichéd tableau of Brydon waking from his nightmare, cradled in Alice Staverton's loving arms. The jarring sentimentality of this scene, and Brydon's "abysmally passive" behavior in it (*TJC*, 313), seems more consistent as a depiction of someone who has suddenly awoken from a mind-cure stupor. Although the affirmation of home is a common conceit of counterfactual fiction (think Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*), the final pages of James's story are peppered with discrete intimations of Brydon's lingering unhappiness.<sup>43</sup> James's reader is left with the suspicion that no amount of feminine caress will permanently quash Brydon's despondent refrain: "Do you believe then—too dreadfully!—that I *am* as good as I ever might have been?"

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<sup>41</sup> For an interesting discussion of expatriation as asceticism, see Marilyn Adler Papayanis, *Writing in the Margins: The Ethics of Expatriation from Lawrence to Ondaatje* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> James, *Varieties*, 92.

<sup>43</sup> For more on this see Eric Savoy, "The Queer Subject of 'The Jolly Corner.'" *Henry James Review* 20 (1999): 1-21.

(295). While New Thought lamented the individual's quotidian estrangement from his innermost potential, "The Jolly Corner" indicates that such estrangement might be preferable.

"The Jolly Corner" intimates the extent to which modernist interiority represents the flip side to the commodification of the self that was taking place in popular culture. Edith Wharton's novel *Twilight Sleep* further brings into relief the affinities with self-improvement discourse that the modernist programmatic conceals. She suggests that modernism's narrative experiments are symptoms of the same self-culture they are intended to critique.

### **Mrs. Manford's Pseudo-Spirituality**

Published a quarter of a century later, when Wharton was sixty-five, *Twilight Sleep* (1927) was a bestseller in its time but a flop with the critics, going out of print for decades until it was reissued in 1997. Named after the compound of scopolamine and morphine administered to women during childbirth so that they would feel no pain and "babies [could be] turned out in a series like Fords,"<sup>44</sup> *Twilight* is concerned with humanity's alienation from natural values. The narrative centers around the willful oblivion of the family matriarch Pauline Manford, who is so busy fawning over the latest trendy self-improvement personalities—whether the mystic Mahatma, with his "School of Oriental Thought," or, later, the "Inspirational Healer" Alvah Loft, author of *Spiritual Vacuum Cleaning* and *Beyond God* (119)—that she fails to notice her husband falling in

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<sup>44</sup> Edith Wharton, *Twilight Sleep* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 18. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

love with her daughter-in-law Lita under her own roof. Her evasion of the affair eventually leads, through a slapstick series of events, to Mrs. Manford's own daughter Nona being shot when she discovers her father and sister-in-law together in bed. By this time, almost twenty years after "The Jolly Corner" appeared, New Thought principles have so infiltrated the American atmosphere that Alvah Loft, "the Busy Man's Christ" (153), even has an Ella Wheeler Wilcox line-a-day pasted on the wall over his head (121). Wharton depicts the younger generation that Nona represents as the innocent casualty of the middle-aged culture of compulsory optimism.

It seems that one cannot work on the self and be a good parent at the same time. When *Twilight* opens, Mrs. Manford's schedule is so crowded that she can barely squeeze in a chat with her daughter:

7.30 Mental uplift. 7.45 Breakfast. 8. Psycho-analysis. 8.15 See Cook. 8.30 Silent Meditation. 8.45 Facial Massage. 9. Man with Persian miniatures. 9.15 Correspondence. 9.30 Manicure. 9.45 Eurythmic exercises. 10. Hair waved. 10.15 Sit for bust. 10.30 Receive Mother's Day deputation. 11. Dancing lesson. 11.30 Birth Control committee at Mrs.— (9-10).<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Manford's schedule is reminiscent of the list of another self-improvement obsessed modernist character: F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby, who abides by the following regime:

Rise from bed.....6.00.....A.M.  
 Dumbell exercise and wall-scaling.....6.15 - 6.30.....”  
 Study electricity, etc.....7.15 - 8.15.....”  
 Work.....8.30 - 4.30..... P.M.  
 Baseball and sports.....4.30 - 5.00.....”  
 Practice elocution, poise and how to attain it..5.00 - 6.00.....”  
 Study needed inventions.....7.00 - 9.00.....”

*The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 173.

Mrs. Manford's "Silent Meditation" is, of course, antithetical to the crass efficiency of the "to-do" list. In addition, her distribution and allotment of time is comically inadequate: who can carve a bust in 15 minutes, or make any psychoanalytic headway in the same amount of time? The ongoing joke of the narrative is that Mrs. Manford needs a stress reliever to unwind from her numerous relaxation therapies; she is, in short, "one agitated by the incessant effort to be calm" (45). There is an overdrawn hysteria to Mrs. Manford's fear of idle moments: "One might as well have tried to bring down one of the Pyramids by poking it with a parasol as attempt to disarrange the close mosaic of Mrs. Manford's engagement list." (14). If her schedule is an evasion, however, it is also, as the mosaic analogy suggests, a carefully structured aesthetic.

With its parody of Mrs. Manford's indiscriminate enthusiasm for the latest fads and quacks, *Twilight* brings to the fore the rising import during this period of the spiritual improvement guru. For Wharton, self-help remains tied to the present and future of print, as for James and Flaubert, yet during her time the field of self-help grew increasingly capacious, and the promises of self-transformation also came to be embodied by the personalities of specific healers. The figureheads of modernist and self-improvement culture often crossed paths, for both modernism and self-help were deeply invested in what Aaron Jaffe and Jonathan Goldman describe as the early twentieth-century culture of celebrity.<sup>46</sup> The very *annus mirabilis* of modernism—1922—marked both the international tour of the self-help guru Emile Coué, the French pioneer of the positive thinking industry, and also the founding of George Gurdjieff's new-age "Institute for the

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<sup>46</sup> Aaron Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Jonathan Goldman, *Modernism is the Literature of Celebrity* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2011).



Harmonious Development of Man” at Fontainebleau. Men like Gurdjieff and Coué were causes célèbres for the day’s elite, an excuse for the wealthy to rally and congregate. They were also a last resort of the desperately ill—a tubercular Katherine Mansfield died in a damp room in Gurdjieff’s institute in 1923,<sup>47</sup> while the modernist artist Roger Fry travelled in vain to Coué’s institute in Nancy, France, in the hopes of finding a cure for his illness.<sup>48</sup>

Wharton’s narrative documents the transience of these gurus, who were always vulnerable to being supplanted by a newer spiritual sensation. Nevertheless, the cultural influence of the mystic Gurdjieff—a likely model for the character of the Mahatma in *Twilight*—was more lasting than Wharton’s narrative depicts. When, in *Twilight*, news of a scandal erupts regarding Mrs. Manford’s daughter-in-law Lita’s sojourn at the Mahatma’s School, including a newspaper picture of her participation in the School’s nudist tribal dances, the novel replicates contemporaneous headlines regarding Gurdjieff’s Institute’s “sacred gymnasium,” described by Sinclair Lewis as “a cross between a cabaret and a harem” and by Vivienne Eliot as “where [Lady Rothmere] does

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<sup>47</sup> See Hugh Kenner, “In Defense of a Guru,” review of James Moore’s *Gurdjieff and Mansfield* in *New York Times* (January 25, 1981).

<sup>48</sup> Pointing to the problem raised at the outset of this chapter, regarding the seeming incompatibility of intellectual and everyday strategies, Virginia Woolf writes of the incident in *Roger Frye: A Biography* (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1940), where Frye describes Coué as “a kind of secular Jesus Christ.” She notes that his time with Coué inspired Frye’s aesthetic interest in primitivism,

At first it seemed impossible for Frye to be anything but a detached and sympathetic spectator. “It’s terribly difficult for people with so external and analytic a mind as I have to submit,” he wrote. For six hours a day he sat on a camp stool repeating “Ca passé” [Coué’s motto] and tried to realize that his skepticism was merely “instinctive and irrational.” At last the charm began to work. His pain left him, and he went on to develop a theory of the unconscious, and that theory was, of course, brought to bear upon art. The séances at Nancy had their share in developing his growing interest in uncivilized races. (249)

religious naked dances with Katherine Mansfield.”<sup>49</sup> But aside from inspiring Wharton’s satire,<sup>50</sup> Gurdjieff had a transformative influence upon a group of expatriate women authors in France including Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, founders of that bastion of modernism, the *Little Review*. Introduced through Djuna Barnes to Kathyne Hulme, Solita Solano, and Georgette Leblanc (the French opera singer and long-time lover of Maurice Maeterlinck), they created “The Rope Group” devoted to expounding his teachings.<sup>51</sup> Though the *Little Review* founders saw their embrace of Gurdjieff’s new-age spiritualism as a departure from their modernist commitments, *Twilight* brings into relief the affinities between these two movements. The qualities Wharton condemns in self-help correspond to the qualities she resists in modernism: the cultishness, primitivism, the fetishism of obscurity and difficulty, the linguistic bravado, even the dependence of the male “genius” upon a network of enabling and supportive females.

The Rope Group and Wharton represent two extreme literary approaches to self-help of the time: the discipleship perspective and the derision polemic, the convert and the critic. Though Mrs. Manford is ready to abandon the Mahatma for any new teacher who would tell her “she was psychic,” (27) many of Coué’s and Gurdjieff’s real disciples remained committed for life. Anderson and Heap were inspired by their time with

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<sup>49</sup> Rebecca Rauve, “An Intersection of Interests: Gurdjieff’s Rope Group as a Site of Literary Production” *Twentieth Century Literature* 49.1, American Writers and France (Spring 2003), 46-81. Here, 59.

<sup>50</sup> See Janet Beer and Avril Horner. “Wharton ‘the renovator’: *Twilight Sleep* as Gothic Satire. *The Free Library* (January 1 2007) [http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Wharton the 'renovator': Twilight Sleep as Gothic satire.-a0166988864](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Wharton+the+'renovator'+:+Twilight+Sleep+as+Gothic+satire.-a0166988864) (accessed November 4, 2013).

<sup>51</sup> The name “Rope Group” referred to Gurdjieff’s allegory that the work group must be “like climbing a high mountain...For safety, each must be roped together, each one thinking of the others, all helping one another ‘as hand washes hand’.” William Patrick Patterson, *Ladies of the Rope: Gurdjieff’s Special Left Bank Women’s Group* (Berkeley, CA: Arete Communications, Publishers, 1999), 96.

Gurdjieff to terminate the *Little Review*—his philosophy had convinced them of the magazine’s irrelevance—however, his writings have more in common with those published in the *Little Review*’s pages than they were willing to recognize. Editing his opaque sentences, unpacking his neologisms, and promoting his genius, just as they had with Joyce, Eliot, and others, their work with Gurdjieff was not as much of a departure from their modernist commitments as they professed.<sup>52</sup> Unlike with Joyce and Eliot, though, their discipleship with Gurdjieff instigated a significant shift in the women’s vocations from editor to writer, fiction to memoir, from transcriber to independent producer. Indeed, what is most remarkable is the tremendous literary output that the Rope discipleship engendered: enough to fill an entire library shelf. As one of the Group’s members, Kathryn Hulme, author of *The Nun’s Story* (1956), later a film starring Audrey Hepburn, recounts:

In the Paris of the Thirties the great adventure of my life began, the only event in it which seems worth recording in personal narrative form—a form, incidentally, which I love to read but dread to write. The event which compels me into this book was my meeting with the celebrated mystic, teacher, and philosopher, George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff, whom I encountered as if by chance and came to love as if by design...He uncovered in me a hidden longing I never

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<sup>52</sup> Gurdjieff himself once said, “I bury the bone so deep that the dogs have to scratch for it.” According to J.G. Bennett, “He himself used to listen to chapters read aloud and if he found that the key passages were taken too easily—and therefore almost inevitably superficially—he would rewrite them in order, as he put it, to ‘bury the dog deeper.’” *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973), 274. Compare to this to Joyce’s remark that readers’ only value the “bone” they can steal, quoted in full in the following chapter, in Max Eastman, *The Literary Mind: Its Place in an Age of Science*. (New York: Charles Scribners’ Sons, 1935), 104.

knew I had—the desire for an inner life of the spirit—and taught me to work for it as one works for one’s daily bread.<sup>53</sup>

The group published a total of seventeen books.<sup>54</sup> As Hulme describes, Gurdjieff offered an occasion to contemplate the inner life, just as modernist stream of consciousness does. Aside from the women of the Rope, Gurdjieff also influenced writers and artists including Jean Toomer, Mabel Dodge Luhan (DH Lawrence’s patron), and Frank Lloyd Wright. On the other hand, modernists including Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and W.B. Yeats were dismissive of Gurdjieff’s teachings.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the link between the Rope Group and the *Little Review* serves as a tangible example of modernism and self-help’s mutual import, rivalry, and influence. The same wish to shed automatism, or what Gurdjieff calls man’s sleep-like “hypnotic state,”<sup>56</sup> and to resurrect the “inner life,” attracted Anderson and Heap to both the misunderstood mystic and to the relatively unknown and unpublished Joyce.<sup>57</sup> And, conversely, the same skepticism toward “the

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<sup>53</sup> Kathryn Hulme, *Undiscovered Country: A Spiritual Adventure* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966), 1.

<sup>54</sup> See Rauve for a lengthy discussion of the Rope Group output, 46.

<sup>55</sup> Pound preferred Gurdjieff’s soup to his ideas, joking that “If he had more of that sort of thing in his [culinary] repertoire he could...have worked on towards at least one further conversation.” Lewis described the guru as a “Levantine psychic shark,” while Yeats advised his friend, “I have had a lot of experience of that sort of thing in my time, and my advice to you is—leave it alone” (all quoted in Rauve 57).

<sup>56</sup> Margaret Anderson, *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* (New York: Samuel Weiser, Inc, 1962), 53.

<sup>57</sup> Bennett’s description of Gurdjieff’s literary style could almost be an account of Joyce’s:

Many who encounter Gurdjieff for the first time in Beezlebub’s Tales are disconcerted by the strange style, and by his use of strange neologisms which often seem quite unnecessary for conveying his intention. There are several reasons why Gurdjieff decided to create his own literary style. In this first place, he was well aware that clarity and consistency in speech and writing nearly always result in the sacrifice of flexibility of expression and depth of meaning. When he spoke or lectured he paid no attention to the rules of grammar, logic, or consistency. After he learned some French and English,

exploration of the subliminal” that Wharton condemns in Woolf’s stream of consciousness,<sup>58</sup> and that she disdains in Joyce’s “turgid welter” of “uninformed and unimportant” “sensation,” made her suspicious of figures like Gurdjieff.<sup>59</sup> The example of the Rope Group corroborates *Twilight*’s insistence on the interrelationship between the twin industries of modernism and self-improvement, in this case with the very same editors and advocates.

A vociferous critic of stream of consciousness and the new “slice of life” literature of Joyce and Woolf,<sup>60</sup> Wharton warned the younger novelists against embracing what she viewed as a pathological inward turn, a trend she despised even in the later writings of Henry James, with whom she otherwise sympathized.<sup>61</sup> She disapproved in particular of the modernists’ indiscriminate notation of every passing thought: “The mid-nineteenth century group selected; the new novelists profess to pour everything out of their bag.”<sup>62</sup> Wharton viewed modernism’s investment in the subliminal<sup>63</sup> as part of its overestimation of the import of the individual in the face of history. As Peel notes, “The achievement of Edith Wharton involves a recognition of that ground that radical Tories and anticapitalists paradoxically share, namely, their opposition to selfish individualism,

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he mixed them indiscriminately, regardless of the linguistic limitations of his hearer. (273)

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Bauer, 144.

<sup>59</sup> Wharton to Bernard Berenson, Jan. 6, 1923, in *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, Edited by RWB and Nancy Lewis (New York: Scribners, 1989), 461.

<sup>60</sup> Edith Wharton, “Tendencies in Modern Fiction” *The Saturday Review of Literature*. Vol.x no. 28. January 27, 1934. 434.

<sup>61</sup> As Peel comments, Wharton “confessed to liking James the individual more than his later books,” 17.

<sup>62</sup> Wharton, “Tendencies,” 434.

<sup>63</sup> Peel, 116.

whether justified by bourgeois or artistic values.”<sup>64</sup> For Wharton, the fickleness of modernism and self-help are linked through their shared disregard for form, history, and selection. Much as Gurdjieff urged his followers toward intense “self-observation and self-remembering (always carried out, however, under the supervision of a “Man Who Knows”)<sup>65</sup> modernism appears to embrace the unsorted, unfiltered, and subconscious. It is their “egoistic consciousness and self absorption”<sup>66</sup> that, for Wharton, links Mrs. Manford and Stephen Dedalus.

Returning to Wharton’s novel, *Twilight* can help to broaden our geographic, as well as temporal, conception of the self-help industry. Though she uses self-help as an occasion to lampoon the credulity of upper class New York society, in reality these gurus were equally influential in Europe, where many of them originated. As one reviewer noted at the time, Wharton’s “satire will not be lost on London or Paris, where Mrs. Manford and her inspirational healers have their counterparts. Mrs. Wharton is not telling that uncomfortable thing the Truth exclusively about American millionaires.”<sup>67</sup>

Wharton’s use of Gurdjieff as an occasion to mock American credulity—its “atmosphere of universal simplification” (191), curiously elides his tremendous popularity in Europe, as well as the network of East-West cross-cultural exchange and appropriation that his popularity reflects.

Though most contemporaneous readers dismissed *Twilight’s* curmudgeonly anti-modern polemics, one surprising admirer of the novel was Aldous Huxley. His praise for

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<sup>64</sup> Peel, 279.

<sup>65</sup> Rauve, 49.

<sup>66</sup> Wharton quoted in Peel, 89.

<sup>67</sup> Naromi Royde-Smith, “New Novels,” review of *Twilight Sleep* in *New Statesman*, 29 (2 July 1927), 377.

the narrative offers further evidence of the transatlantic relevance of its themes. Huxley wrote to Wharton to commend her for first “putting the case” against Fordism that he was to delineate in *Brave New World*. He wrote of the narrative again in an article on “Modern Superstition,” citing *Twilight’s* masterful, “ruthless” depiction of “the contemporary tendency for superstition to be magical, rather than religious—to aim at specific acts of power, such as hip slimming, rather than a theory of the cosmos.”<sup>68</sup> He continued,

With her customary acuteness, Edith Wharton has laid her finger on the essential fact about modern superstitions. They give results here and now; and if they don’t give results they fail. People turn to the supernatural for some particular and immediate benefit—such as slender hips, freedom from worry, short cuts to success, improved digestions, money. They want, not truth, but power.<sup>69</sup>

A case in point, Mrs. Manford is interested in spiritual communion, not because of its metaphysical insights, but because of its potential efficiency; it resembles “an improved form of stenography” (153). Wharton responded she was “much set up” by Huxley’s acknowledgment of her influence. Though it may be slightly disconcerting to align Wharton’s realist comedy with Huxley’s sci-fi dystopia, both narratives center around the topos of birth and its industrialization, which the authors view as the ultimate sign of our alienation from nature and each other. The correspondence between the two narratives suggests that it is but a step from Manford’s hypnosis to Huxley’s “hypnopaedia,” from positive thinking mantras to *soma* pills (“one cubic centimeter cures ten gloomy

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<sup>68</sup> Aldous Huxley, “Hocus Pocus” in *Aldous Huxley’s Hearst Essays*. Edited by James Sexton (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1994), 268.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

sentiments”).<sup>70</sup> According to critic Dale Bauer, one of the primary aims of the drug twilight sleep was to encourage procreation among the more “fragile” upper classes; it shifted women’s dependence from the lower-class midwife to the doctor/scientist. As Bauer elaborates, twilight sleep, for Wharton, is bound up with the larger “eugenics fervor” of the time.<sup>71</sup> In this respect, Wharton belongs to a group of twentieth-century authors, also including Adorno and Nathanael West, as we will see in Chapter Four, who viewed an alarming correspondence between fascism and the rise of self-help culture. For each of these writers, self-help culture is an unsettling harbinger of the prospect of an American totalitarianism.

Like Huxley’s, then, Wharton’s narrative envisions itself as a warning about the dystopia to come, with Huxley’s technocratic nightmare merely a more extreme form of the social parody Wharton executes. Admittedly, it may seem alarmist to regard trends as seemingly innocuous as eurythmic exercises as signaling the potential disintegration of the social and natural order. Indeed, this was largely the opinion of the time. As one reviewer of *Twilight Sleep* noted:

Had anyone suggested [to the Fathers of the Church, who included melancholy among the mortals sins] that a too facile cheerfulness might come to be a spiritual danger in the future, the quaint notion might well have provoked a smile...It remained for the New World to invent the new sin of excessive and habitual optimism.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1946), 36.

<sup>71</sup> Dale M. Bauer, *Edith Wharton’s Brave New Politics* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 92-95.

<sup>72</sup> Isabel Paterson, “The New Sin,” review of *Twilight Sleep*, *New York Herald Tribune*, (22 May 1927), section 7, 1-2.



In contrast to Huxley's affirmation, the reviewer is slightly incredulous that Mrs. Manford's positive thinking presents a valid social threat. Anticipating contemporary anti-positivity polemics, Wharton and James were almost a century ahead of the curve in identifying the social and psychological casualties of the culture of compulsory optimism.<sup>73</sup> More than just a sign of their prescience, however, the apparent contemporaneity of their narratives testifies to the repetitious nature of these trends, and to the push pull between affirmative and skeptical culture. At the same time as it warns of the future, there is the sense in *Twilight* that no optimistic fad can hold back the assaults of historical catastrophe for long; that each hopeful era is destined to be tempered by the subsequent generation's cautious and corrective pessimism.

Wharton attributed the new pseudo-spiritualism to the broader cultural aversion to "an absolutely featureless expanse of time" (117). Her narrative describes the "blind dread of physical pain" (19), boredom, or negativity of any kind, particularly among the upper classes. Indeed, Mrs. Manford's entire life is described as "a long uninterrupted struggle against every form of pain," from the acquisition of X-rays and private hospital rooms to rest-cures, lace cushions, and hot-house grapes (261). She "wanted to de-microbe life" (55). "Being prepared to suffer is really the way to create suffering," Mrs. Manford explains to her daughter Nona. "We ought to refuse ourselves to pain. All the great healers have taught us that." (275).

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<sup>73</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011); Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009).

This denial of pain—the idea that trauma can be thought away—is a notion that self-help had in common with another, more reputed intellectual trend: namely, existentialism. In his critique of Sartre, for instance, Adorno targeted Sartre’s argument that concentration camp victims could willfully transform their experience of torture: “Sartre even affirmed the freedom of the victims of the concentration camps to inwardly accept or reject the tortures inflicted upon them,” a position that Adorno says Beckett’s modernism refutes.<sup>74</sup> We might view “mind power” as the grotesque, perverted other of existentialist freedom. The belief in the capacity of will to transcend or transform circumstance reflects the influence on both movements of Stoicism, with its emphasis on the role of disposition in determining matter and experience.<sup>75</sup> Like Adorno with Sartre, self-help’s critics have condemned its denial of the intractable, systemic injustices that “mind-power” purports to override. At the same time, self-help and existentialism are linked by their investment in individual agency, in contradistinction to philosophies that stress the inescapability of hegemonic networks of oppression. This humanist faith in the capacity of the will to alter material conditions is what Mrs. Manford and Jean-Paul Sartre have to offer that standard ideology critique fails to provide. Likewise, the contemporary self-help genre’s championing of the transformative power of individual authors and books, for instance, in such works as *How Proust Can Change Your Life*,<sup>76</sup> has tapped into a popular, pedagogic demand for the celebration of literary power and

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<sup>74</sup> Theodor Adorno, “Trying to Understand Endgame,” *Notes to Literature, Volume I* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 249.

<sup>75</sup> In his notes, Sartre described himself as a “Stoic” (John Sellars, *Stoicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 154. For one example of the influence of Stoicism on self-help see the writings of Albert Ellis. Yet all “mind power” discourse is really a reconfiguration of Stoical precepts.

<sup>76</sup> Alain de Botton, *How Proust Can Change Your Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

achievement that leftist, post-Foucauldian English departments are no longer able or willing to satisfy.

Of course, Wharton does not see it that way, viewing self-help as an adversary, rather than advocate, of the literary. Like Flaubert, Wharton senses the considerable literary repercussions of the burgeoning print industry. For her, the true offense self-help commits, beyond Americanization and stunted human relations, is to literature. Of Mrs. Manford's readerly endeavors, Wharton writes,

she felt that her optimism had never been so sorely strained since the year when she had had to read Proust, learn a new dance-step, master Oriental philosophy, and decide whether she should really bob her hair, or only do it to look so. She had come victoriously through those ordeals; but what worse lay ahead? (85)

Incidentally, Proust was the one modernist Wharton actually liked, a fact that only underscores the gravity of Mrs. Manford's offense. Wharton sent Henry James a copy of *La Recherche*, "trembling with excitement which only genius can communicate."<sup>77</sup> James, in turn, was "deeply impressed" by Proust's work.<sup>78</sup> As with Mrs. Manford's engagement schedule, Wharton again seeks recourse to the genre of the list to communicate her character's vulgarity. With its indiscriminate leveling, the list operates as a privileged form of anti-self-help polemic, a technique, as we have seen, Flaubert utilizes to great effect ("Emma wanted to learn Italian: she bought dictionaries, a grammar book, and a provision of white paper. She tried serious reading, history, and

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<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Robin Peel, *Apart from Modernism: Edith Wharton, Politics, and Fiction before World War I* (New Jersey: Rosemont Publishing and Printing Corp., 2006), 94.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* Proust is an interesting mediating figure insofar as even purported anti-modernists such as Arnold Bennett and Wharton admired his writings. This is particularly significant in light of the fact that of all the modernists, Proust is the one most committed to conveying life wisdom to the reader.

philosophy”<sup>79</sup>). Like Pécuchet with his farming manual, and Gatsby with his uncut books, Proust is for Mrs. Manford only an emblem of her worldliness.

As with Flaubert, the subject of self-help offers a pole against which to measure Wharton’s own authorial agenda, as one formed in contradistinction to public purveyors of spiritual salves. Her insistence on the import of pain, form, and selection, is articulated against the “shortcut” interiority and indiscriminate inclusivity that she believes modernism and self-improvement culture share. But how does Mrs. Manford’s “pseudo-activity” compare to that of Bouvard and Pécuchet? As a self-help acolyte, Manford is a smashing success—she follows instructions to a tee—whereas Bouvard and Pécuchet are dismal failures. And of course Manford belongs to the idle upperclass, whereas Flaubert’s clerks are hard-working petit bourgeois. Unlike with Mrs. Manford, there is economic security at stake in each of the clerks’ new endeavors, lending their pseudo-activities a desperation and urgency that Mrs. Manford’s lacks. Nevertheless, there is the same critique of the inconsistency of the dilettante in both texts. Just as Bouvard and Pécuchet transition from atheism to biblical hermeneutics without a second thought, for instance, Mrs. Manford seems unconcerned by any ideological inconsistencies in her activities, all contradictions being subsumed under the greatest ideology of all: the ideology of perpetual, relentless activity.

Wharton limns the same correspondence between pseudo-philanthropy and the self-help spirit that we found at play in Flaubert’s last novel. This capriciousness of the dilettante is spoofed when Mrs. Manford accidentally presents her birth control advocacy speech to the Mother’s day assembly. Standing before the matriarchal crowd, she begins,

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<sup>79</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 137.

vehemently, “No more effaced wives, no more drudging mothers, no more human slaves crushed by the eternal round of house-keeping and child bearing.” After a horrified pause, Mrs. Manford quickly realizes her error and recovers with characteristic aplomb, “That’s what our antagonists say—the women who are afraid to be mothers...” (98). It seems, however, that Mrs. Manford’s inconstancy is characteristic of her set, “Whatever the question dealt with, these ladies always seemed to be the same, and always advocated with equal zeal Birth Control and unlimited maternity, free love or the return to the traditions of the American home. (11). Mrs. Manford is not bothered by the gaffe as evidence of her own hypocrisy, but rather, as a sign of her lack of control. She wonders, “What was the use of all the months and years of patient Taylorized effort against the natural human fate: against anxiety, sorrow, old age—if their menace was to reappear whenever events slipped from her control?” (98) The ridiculing of Mrs. Manford in such scenes reflects Wharton’s upper-class disdain for the fickleness of the self-made (the source of Mrs. Manford’s poor taste is hinted at when we learn that, though her mother comes from Southern gentility, a “Pascal of Tallahassee,” her father was a self-made man who “came from Scotland with two six-pences in his pocket”) (16). Of course, self-help represents the ultimate offense to aristocratic ideals of *noblesse oblige*. In addition, however, Manford offends the dedication of the specialist, for she is missing that necessary delusion of the expert that his subject is the best and most important of all, that “the fate of his own soul depends upon whether or not he makes the correct conjuncture at this passage of the manuscript” as Max Weber says.<sup>80</sup> Like Bouvard and Pécuchet,

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<sup>80</sup> Max Weber, “Science as Vocation,” *The Vocation Lectures* (Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 2004), xxvi.

Mrs. Manford is troubling for the way that she trivializes—and thereby throws into question—the necessity of other, more “serious” intellectual pursuits.

A strange fact about *Twilight Sleep* is that, despite its alarmist rhetoric, it describes self-help as almost passé. It is their obsession with self-improvement that distinguishes the older generation of gray haired women doing eurythmic exercises from the younger generation of Nona and Lita (her daughter and daughter-in-law), who don't give a whit about gurus and mantras, being more preoccupied with “the ceaseless rush from thrill to thrill” (11). Wharton was not the only author to prematurely describe self-help as on the way out (recall Baudelaire's prediction for the impending obsolescence of fashionable “get rich quick books” in 1865).<sup>81</sup> Yet if self-help is an obsolete, older-woman's trend, the question is raised of why Wharton regarded it as a social threat worth parodying. Why is it, in other words, that it is Mrs. Manford and not the youthful thrill-seeking Lita, embodiment of “jazz” and modernism,<sup>82</sup> who is the primary target of *Twilight's* scorn?

The reason can only be because Lita's modernism and Mrs. Manford's self-improvement regimes are fundamentally intertwined. Lita and Mrs. Manford represent two different, competing ways of being contemporary. Embodying the spirit of self-help and modernism, respectively, Mrs. Manford wants to master time, Lita surrenders to it. Both are terrified of idle moments. An evening regular at the “Cubist Cabaret,” Lita seeks to avoid boredom at all costs (the motive for her adultery with her father-in-law). “Always the same old everything!” she laments (194). Modernist novelty and self-help

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<sup>81</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “Assommons les Pauvres!” (“Thrash All Beggars!”) *Baudelaire in English* (London: Penguin, 1997).

<sup>82</sup> Bauer, 98.

efficiency are presented as symptoms of the same social intolerance for empty time. Further, the correspondence suggests that part of the allure of modernism has to do with the alternative it presents to regimented self-improvement schedules. Contrary to the proverbial wisdom that men seek wives resembling their mothers, the source of Jim's attraction to Lita is her opposition to Mrs. Manford's modus operandi. Jim is, rather, "enchanted by the childish whims, the unpunctuality, the irresponsibility, which made life with [Lita] such thrilling unsettled business after the clock-work routine of his mother's perfect establishment" (17). Unlike Mrs. Manford's optimistic platitudes, Lita voices "animal sincerity" (162), baldly articulating the very truth from which Manford so frantically retreats; she embodies the cruel impermanence of happiness and desire.

Wharton's novel thereby exposes the intergenerational alienation that both self-help and modernism reflect. *Twilight Sleep* is, above all, about the friction between a mother and her daughter, and it is significant that Manford's spiritual crisis centers around a botched Mother's Day speech. Nona, and the new youthful modernism she heralds, defines herself in resistance to Mrs. Manford's facile optimism and ruthless efficiency, much as modernism carved out its own negativity and difficulty in reaction to the bromides of commercial culture. Moreover, intergenerational chasms open a space for commercial advice, whether in the form of advertising or self-help. When the scholar Roland Marchand identified an "advice vacuum" in early twentieth-century culture, he attributed this in part to "generational discontinuities," and the lack of intimacy between parent and child.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, Walter Benjamin described how the men on the front lines

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<sup>83</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising and the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 344.

of the First World War came home from the battlefield silent, unable to translate their experience into advice.<sup>84</sup> For Wharton, too, the war had irreparably altered the culture of advice, rendering the self-delusions of the previous generation untenable. The youth in her narrative “belonged...to the bewildered disenchanted young people who had grown up since the Great War” (12). Wharton elaborates:

It was as if, in the beaming determination of the middle-aged, one and all of them, to ignore sorrow and evil, “think them away” as superannuated bogies, survivals of some obsolete European superstition unworthy of enlightened Americans, to whom plumbing and dentistry had given higher standards, and bifocal glasses a clearer view of the universe—as if the demons the elder generation had ignored, balked of their natural prey, had cast their hungry shadow over the young. After all, somebody in every generation had to remember now and then that such things as wickedness, suffering and death had not yet been banished from the earth; and with all those bright-complexioned white-haired mothers mailed in massage and optimism, and behaving as if they had never heard of anything but the Good and the Beautiful, perhaps their children had to serve as vicarious sacrifices. (45)

The generational toggling between positive and negative worldviews offers proof of the inescapability of the past, a point Wharton thought America (and literary modernism) urgently needed to recognize. The war also made apparent the futility of attempting to impose a plan and order on the chaos of history. Nona and Lita are evidence that you

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<sup>84</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).



cannot merely cover up and anaesthetize the past; someone will always have to pay for the preceding era's self-deceptions.

Likewise, for Wharton modernist interiority is no escape from the optimistic delusions of the past, but merely a recoiling from them. If the modernists resisted self-help for its formulaic simplifications, Wharton resisted self-help for the same exploitation of textual ambiguity and obscurity practiced by the modernists themselves. As Bauer notes, in her late writings, Wharton relied "much more than before on the mass culture around her to explore the intricacy of her own antimodernism."<sup>85</sup> Wharton herself associates the modernist stream of consciousness technique with the "speed-recovery" culture Manford embodies:

For some reason it is easier to note the confused drift of subconscious sensation than to single out the conscious thoughts and deliberate actions which are the key to character, and to the author's reason for depicting that character. I have often wished, in my "Sister Anne" watch for the coming great novelist, that these facilities did not so temptingly concord with the short-cut in everything which is the ideal of the new generation, with the universal thirst to surpass the speed-recovery in every department of human activity.<sup>86</sup>

It seems jarring to read Wharton's account of modernism—whose difficulty and complexity is widely understood as a critique of commodity culture—as itself a product of this same short-cut culture. One cannot help but feel that, with her characterization of modernism as essentially lazy, Wharton has gotten the movement wrong. Who having

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<sup>85</sup> Bauer, xii.

<sup>86</sup> "Tendencies," 434.

read “Oxen of the Sun” could say that Joyce lacks a literary-historical sense or, having read *To the Lighthouse*, would agree that modernism’s stream of consciousness method is not a careful work of selection, discrimination, and presentation? Wharton too easily accepts the movement’s anti-nineteenth-century grandstanding, which masks the author’s deep dependence upon the old conceits of character, convention, and plot. “I am always suspicious,” she said, “in creative work, of modifications which avoid difficulties, and nothing in the novelist’s task puts his ability to the test as does the creating and keeping alive of characters,” a vocation she felt the modernists had eschewed with their “cinema obviousness.”<sup>87</sup> Many will no doubt disagree with her account (for instance, Leo Bersani has written a convincing description of the enduringness of the character of Leopold Bloom).<sup>88</sup> However, there is also something that rings true in this mischaracterization, an insight that an uncritical acceptance of modernism’s tenets overlooks. Like the self-made man who disingenuously disavows the support and influence of his predecessors, the ideal of modernist novelty elides any indebtedness to tradition and history. In this way, Wharton’s critique of modernist novelty shows up the disjunction between the movement’s slogans and its historicity.

## Conclusion

It is not merely the case that Wharton and James were engaging with self-help in complex and surprising ways, as should by now be established, but also that self-help

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<sup>87</sup> Edith Wharton, “Permanent Values in Fiction.” *The Saturday Review of Literature*, Number 38 (April 7, 1934), 604.

<sup>88</sup> Leo Bersani, “Against Ulysses.” *The Culture of Redemption*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.

comes to stand for their alienation from the present, both in terms of current trends and the moment's immediacy. This is perhaps why their narratives associate self-help not with youth but with the aging generation who compensate for their own obsolescence with exercises stressing immersion in the moment. For Wharton, modernism and self-help are two competing ways of coping with transience. For James, self-help represents a kind of counterfactual integration in the mass imaginary. As a result of the utopian premise of self-help—its fantasy of what Habermas calls “an ideal speech situation”<sup>89</sup>—there is an elegiac undertone to literary parodies of self-help. One could go so far as to say that every parody of self-help masks a regret. Even Flaubert envied the simple pleasures of the dilettante. At the same time as she mercilessly lambasts the new self-improvement trends, Wharton reveals the extent to which Mrs. Manford depends upon her credos and exercises to compensate for life's brutality. Despite the stratagems she undertakes in order to ridicule her character's pursuits, Wharton's narrative ultimately fails to convince us of the risibility of Mrs. Manford's coping mechanisms. These authors' parodies of self-help express not just their nostalgia for a time when the advice relation remained untainted by commodification, but also their yearning for a form of representation that would not be predicated on their own alienation.

Outside of the drama of their narratives, Wharton and James's literary treatments of self-help bring forth the complex problem of the disjunction between action and contemplation, participation and critique. With their concern over self-help's quotidian utility, they return us to the problem of how to understand and articulate the everyday

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<sup>89</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 25.

value of a weak philosophy. Despite William James's lengthy defense of the pragmatic benefits of a positive worldview, he admitted that, ultimately, negativity offers a more accurate picture of life's vicissitudes. James would agree with Huxley in "Modern Superstition" that self-help has attained the status of a new religion, yet he is more receptive to this new religion's social purpose. However, in a telling moment, after his impassioned defense of the overlooked merits of the healthy temperament, William concedes, in a moving passage:

The method of averting one's attention from evil, and living simply in the light of the good is splendid as long as it will work...But it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes; and even though one be quite free from melancholy one's self, there is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth.<sup>90</sup>

For a founder of pragmatism, it's a remarkable concession. For the truth in this passage is most decidedly not a mere case of "what works" but of something much deeper. In fact, truth here is the opposite of what works in a pragmatic, everyday sense. This is not modern relativism or amoral perspectivism; for James, the glass is half empty. Time is finite, reality unstable, death imminent, security a delusion. "Our civilization is founded on shambles," he elaborates, "and every individual existence goes out in a lonely spasm

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<sup>90</sup> James, *Varieties*, 152.

of helpless agony.”<sup>91</sup> It is in such melancholy confessions, smuggled between arguments for the potential benefits of “healthy mindedness,” that the James brothers meet.

And this sense of the negative as true might be the real source of William James’s prescience and radicalism regarding the social exigency of self-help’s panaceas. For William, self-help is not just about the superficial desire for “instant gratification” and shortcuts, as Huxley and Wharton suggest. Rather, James sees deeper into the transhistorical lack that self-help, like all “varieties of religious experience,” seeks to redress. Wharton gestures towards this with her identification of Mrs. Manford’s fear of empty time, but her narrative stops short of a thorough exploration of this deeper ontological demand that, as “The Jolly Corner” shows, modernism and self-help collectively exploit.

If, as Wharton and the James brothers agree, health and positivity are fundamentally false (i.e. transient), the question becomes: can one live healthy mindedness knowing it is not the truth. That is to say, can one unlearn irony and come back from modernist negation? This is what William James called the phenomenon of the “twice born”: those who have inhabited the truth of negativity and learned to reject it in order to achieve happiness.<sup>92</sup>

Probably no contemporary author has done more to resurrect James’s insistence on self-help’s necessary lie than David Foster Wallace. With his receptivity to self-help’s social and personal function, Wallace might be William James’s heir apparent. Both

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> William James, *Writings 1902-1910. Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Library of America, 1988), 155.

thinkers suffered in their personal lives from tragic and debilitating depression. Notes one reporter after visiting Wallace's papers at the Harry Ransom Center:

One surprise was the number of popular self-help books in the collection, and the care and attention with which he read and reread them. I mean stuff of the best-sellingest, Oprah-level cheesiness and la-la reputation was to be found in Wallace's library. Along with all the Wittgenstein, Husserl and Borges, he read John Bradshaw, Willard Beecher, Neil Fiore, Andrew Weil, M. Scott Peck and Alice Miller. Carefully...

I left the Ransom Center wondering whether one of the most valuable parts of Wallace's legacy might not be in persuading us to put John Bradshaw on the same level with Wittgenstein.<sup>93</sup>

Or, rather, Wallace's legacy invites us to ask whether it is possible to enjoy Bradshaw *after* Wittgenstein, a question that contemporary self-help readings of modernism like de Botton's and Kiberd's also pose. According to this reporter, the appeal of self-help for Wallace was its capacity to remind him of his own humility, and to curb the fantasy of genius-exceptionality. Disrupting the "role segregation" between private and professional identities, self-help humbles the hubris of the postmodern.<sup>94</sup> But if needing a self-help book is a reminder of one's commonness, its contents counteract this humbling

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<sup>93</sup> Maria Bustillos, "Inside David Wallace's Private Self-Help Library." *The Awl* (April 5, 2011).

<sup>94</sup> Wanting to participate, being unable to participate: this conflict engenders the irony that makes essays like "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," describing Wallace's reluctant experience aboard a luxury cruiseliner, so compelling.<sup>94</sup> As Elaine Blair of the *New York Review of Books* avers, "Wallace gives us permission to find solace in common self-help truisms without feeling that we have lost our critical faculties. In other words, he cleaves aesthetic standards from moral ones, and shows us that it is possible, and sometimes necessary, to do so." "A New Brilliant Start." *The New York Review of Books* (December 6, 2012)

with their fetishism of exceptionality and individual achievement. Self-help paradoxically turns the romance of individualism into a type of uniformity. According to Wharton, a similar perversion of the romance of character and individualism is precisely what modernism heralds.

The contemporary author, who does not want to be like Wharton the curmudgeon, but does not want to be the Rope Group either, must mediate the extremes of aloof derision and unrestrained participation. Such is Spencer Brydon's dilemma, caught between the spheres of the potential and the actual, unable to fully immerse himself in either. Bruno Latour calls this the opposition between the "fact" and "fairy" positions, or between detached demystification and hysterical fetishism.<sup>95</sup> If Wharton critiques the idiocy of the pseudo-spiritual, "The Jolly Corner" makes the unsustainability of modernist interiority grotesque. Nobody wants to live in modernism, as Marshall Berman and Frank King remind us. Even the most committed authors need some relief from modernism's unforgiving landscape.

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<sup>95</sup> Bruno Latour, "Why has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004), 237.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Ulysses* as Self-Help Manual? James Joyce's Strategic Populism

In 2009, Declan Kiberd caused a little stir among Joyceans with his new guide to James Joyce for the “common reader,” *Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Life in Joyce's Masterpiece*. In his latest work, the respected author of *Inventing Ireland* (1995) aimed to pry Joyce's masterpiece from the grip of the “corporate university,” which “praised Joyce as the supreme technician and ignored *Ulysses* as a modern example of wisdom literature.” “It is time to reconnect *Ulysses* to the lives of everyday people,” Kiberd declares.<sup>1</sup> Instead of tracing Homeric parallels or poring over skeleton keys, he suggests that we approach Joyce's text as nothing other than a “‘self-help’ manual.” *Ulysses*, he explains, “is a book with much to teach us about the world—advice on how to cope with grief; how to be frank about death in the age of its denial; how women have their own sexual desires and so also do men; how to walk and think at the same time...”<sup>2</sup>

Kiberd's book was received favorably in the popular press, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, quite critically in the academic journals. Scholars appreciated his lucid, jargon-free prose, but recoiled at his brash claims, his reliance on “anecdotal” evidence and the text's “gossipy biographical flourish.”<sup>3</sup> If Joyce's goal was really to reach the “common reader,” reviewers wondered why he did not write in simpler terms. While the

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<sup>1</sup> *Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Life in Joyce's Masterpiece*. (New York: Norton, 2009), 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Kelly, 2010. “Saving Joyce from the Professors,” *South Carolina Review*, 43.1 (2010), 264.



self-help manual is defined by plain speech, direct address, and an appeal to common sense, these are qualities that Joyce's avant-garde experiment gleefully abdicates. Kiberd deftly isolates moments of universality, of quotidian intimacy and domestic wisdom in Joyce's text, all the while brushing off the infamous difficulty of *Ulysses*:

Is Joyce therefore in bad faith, writing a book which celebrates the common man in such forbiddingly complex ways? Not really. The book was written to be enjoyed by ordinary men and women, but it is also an account of how the intellectual can return to the actual, an account of the complex path which such persons can take back to the ordinary.<sup>4</sup>

"Not really" Kiberd says, betraying his own uncertainty, as he describes ordinariness as the telos of Joyce's radically innovative text. The ire of the academic reviewers is not directed at Kiberd per se, but at the genre to which his latest book belongs. For them, these simplifying guides are works of "iconoclastic arrogance,"<sup>5</sup> reducing their subjects to a "shoddy simulacrum."<sup>6</sup> "Proclaiming their fealty to the ordinary," Steven Kellman cuttingly observes, "they are driven by impatience with—even contempt for—the actual experience of reading extraordinary works."<sup>7</sup> Yet literature is always vulnerable to abridgement, and a text's cultural portability is also a great predictor of longevity.

This chapter uses "self-help" guides to Joyce as an occasion to illuminate the

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<sup>4</sup> 258.

<sup>5</sup> Steven G. Kellman, "James Joyce for Ordinary Blokes?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 21, 2009. <http://chronicle.com/article/James-Joyce-for-Ordinary/48427/> (accessed May 25, 2012), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Cusack, "Review: *Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Living and Who Reads Ulysses? The Rhetoric of the Joyce Wars and the Common Reader.*" *English Studies*, 92.4 (2011), 472.

<sup>7</sup> 6.

buried history of modernism's engagement with popular morality. It suggests that the birth of Joyce's aesthetic—and, by extension, modernism more broadly—is attributable to early twentieth-century debates over the education of “common readers,” debates that had far-reaching political and national connotations.<sup>8</sup> As a corollary, this chapter undermines idealized portraits of “oracular” Joyce, showing *Ulysses* to be firmly a product of the contentions of its day. Just as Wharton and James challenged modernism's antipathy to self-help, as we saw in the previous chapter, applications like Kiberd's reveal that didacticism is not so inimical to modernism as has been supposed.

Given the ardor of Kiberd's project, and the passionate antipathy it inspired, one might think that he was the first reader of *Ulysses* to point out its everyday appeal. In reality, however, Kiberd's text is the latest in a long tradition of common reader interpretations of Joyce, beginning with Charles Duff's 1932 *James Joyce and the Plain Reader*,<sup>9</sup> William Powell Jones's *James Joyce and the Common Reader* (1955),<sup>10</sup> and Anthony Burgess's *Here Comes Everybody* (1965), to name a few.<sup>11</sup> As early as 1934, *TIME* magazine had declared, “For readers to whom books are an important means of learning about life, [*Ulysses*] stands preeminent above modern rivals.”<sup>12</sup> Other contemporary authors with a similar approach to Kiberd's include Philip Kitcher, Jefferson Hunter, and Arnold Weinstein, who similarly dubs *Ulysses* “nothing less than a

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<sup>8</sup> I use the term “common reader” because it is the phrase used by the modernists and their early critics, yet knowing that it fails adequately capture the diversity—or indeed originality—of popular approaches to the literary text.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Duff, (London: D. Hammersworth).

<sup>10</sup> William Powell Jones, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press).

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Burgess, (London: Faber and Faber).

<sup>12</sup> “Ulysses Lands.” *TIME*. January 29 1934. 23.5.

self-help manual.”<sup>13</sup> Such texts evince the continuance of what Julie Sloan Brannon calls the “Joyce wars,” divided between specialized readers and those who read Joyce for his practical advice.<sup>14</sup> While neither position is very convincing alone, together they testify to *Ulysses*’s continued status as a *locus classicus* for questioning literature’s real-world value; the deterrent complexity of Joyce’s narrative forces readers to articulate, perhaps even reconsider, the expectations they bring to literary texts.

Joyce’s popular interpreters are quick to point out those moments where he appears to encourage their moralizing approach. For instance, the narrator of “Ithaca” informs us that Leopold Bloom “himself had applied to the works of William Shakespeare more than once for the solution of difficult problems in imaginary or real life.”<sup>15</sup> Lest we take Bloom’s method as model, however, Joyce offers the following addendum, namely that “In spite of careful and repeated reading of certain classical passages, aided by a glossary, he had derived imperfect conviction from the text, the answers not bearing in all points” (17.389-91). Joyce’s punctilious terminology, which likens literary wisdom to a failed formula or sum, also emerges in reference to Stephen Dedalus’s reading of Hamlet; as Buck Mulligan puts it: “He proves by algebra that Hamlet's grandson is Shakespeare's grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father” (1.555-557). Stephen’s tongue-in-cheek approach to the literary masterpiece

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<sup>13</sup> Arnold Weinstein, *Recovering Your Story, Understanding the Self Through Five Great Modern Writers: Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Morrison*. (New York: Random House, 2006), 101.

<sup>14</sup> Julie Sloan Brannon, *Who Reads Ulysses?: The Rhetoric of the Joyce Wars and the Common Reader*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 2.

<sup>15</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses: The Corrected Text* (1922). Edited by Hans Walter Gabler et al. (New York: Random House, 1986), 17.385-387. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

as algebraic equation, like Bloom's quest for Shakespearean "solutions," parodies the pedagogical expectations we bring to texts.

Bloom's practice of reading for life-wisdom has a long history, one coincident with the history of reading itself. Medievalist Nicholas Howe explicates that in its Anglo-Saxon roots, the verb for "reading" ("raedan") also originally meant "giving advice or counsel," a connotation Modern English gradually lost as it gravitated toward the Latin term, "legere."<sup>16</sup> Thus, contemporary self-help interpretations are only the latest manifestation of a didactic impetus that has recurred throughout Western literary history: from Renaissance poetry's commitment to merging pleasure and utility, to the eighteenth-century argument that literature should improve and instruct, and through to the utilitarian moralism that motivates so many Victorian texts. Yet, as we've seen in the previous chapter, the emergence of modernism coincides with a heightened antagonism between practicality and aesthetics. This shift reflects the modernists' resistance to Victorian moral imperatives, as well as the influence of Kantian disinterestedness upon their embrace of "*l'art pour l'art*." In the popular sphere, the rise of the bestseller list in the early twentieth century created a newly agonistic relation between the novel and the handbook, which vied for space on the same general list until 1918.<sup>17</sup> The commercialization of counsel in advertising copy and advice columns undermined the integrity of the narrative moral, while the rise of political propaganda during the First

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<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Howe, "The Cultural Construction of Reading in Anglo-Saxon England." In *The Ethnography of Reading*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin, 58-79 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 63.

<sup>17</sup> In 1918, the non-fiction list was permanently established. See Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: R.R. Bowker Company, 1946), 205.

World War made the public increasingly wary of rhetorical manipulation of all kinds. It is under these conditions that modernism established its famed resistance to the moralizing mode.

Thanks to the influence of New Criticism, formalism, and aestheticism, literary critics have largely followed suit in questioning literature's ethical use, with some notable exceptions.<sup>18</sup> Richard Posner's response to the ethical criticism of Martha Nussbaum seemed to speak for a whole generation of critics who had witnessed the well read commit atrocities: "immersion in literature does not make us better citizens or better people," he asserted, adding that ethical readings tend to be "reductive" and "digressive."<sup>19</sup> Nussbaum could be describing some self-help guides to modernism when she regretfully concedes that "some writing about literature" has "given ethical writing about literature a bad name, by its neglect of literary form and its reductive moralizing manner."<sup>20</sup> However, the precarious position of the humanities today, suffering from a lack of visible "use-value" compared to Business or Science, necessitates a more charitable consideration of literature's popular applications.

*Ulysses's* reputation as the very paradigm of modernist inutility makes it an ideal case study of modernism's complex engagement with the pragmatism of the popular realm. Identifying the need for such a critical intervention, Julie Brannon aptly observes,

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<sup>18</sup> In addition to Martha Nussbaum, some critics who are in different ways interested in literary ethics include Wayne Booth, Geoffrey Harpham, and Tobin Siebers, to name but a sampling.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," *Philosophy and Literature* (21.1.1997), 2, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Love's knowledge: essays on philosophy and literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 172.

Lawrence Rainey, Mark Morrison, Joyce Wexler, and Allison Pease, among many others, have studied how the publishing culture of the early twentieth century shaped Modernism. Yet little attention has been paid to how present day audiences, for whom Modernism is already codified, reified, and ossified as canonical, receive texts like *Ulysses*.<sup>21</sup>

Practical readings of *Ulysses* can bolster the scholarly effort to dismantle the ossified, “great divide” narrative of modernism’s antipathy to real-world use.<sup>22</sup> Despite growing interest in the populism of the avant-garde, literary critics have yet to seriously engage with these contemporary readings of Joyce’s work. To shrug off self-help guides to Joyce as trivial epiphenomena is to neglect their ability to illuminate the enduring sources of modernism’s appeal. To that end, this chapter treats contemporary applications of *Ulysses* as an occasion to reassess the influence of the “average reader” upon the very constitution of the modernist aesthetic.

Rather than subverting Joyce’s avant-garde aims, the popular championing of *Ulysses*’s everyday use is made possible by Joyce’s own attunement to the common readers of his time, people wary of authority but eager for useful advice. As we shall see, the puzzling ubiquity of practical readers in *Ulysses* reflects the demand for moralizing texts that Joyce witnessed in the reading public of his youth. It is important to remember that a “veritable revolution in literacy and education” took place in mid nineteenth-

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<sup>21</sup> xiii.

<sup>22</sup> The argument for a “great divide” between modernism and mass culture was most famously advanced by Andreas Huyssen (1986).

century Ireland,<sup>23</sup> providing the common reader with an unprecedented influence over the literary market. These changes provide a crucial context for understanding the representation of reading in Joyce's work.

### **The Ideal Reader in *Absentia***

Nobody in *Ulysses* reads like a modernist. Joyce's characters read personally, emotionally, practically, prophetically, but they do not read in the disinterested manner the modernists are conventionally thought to have promoted. Molly reads for romantic escapism, Bloom is relentlessly mining for advice. While Jeffrey Segall identifies Joyce's ideal audience as the New Critics,<sup>24</sup> even Stephen Dedalus's infamous "Hamlet theory" wouldn't pass muster in Cleanth Brooks's class, with Stephen's projecting of paternity issues, professional frustrations, and biographical background onto Shakespeare's text.<sup>25</sup> Joyce theorizes an "ideal" reader who has a purely "static" and aesthetic appreciation of the text, who doesn't seek a message or a moral but stays up all night reveling in the jouissance of the Joycean word.<sup>26</sup> But as the characters in *Ulysses* remind us, "ideal readers" don't buy books.

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<sup>23</sup>Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), 146.

<sup>24</sup>*Joyce in America: Cultural Politics and the Trials of Ulysses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 135.

<sup>25</sup>John Nash notes, "Nowhere in Joyce's work is there a model of an 'ideal reader'" (2006, 6).

<sup>26</sup>Joyce complained, "The pity is the public will demand and find a moral in my book—or worse they may take it in some more serious way, and on the honor of a gentleman, there is not one single serious line in it." *Interview with Djuna Barnes for Vanity Fair*, April 1922. In *Finnegans Wake* he describes his "ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia" ([1939] 1999, 120.13).

André Lefevere and Itamar Even-Zohar observe that the greatest amount of activity in literary transmission usually occurs in the lowest strata of the “polysystem”: “i.e. texts that are being reconstituted in children’s literature, literary guidebooks, and other popular and paraliterary genres.”<sup>27</sup> *Ulysses* confirms this view, in its depiction of what I call the “self-help methodology” as a primary vector of literary transmission. In Joyce’s narrative, the activity and perpetuity of the literary are persistently tied to the practical application of texts, from Dilly’s French primer to Stephen’s guide to seduction, to Gerty MacDowell with her tips from women’s magazines. As Jennifer Wicke writes, such eminently consumable, popular books “dot the text like candy.”<sup>28</sup> Of the twenty-three texts populating Bloom’s bookshelf, only four are discernibly fiction, the rest are biographies, histories, and practical guides, including: *The Useful Ready Reckoner*, *The Child’s Guide*, *A Handbook of Astronomy*, *Short but Yet Plain Elements of Geometry*, and last but not least, Eugen Sandow’s *Physical Strength and How to obtain it* (17.1361-1398).<sup>29</sup>

Although Bloom enjoys flipping through his volumes of Shakespeare for “wisdom while you wait” (11.906), Joyce condemned the same approach in a 1903 review of a guide to the Bard for the “general reader,” precisely like those now published

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<sup>27</sup> As described in Friederike Von Schwerin-High, *Shakespeare, Reception and Translation: Germany and Japan* (Continuum: New York, 2004), 64. Even-Zohar describes the literary system as co-existing with other social systems, whether religious, legal, etc., which taken together constitute the “polysystem.”

<sup>28</sup> Jennifer Wicke, “‘Who’s She When She’s at Home?’: Molly Bloom and the Work of Consumption” in *Molly Blooms: A Polylogue on “Penelope,”* ed. Richard Pearce, 174-195 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1994), 179.

<sup>29</sup> For discussions of the role of Sandow’s self-help text in *Ulysses*, see Brandon Kershner (1998) and Vike Martina Plock (2006).



on Joyce's own work. The review, facetiously titled "Shakespeare Explained," synthesizes Joyce's contempt for the reductive quality of such populist approaches:

There is nowhere an attempt at criticism, and the interpretations are meagre, obvious, and commonplace. The passages 'quoted' fill up perhaps a third of the book, and it must be confessed that the writer's method of treating Shakespeare is (or seems to be) remarkably irreverent. . . .It will be seen that the substance of this book is after the manner of ancient playbills. Here is no psychological complexity, no cross-purpose, no interweaving of motives such as might perplex the base multitude. . . . There is something very naif about this book, but (alas!) the general public will hardly pay sixteen shillings for such naivete. . . . And even the pages are wrongly numbered.<sup>30</sup>

Joyce thought that even the "general reader" would see through the book and refuse to purchase it. Unlike Joyce, however, Leopold Bloom might have appreciated "Shakespeare explained." Bloom fantasizes about submitting a story to the local paper, "something quick and neat" which "begins and ends morally" (4.511-515), a description which seems to perfectly fit this "ancient playbill" mold. Modernism likes to play with this gap between quotidian character and radical form. Speaking of *Madame Bovary*, Rita Felski notes that "Emma does not read as Flaubert wishes his own novel to be read" (1995, 15). Discussing Joyce, John Carey makes an identical point: "Bloom himself would never and could never have read *Ulysses*" (1992, 20).

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<sup>30</sup> James Joyce, *Occasional Critical and Politics Writings*, Edited by Kevin Barry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 97-98.

Bloom prefers practical reading material like Eugen Sandow's exercise manual. Sandow's special section on "Physical Culture for the Middle-Aged," and his article on "Physical Culture among the Jews," would have appealed to Bloom's sensibilities.<sup>31</sup> W.B. Yeats was apparently also a Sandow devotee, commenting in a letter from July 19, 1905 that, to his daily regimen, "I have added Sandow exercises twice daily."<sup>32</sup> Perhaps Sandow appealed to literary types because, as Brandon Kershner explains, his handbook had a strong narrative element, combining autobiography with prescription much like Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* and *Lives of Engineers*.<sup>33</sup> Yet Joyce's invocation of Sandow makes no allusions to these aesthetic aspects of his text, or to *Physical Strength's* merging of narrative and prescription. The only nugget that Bloom appears to have gleaned from the text is one of Sandow's instructions for physical positioning: "On the hands down," as Bloom repeats to himself at various points in *Ulysses*. Sandow's prescriptive motto circulates in Bloom's imagination as this one unmoored, reified prescription, to be pocketed and deployed as consolation or reminder, much like his potato or piece of soap, at key moments throughout the day.

Sandow's text frequently arises amid Bloom's thoughts of death, aging, and physical deterioration, as in "Calypso:"

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<sup>31</sup> Vike Martina Plock, 2006. "A Feast of Strength in Ithaca," *Journal of Modern Literature* 30.1 (2006), 129-136.

<sup>32</sup> W.B. Yeats, Letter to Florence Farr, 19 July 1905. In *Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats Volume IV, 1905-1907*. Edited by John Kelly (New York: Oxford, 2005), 135.

<sup>33</sup> Brandon Kershner, "The World's Strongest Man: Joyce or Sandow?" In *Images of Joyce Volume I*, ed. Clive Hart et al, 237-252 (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998), 246.

Grey horror seared his flesh. Folding the page into his pocket he turned into Eccles Street, hurrying homeward. Cold oils slid along his veins, chilling his blood: age crusting him with a salt cloak. Well, I am here now. Yes, I am here now. Morning mouth bad images. Got up wrong side of the bed. Must begin again those Sandow's exercises. On the hands down. (4.230-234)

The self-help devotee prefers to invent superstitious antidotes ("wrong side of the bed"/"Sandow's exercises"), than concede the limitations of human agency in the face of human mortality. For Bloom, Sandow offers much the same consolation as Molly's warm flesh: an affirmation of immediacy, the present and life. Bloom frequently turns to the practical as an escape from negativity, a tendency which sometimes verges upon flippancy, as when he jumps from thoughts of people drowning to wondering, "Do fish ever get seasick?" in "Nausicaa" (13.1162). This consolation of the material is, in some sense, what Stephen lacks, along with the discipline to resist morbid thoughts. Above all, the self-help text for Bloom represents will: "It is the brain which develops the muscles," as Sandow notes.<sup>34</sup> In light of Sandow's emphasis upon mental discipline, Bloom's choice of "equanimity" above violence in "Ithaca" suggests that, despite his disappointing muscular developments, perhaps Bloom does succeed at following some of Sandow's principles after all.

Sandow's text emerges again in "Circe's" surrealist phantasmagoria, which takes place in a brothel in nighttown, to expose the potential sadomasochism of the self-help mode of textual engagement. The brothel's Madam Bella (now transformed into the male

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<sup>34</sup> Eugen Sandow, *Strength and How to Obtain It* (London: Gale & Polden Ltd, 1897), 9.

Bello) repeats Sandow's prescription to Bloom, who has metamorphosed in this dream-like sequence into a groveling sow. The Homeric parallel aside, in light of Sandow's orientation towards the "obese," it makes sense that Bloom is transformed into a plump greedy pig, and that the Sandow text would be the agent which facilitates this transformation. The sniveling pig that Bloom becomes dramatizes self-help's debasement of its reader:

BELLO

Down! (*he taps her on the shoulder with his fan*) Incline feet forward! Slide left foot one pace back! You will fall. You are falling. On the hands down!

BLOOM

(*her eyes upturned in the sign of admiration, closing, yaps*) Truffles!  
(*With a piercing epileptic cry she sinks on all fours, grunting, snuffling, rooting at his feet: then lies, shamming dead, with eyes shut tight, trembling eyelids, bowed upon the ground in the attitude of most excellent master.*) . . .

BLOOM

(*enthralled, bleats*) I promise never to disobey. (15.2846-2864)

To be enthralled by the experience of one's own abasement is the peculiar premise, not only of modernist narratives like *Ulysses*, but also of self-help. Bello exploits the supplicatory posture of the Sandow exercise, turning the degrading experience of the self-improvement regime to her domineering advantage. Joyce's insomniac reader may well empathize with Bloom in this scene, who must perpetually adapt to the whim of Bello's

irrational authority. Amid Bello's onslaught of commands, Bloom rolls around on the floor in an "enthralled" revelry, begging to be given directives.

But "Circe" is not the only time that Joyce aligns the erotic and didactic modes; the first articulation of this relation is voiced by Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In this earlier text, Stephen theorizes the association between eros and didacticism that "Circe" will later burlesque, in a diatribe taken from Joyce's own personal notes on aesthetics:

The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion (I use the general term) is therefore static.

The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing.<sup>35</sup>

Pointedly, in "Ithaca" Bloom is described as nothing less than a "*kinetic poet*" (17.410).

At the other extreme, Stephen offers a typical modernist articulation of the merits of aesthetic disinterestedness. According to him, "pornographical" and "didactic" arts are "improper" because they focus on provoking the reader, rather than on the formal integrity of the work.

It might seem counterintuitive to pair the didactic, that most soporific of styles, with the pornographic mode, yet as Sarah Raff argues the two are frequently

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<sup>35</sup>James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1967), 205.

intertwined.<sup>36</sup> In the eighteenth century, novelists claimed to entertain readers only to better instruct them; the narrative example, they assured, was merely the sugar for smuggling the pedagogical message through. As it turns out, though, scenes of instruction in these eighteenth-century narratives were intensely erotically charged. Associating self-help with sadomasochism in “Circe,” morality tales with sexual excitation in “Nausicaa,”<sup>37</sup> and tutoring with seduction in “Penelope,” *Ulysses* corroborates Raff’s point. Such scenes rekindle the Horatian merging of utility and pleasure, with a bawdy, modern twist. Molly imagines seducing Stephen as he tutors her in Italian, “Ill read and study all I can find or learn a bit off by heart if I knew who he likes so he wont think me stupid if he thinks all women are the same and I can teach him the other part Ill make him feel all over him till he half faints under me...” (18.1362-1364). Conversely, Bloom’s fondness for Molly is often couched in imagining strategies for her instruction (16.1653 and 17.672). Evaluating different approaches to Molly’s edification, Bloom determines the most effective method to be “indirect suggestion implicating selfinterest” (17.704), a fitting description of Joyce’s own authorial technique.

Despite his eagerness to distance himself from the “improper” responses of less educated readers, Stephen himself registers the pleasures of “kinetic” readings.

Surrounded by a group of older librarians and scholars in “Scylla and Charybdis,”

Stephen performs an elaborate biographical reading of *Hamlet*, invoking a quotation from

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<sup>36</sup> Sarah Raff, “Quixotes, Precepts, and Galateas: The Didactic Novel in Eighteenth-Century Britain” *Comparative Literature Studies* 434 (2006), 466-481.

<sup>37</sup> See Thomas Kerr (1985) for a discussion of the morality tale *The Lamplighter*, which informs this episode.

Maurice Maeterlinck to support his interpretation of the play as Shakespeare's enactment of his distress over his wife's alleged infidelities. Stephen quotes Maeterlinck's poetic observation,

*If Socrates leave his house today he will find the sage seated on his doorstep. If Judas go forth tonight it is to Judas his steps will tend. Every life is many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love, but always meeting ourselves. (9.1042)*

Stephen uses Maeterlinck's insight to support the idea that all of the characters in Shakespeare's plays are enacting different problems in the author's life. Patrick A. McCarthy reads the passage as asserting that "all readings—of the book and of the world—are inevitably personal readings."<sup>38</sup> But Stephen tellingly leaves out the full version of Maeterlinck's sentence, which reads "If Judas go forth to-night, it is towards Judas his steps will tend, nor will chance for betrayal be lacking; but let Socrates open his door, he shall find Socrates asleep on the threshold before him, and there will be occasion for wisdom."<sup>39</sup> Indeed, "there will be occasion for wisdom," not only because Socrates is the "wise sage," but also because experience must always lead back to the self in order to be meaningful. In its original form, Maeterlinck's statement is not a deterministic critique of readerly projection but an observation about the crucial role of identification in the

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<sup>38</sup> Patrick A. McCarthy, "Reading in Ulysses" in *Joycean Occasions: Essays from the Milwaukee James Joyce Conference*. ed. Janet E Dunleavy, Melvin J. Friedman, and Michael Patrick Gillespie (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991), 19.

<sup>39</sup> Maurice Maeterlinck, *Wisdom and Destiny*. Translated by Alfred Suto (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1918), 32.

acquisition of wisdom, indicating Stephen's own susceptibility to the "kinetic" readings he critiques. Throughout *Ulysses*, Joyce depicts characters who see themselves in what they read, from Molly hating any book with a "Molly" in it (19.657), to Bloom seeing Molly's infidelity in *Sweets of Sin* ("For him! For Raoul!") (10.609), to Stephen projecting his loneliness onto Shakespeare's text ("And my turn? When?") (9.261). These scenes suggest that without projection, identification, and the prospect of personal relevance there is no textual relation.

At heart, both Stephen's and Bloom's readings are motivated by self-interest, intimating the buried affinities between intellectual and popular approaches to the literary text. However, the two characters put their readerly self-interest to very different use. Nevertheless, their literary applications belie the view of reading as a passive, merely consumptive process, showing how each reader invents his own relation to the text. "Whether it is a question of newspapers or of Proust," says Michel de Certeau, "readers are travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves."<sup>40</sup> In de Certeau's view, this readerly "poaching" is not merely instrumental but adopts a romantic, subversive hue; it is akin to "dances between readers and texts in a place where, on a depressing stage, an orthodox doctrine had erected the statue of "the work."<sup>41</sup> However "orthodox" in appearance, Joyce's pronouncements about his "ideal reader" strategically encourage such readerly "poaching." As the nighttown scene

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<sup>40</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 174.

<sup>41</sup> 175.



suggests, the textual “dance” between the desire for self-improvement and a recalcitrant aesthetic defines the taunting pleasure of the modernist text.

The popular commentators are right to protest that too much critical weight has been placed on the ideal reader who stays up all night mapping Homeric parallels and memorizing skeleton keys and not enough on *Ulysses*’s strange courtship of the common reader. Joyce came of age during a divisive period for Irish letters, marked by “utilitarian” and “romantic” political extremes.<sup>42</sup> The transition from parochial Irish culture to the rise of Irish modernism was not seamless, but rather an ugly and protracted scuffle over the nation’s literary future, culminating in a very public dispute between Charles Gavan Duffy and W.B. Yeats, out of which “battles lines formed for the contention that continues to this day.”<sup>43</sup> These debates fostered Joyce’s attunement to popular readers as gatekeepers for even the most radical aesthetic. Only by attending to the national significance of self-help to the Irish can we fully appreciate the stakes of the different reading methods represented in Joyce’s text.

### **“That Old Delusion, Didacticism”: Modernism and the Irish Common Reader**

Common reader wars are nothing new to Irish culture. In fact, twenty-first-century common reader wars in Joyce criticism are reenacting the disputes that gave rise to Irish modernism in the first place. Books by Kiberd, Weinstein, and Alain de Botton

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<sup>42</sup> Seamus Heaney, “A Tale of Two Islands: Reflections on the Irish Literary Revival.” In *Irish Studies, Volume I*, ed. P.J. Drudy, 72-87. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 2.

<sup>43</sup> Malcolm Brown, *The Politics of Irish Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972), 370.

are present-day manifestations of modernism's constitutional entanglement with the popular, pragmatic, and didactic, a side of the movement that has been obscured by the received history of its disdain for the masses, but is today receiving some critical attention.<sup>44</sup> Tracing the branch back to the rhizome, it becomes clear that Joyce's indirect didacticism developed in response to the political hothouse of the Dublin of his youth. The coy moralism of *Ulysses* reflects Joyce's attunement to the pleasure of the homiletic text.

It is impossible to discuss *Ulysses* and self-help without addressing the colonial connotation of "self-help" in Ireland, a nation marked by bloody fights over the rights of "Sinn Féin" ("ourselves") and Home rule.<sup>45</sup> Rather than purely agonistic, there is an "unacknowledged overlap between [Joyce's] fiction and the self-help movement of the Revivalist period."<sup>46</sup> Joyce published his early stories in the *Irish Homestead*, a journal that P.J. Matthews explains was primarily for farmers, founded by the Irish Agricultural Organization Society. Joyce once disdainfully referred to the *Homestead* as "the pigs' paper," and was apparently so ashamed to have his avant-garde art appear alongside columns about how to make your own butter that he used the pseudonym "Stephen Daedalus."<sup>47</sup> But in addition to being a source of income and publication for young Irish

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<sup>44</sup> See, for instance, Lisi Schoenbach's *Pragmatic Modernism* (2012) and Liesl Olsen's *Modernism and the Ordinary* (2009).

<sup>45</sup> Kiberd himself discusses the political significance of "self-help" to the Irish (2009, 33).

<sup>46</sup> Plock, "Modernism's Feast on Science: Nutrition and Diet in Joyce's *Ulysses*." *Literature & History* 16.2 (2007), 34.

<sup>47</sup> P.J. Matthews, "'A.E.I.O.U': Joyce and the Irish Homestead," In *Joyce on the Threshold*, ed. A. Fogarty and T. Martin. Florida, 151-168 (Florida: University of Florida Press, 2005), 153.

writers, the *Homestead* was instrumental in establishing village libraries across Ireland and in encouraging the spread of literacy far from urban centers.

In publishing young Irish writers the *Homestead* was exercising the new power wielded by the rural classes in shaping the intellectual sphere. Yeats, who felt threatened by this increased literary influence of the working classes, exhorted the Irish public to resist the influence of British utilitarianism.

On all sides men are studying things that are to get them bodily food, but no man among them is searching for the imaginative and spiritual food to be got out of great literature. Nobody, with the exception of a few ladies, perhaps, ever seems to do any disinterested reading in this library, or indeed anywhere else in Ireland. Every man here is grinding at the mill wherein he grinds all things into pounds and shillings, and but few of them will he get when all is done.<sup>48</sup>

Yeats felt that two grave consequences of colonial oppression—a dearth of time and money—had led to the stifling of that most essential superfluity, aesthetics. When the National Education system was founded in Ireland in 1831, the subjects taught in the schools “had little appeal to parents or their children. To them, education was synonymous with ‘book learning’ and left no room for activities redolent of their everyday lives.”<sup>49</sup> Yet by the 1850s people had become more receptive to the benefits of book-learning for acquiring high-status jobs, and parents pressed the Commissioners to

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<sup>48</sup> W.B. Yeats, “Dublin, Nov. 6, 1892” *Letters to the New Island*. Edited by George Bornstein and Hugh Witemeyer (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 65.

<sup>49</sup> “Sufficient to Their Needs: Literary and Elementary Schooling in the Nineteenth Century.” In *The Origins of Popular Literary in Ireland: Language Change and Educational Development*, ed. Mary Daly and David Dickson 113-138 (Dublin: Trinity College Dublin Press, 1990), 129.

add modern and classical languages to the curriculum. Writing in 1892, the year the Irish Education Act introduced compulsory education, Yeats was less troubled by working-class illiteracy than by the people's encroachment on the "hallowed" field of poetics.

Yeats also believed that the political compulsion to put a green shamrock on the cover of every Irish book was stunting the development of the nation.<sup>50</sup> The green "shamrock stamper" Yeats had in mind was Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, a founder of the Young Ireland movement and the *Nation* magazine. In 1892, when the precocious Joyce was already writing poems and prose, Yeats and Duffy engaged in a fierce battle over editorial control of a series called the New Irish Library, a volume of inexpensive books intended to revitalize the Irish literary scene. The scheme was initially Yeats's project to educate the Irish about their own literature, for back then, as he said, "no educated man ever bought an Irish book."<sup>51</sup> But when the older and more respected Duffy returned to Ireland after years abroad, like "Odysseus returning to Ithaca," as the press said,<sup>52</sup> the shareholders granted him control and pushed Yeats out. All of Ireland was party to the volley of accusations in the press between Yeats and the old Young guard of Dublin.

Much like common reader disputes today, the New Irish Library debate centered on the uses of the literary. Is it the function of books to expand the imagination or discipline the mind? Should language work to complicate or simplify life? The intense political climate made the New Irish Library a hothouse for competing arguments about

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<sup>50</sup> W.B. Yeats, (1922) "Ireland After Parnell." In *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume III, "Autobiographies."* Edited by William H O'Donnel and Douglas N. Archibald. New York: Scribner, 1999), 172.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

the relation of literature to everyday practice. Both Duffy and Yeats were consumed by the insistence that there could be only one anthology—it was *The New Irish Library*, after all—and so the stakes of the project were high. Since the literary identity of Ireland appeared to depend on it, the Library engendered a polarized approach to literature’s social use. Ireland’s revered orator John F. Taylor, whom Joyce quotes in “Aeolus,” in the only passage from *Ulysses* he ever recorded, was Duffy’s strident ally, and Taylor used his rhetorical skills to take up his friend’s cause in the national press.<sup>53</sup>

No author who came of age in Ireland during these years (or after) could have escaped the New Irish Library dispute’s divisive influence. The debate, which P.J. Matthews calls “a dogfight over the establishment of a canon of Irish literature,”<sup>54</sup> was not just confined to the Emerald Isle, but garnered bemused onlookers in the British press as well. As William Patrick Ryan noted in 1894, “few were to remember a time when either the press of England or Ireland had given itself so much concern about Irish books and writers.”<sup>55</sup> Matthews describes the controversy as “an early manifestation of a sea change taking place in Ireland which was, in many ways, a generational revolution.”<sup>56</sup> A pivotal episode “in the continuous fight of the younger writers against the literary ideals

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<sup>53</sup> On Joyce’s use of the Taylor speech in *Ulysses*, see Damien Keane, “Quotation Marks, the Gramophone Record, and the Language of the Outlaw,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 51.4 (2009), 400-415.

<sup>54</sup> P.J. Matthews, *Revival: The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, The Gaelic League, and the Cooperative Movement* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 15.

<sup>55</sup> William Patrick Ryan, *The Irish Literary Revival; its History, Pioneers and Possibilities* (London: Ward & Downey Limited, 1894), 67.

<sup>56</sup> *Revival*, 16.

of the old school,”<sup>57</sup> it created a rift in Ireland’s intellectual culture that continued well into the rise of Irish modernism.

Yeats believed that the literature in the Library should aspire to a “mystic truth” and “mysterious ideal,” rather than a political message.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, the volumes Duffy eventually produced included a *History of Parliament* by Thomas Davis, an Irish songbook, Standish O’Grady’s *Bog of Stars*, Dr. Hyde’s *Short History of Gaelic Literature*, and most egregiously, a story by Balzac, the *Médecin de Campagne*, rewritten for an Irish audience as *A Parish Providence*.<sup>59</sup> This latter is a good example of Yeats’s fear that the originality of the Irish imagination would be denationalized by the desire to keep up with British progress. Yeats lambasted the Balzac adaptation when it appeared: “Duffy has made a book out of one of the poorest of Balzac’s novels, not improved by having the French names turned into English ones; an introduction on agriculture and local industry forty pages long, made up mostly out of a fifty year old article of his own, and an appendix full of quotations from a blue book.”<sup>60</sup> In a funny turn, the obligation to

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<sup>57</sup> Ernest Augustus Boyd, *Ireland’s Literary Renaissance* (New York: John Lane Company, 1916), 91.

<sup>58</sup> W.B. Yeats, (1880-1883) “Young Ireland,” *Uncollected Prose by WB Yeats*. Edited by JP Frayne and G. Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 34.

<sup>59</sup> The full chronological list of New Irish Library publications includes: Thomas Davis, *The Patriot Parliament of 1689*, ed. Charles Gavan Duffy (1893); Standish O’Grady, *The Bog of Stars and Other Stories and Sketches of Elizabethan Ireland* (1893); *The New Spirit of the Nation*, ed. Martin MacDermott (1894); E.M. Lynch, *A Parish Providence: A Country Tale*, with an Introduction by Charles Gavan Duffy (1894); *The Irish Song Book*, ed. Alfred Perceval Graves (1894); Douglas Hyde, *The Story of Early Gaelic Literature* (1895); John Todhunter, *Life of Patrick Sarsfield, Earl of Lucan* (1895); J.F. Taylor, *Owen Roe O’Neill* (1896); Michael MacDonagh, *Bishop Doyle: A Biographical and Historical Study* (1896); Sir Samuel Ferguson, *Lays of the Red Branch*, with an introduction by Mary Ferguson (1897).

<sup>60</sup> W.B. Yeats, (1894) “Some Irish National Books.” In *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume IX*, “Early Articles and Reviews.” Edited by John Frayne and Madeleine Marchaterre (New York: Scribner, 2004), 247.

be Irish leads to a poor imitation of the French. Such a volume offered proof, if any was needed, that Duffy's priority was producing not quality literature but propagandist tracts. Yet despite their polemical differences, Duffy and Yeats had more in common than they were willing to admit, for Yeats was both didactic and nationalist in his own way, and Duffy evidently had some appreciation for aesthetics.

Joyce credits Duffy with publishing James Clarence Mangan, whom Joyce considered the greatest Irish poet and wrote about on two separate occasions (1902 and 1907, reprinted in *James Joyce: Occasional Political and Critical Writing* 2000). He also references Duffy's patriotic ballads in *Ulysses* (12.134, and 13.1149), and elsewhere laments the exportation of Duffy's "practical talent" during his years abroad.<sup>61</sup> Tantalizingly, however, a page from Joyce's Mangan manuscript has been lost, and his essay is suddenly cut off just where he begins to speak about Duffy.<sup>62</sup> In another incomplete piece from 1907, Joyce writes that the current nationalist crisis incited by the youth of the Celtic revival or Celtic twilight (derided in the *Wake* as the "cultic twalette" (344.12)), represents the culmination of "no less than three decisive clashes" that have recurred in Irish nationalist history, beginning with the Thomas Davis/Daniel O'Connell dispute, reemerging with the rise of Fenianism in 1867, and erupting once more with

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<sup>61</sup> Joyce, *Occasional*, 124.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 128. The extant manuscript ends with "the foundation of the separatist journal, *The Nation*, founded by three leaders, Thomas Davis, John Blake Dillon (father of the ex-leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party)"; Duffy, the third founder, would have begun the lost page.

Yeats's revival's "boycott" of "moral and material" concerns, a boycott originating in the New Irish Library dispute.<sup>63</sup>

The conflict between Duffy and Yeats is echoed in the opposition between Bloom's pragmatic and Stephen's aesthetic approach to the literary. In the same way that Yeats opposes his "mystic truth" to Duffy's parochial plans, "Stephen dissented openly from Bloom's views on the importance of dietary and civic selfhelp while Bloom dissented tacitly from Stephen's views on the eternal affirmation of the spirit of man in literature" (17.28). But just as Duffy and Yeats had more in common than they were willing to admit, Stephen's reworking of the Maeterlinck quotation suggests that he has a hidden kinship with Bloom's position. Joyce indicates the buried affinities between his protagonists: "there's a touch of the artist about old Bloom," as Lenehan notes (10.582), while Stephen is shown to be capable of his share of materialism as well, inquiring "Would I make any money by it?" when Haines proposes to package his Irish thoughts (1.490).

Yet their ideological differences come to the fore when Bloom alights upon the idea for a series of moral publications based on Stephen's stories in "Ithaca." Conversing over cocoa, Stephen tells Bloom his enigmatic "Parable of the Plums," and the narrator describes Bloom's opportunistic, Duffy-like reaction:

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<sup>63</sup>Joyce, *Occasional*, 137. Yeats's first publication after the Duffy dispute was *The Celtic Twilight* (1893).



Did he see only a second coincidence in the second scene narrated to him, described by the narrator as *A Pisgah Sight of Palestine* or *The Parable of the Plums*?

It, with the preceding scene and with others unnarrated but existent by implication, to which add essays on various subjects or moral apothegms (e.g. *My Favourite Hero* or *Procrastination is the Thief of Time*) composed during schoolyears, seemed to him to contain in itself and in conjunction with the personal equation certain possibilities of financial, social, personal and sexual success, whether specially collected and selected as model pedagogic themes (of cent per cent merit) for the use of preparatory and junior grade students or contributed in printed form, following the precedent of Philip Beaufoy or Doctor Dick or Heblon's *Studies in Blue*, to a publication of certified circulation and solvency or employed verbally as intellectual stimulation for sympathetic auditors, tacitly appreciative of successful narrative and confidently augurative of successful achievement, during the increasingly longer nights gradually following the summer solstice on the day but three following, videlicet, Tuesday, 21 June (S. Aloysius Gonzaga), sunrise 3.33 a.m., sunset 8.29 p.m. (17.639-656)

After “repressing” his “didactic counsels” throughout the episode (17.248), Bloom finally lets “that old delusion, didacticism, get the better of his judgment,” to borrow Yeats’s

characterization of Duffy.<sup>64</sup> Bloom's entrepreneurial alertness sees opportunity in Stephen's creative inventions. Bloom attempts to sell the scheme by pointing out to Stephen that "originality, though producing its own reward, does not invariably conduce to success" (17. 606). Bloom's pragmatic urgings adopt a more antagonistic valence when read against the background of the New Irish Library dispute, complicating the paternalist paradigm through which "Ithaca" is typically read. Approaching Bloom's didacticism through Duffy's precedent emphasizes the political stakes of his enterprise and exposes Bloom's stuffy instrumentalism, while also underscoring Stephen's youthful insolence and irreverence.<sup>65</sup> Read though the contentions of the Celtic revival, the anti-Semitic song Stephen sings following this exchange, a point that has long troubled readers of the episode, appears a juvenile defiance of Bloom's appropriating gesture, a misguided assertion of artistic autonomy. Yeats made similar gestures of defiance throughout his inconsistent career, suddenly turning the vehement nationalist in an 1895 fight with Unionist Edward Dowden. "Strife is better than loneliness," as his favorite proverb said.<sup>66</sup>

Bloom's publication scheme is ironic because a "moral pedagogic theme" is precisely what Stephen's Parable of the Plums resists. Stephen's Parable describes two "vestal virgins" who mount Nelson's pillar, only to get dizzy from the view, instead settling back to eat their plums and spit out the pits below. With its inconclusive account

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<sup>64</sup> W.B. Yeats, "Some Irish National Books," 247.

<sup>65</sup> Bloom is not the only character in *Ulysses* with plans to capitalize on Stephen's wit. "I intend to make a collection of your sayings if you will let me," the Englishman Haines says to Stephen at the beginning of the text, "That one about the cracked lookingglass of a servant being the symbol of Irish art is deuced good" (1.480).

<sup>66</sup> Brown, 13.

of the women's disappointment, the story thematizes frustrated expectations. Stephen makes a similar point with the riddle he tells his students in "Nestor," whose answer elicits groans because they could not possibly have foretold it. Throughout *Ulysses* Joyce pokes fun at readers' expectations, whether for instruction ("Nestor"), love ("Nausicaa"), erudition ("Oxen"), commonplaces ("Eumaeus"), information ("Ithaca")<sup>67</sup>, or arousal ("Penelope"). Bloom's deliberate denial of the ironic framework of Stephen's parable enacts the concerted elision of Joyce's obscurity that is typical of common reader interpretations of his work. At the same time, this dynamic tension between the didactic and aesthetic defines the pleasure of the Joycean text.

In the differences between Stephen's and Bloom's approaches to literature and Irish self-improvement, *Ulysses* contains its own little common reader dispute, one inextricable from generational debates over the identity of Ireland's national literature. The much-anticipated encounter between the two characters resembles a thought experiment in what would happen if the two poles of Irish letters could be induced to contemplate collaboration. Of course, it is nothing new to say that Stephen and Bloom represent two extremes of Irish society, and critics have extensively explored the racial, paternal, religious, and mythic symbolism of their meeting. But approaching this tenuous union through the lens of the Library dispute suggests that Stephen and Bloom's ideological convergence enacts the birth of the modernist aesthetic. Yeats implied as much in his self-congratulatory way when he observed that if he had not resisted Duffy in 1892, "it might have silenced in 1907 John Synge, the greatest dramatic genius of

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<sup>67</sup> The catechism form of the episode lampoons this mode of instruction.

Ireland.”<sup>68</sup> Helen O’Connell concurs, arguing that “the persistent questioning of the orthodoxies of modernization and nationalism . . . produced the literature of the Revival period, culminating in the modernism of writers as diverse as W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Elizabeth Bowen.”<sup>69</sup> Yet the identity of modernism was just as dependent upon questioning the real-world import of revivalism as it was upon critiquing old-school didacticism, and this practical impetus of modernism is something that Joyce’s popular readers help to expose. If the competing voices of Irish culture could share a cup of cocoa, it would not be a perfect union; there would likely be conversational misfires, inadvertent insults, ulterior motives, and irrepressible antipathies. But “Ithaca” imagines a situation in which these very different ways of reading might be admissible in the same kitchen.

If the future of Stephen and Bloom’s friendship seems dubious, the blend of the esoteric and pragmatic they represent is more promising. In *Ulysses*, the alternation between aesthetic and pragmatic extremes is both thematic and stylistic. Every grand display of linguistic experimentation in *Ulysses* is buttressed by the comfort of the proverbial. The abstruse musings of “Proteus” are offset by the homely domesticity of “Calypso,” following “Circe’s” dizzying surrealism come the journalistic platitudes of “Eumaeus,” and after the disorienting narration of “Cyclops,” Gerty MacDowell’s magazine vernacular offers some reprieve. Like Yeats, Joyce was wary of the multitude, writing that “the artist, though he may employ the crowd, is very careful to isolate

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<sup>68</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Trembling*, 90.

<sup>69</sup> Helen O’Connell, *Ireland and the Fiction of Improvement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 204. O’Connell’s book offers a tremendously thorough and generative account of the New Irish Library dispute.

himself,”<sup>70</sup> and his oscillating aesthetic enacts this strategic populism. Joyce’s blending of popular vernacular and heady intellectualism does not make him a martyr to the popular cause, as Kiberd would have it, nor does it make him an irascible snob, as John Carey might wish. Instead, it shows that Joyce learned from the controversies of his time to blend the people’s aversion to oppressive authority with their desire for relevant texts. Joyce saw that only an oblique didacticism could register the needs of Ireland’s burgeoning popular readership.

In the end, the New Library project fizzled out without a clear victor. It may be that Duffy won the battle but lost the war,<sup>71</sup> given the eventual success of the Abbey Theater and the influence of the revival more generally. Yeats seems alone in declaring the Library a failure (“ten thousand copies had been sold before anybody had time to read it,” he said, “and then the sale came to a dead stop” ([1922] 1999, 188),<sup>72</sup> while the press deemed it a success. Helen O’Connell observes, “It is quite possible that ‘the people’ of Ireland did not really want to indulge in imaginative literature, but found fulfillment instead in ‘rhetoric,’ didacticism, and fact.”<sup>73</sup> The early sales were likely due to the Library dispute’s publicity, until Duffy had to abort the enterprise when his publications proved too tedious to sustain demand. But had Yeats been in control of the venture, he

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<sup>70</sup> Joyce, *Occasional*, 50.

<sup>71</sup> This is Malcolm Brown’s suggestion (359).

<sup>72</sup> W.B. Yeats, “Ireland After Parnell,” 188.

<sup>73</sup> O’Connell, 198-199.

may have been too “out of touch with the Irish people,” as Joyce remarked in a letter from 1907, to have attracted wide sales.<sup>74</sup>

It would be misguided to regard Joyce as a “solution” to the problem set up by Duffy and Yeats; this is precisely the kind of mathematical approach to the literary he mocks. Critics too often fall prey to the hagiographic tendency to imagine Joyce as somehow prophetically anticipating and resolving the paradoxes of his own reception, a position that finds its corollary in Derrida’s famous description of the “hypermnestic machine” that is Joyce’s writing.<sup>75</sup> One way to resist this idealization is to recognize how Joyce learned the dangers of ignoring popular demand from local precedent. Indeed, “Joyce’s international and cult status has concealed the ways in which his work is part of an articulate and broad debate within the Irish literary revival.”<sup>76</sup> The historical context undermines the hagiographic fantasy by showing how Joyce’s unique blend of obscurity and common sense was not, as Richard Ellmann famously said, a sign of his being so far ahead of his contemporaries that we are still struggling to catch up,<sup>77</sup> but rather Joyce’s effort to catch up to the contradictory demands of his contemporaries. As the entrepreneurial Joyce knew well, didacticism was not just an atavistic impulse of old

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<sup>74</sup>Letter to Stanislaus Joyce, 11 February 1907. In *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, edited by Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking Press, 1927), 147. Conflictingly, Joyce also chastised Yeats for his “floating esthete’s will” and “treacherous instinct of adaptability” in pandering to the masses, (*Occasional*, 51). But Brown similarly identifies Yeats’s “laughable alienation from the Irish nation, past or present” (370). Joyce’s contradictory relation to Yeats is a very complex affair, informed by their different religious backgrounds, among other factors, as perhaps most thoroughly explored by Alistair Cormack, *Yeats and Joyce: Cyclical History and Reprobate Tradition* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate Press, 2008).

<sup>75</sup>“Two Words for Joyce.” In *Post-Structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French*, ed. Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer, 145-161 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 147.

<sup>76</sup>Kevin Barry, Introduction to *James Joyce: Occasional, Critical, and Political Writings*, ed. Kevin Barry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxix.

<sup>77</sup>*James Joyce: New and Revised Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3.

fogies like Bloom and Duffy, but also a key to the future of the literary. At the same time, the moral capacity of *Ulysses* is about more than just sales. In his personal copy of Leo Tolstoy's *Essays*, Joyce underlined, pencil-marked, and put an exclamation point beside the following claim: "this knowledge of how men should live has from the days of Moses, Solon, and Confucius been always considered a science—the very essence of science."<sup>78</sup> Joyce's self-help commentators would surely agree.

Today's popular readings expose Joyce's attunement to the reading public of his time: a people characterized by both "defiance" and "impotence,"<sup>79</sup> who shunned authoritarianism but yearned for advice. The political stakes of literature's attunement to the popular were particularly tangible to Joyce, who had witnessed the role of non-professional readers in determining the identity of Ireland's literary culture. Lawrence Rainey defines the avant-garde as the "uneasy synthesis" of "the opposition between elite and popular culture, or between art and commodity."<sup>80</sup> Ireland's sheltering of both Duffy's and Yeats's literary extremes, its simultaneous harboring of the most vehement propagandists and impassioned aesthetes, offers a clue as to how the provincial town of Dublin became the unlikely proving ground of the movement known as high modernism.

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<sup>78</sup> Thomas E Connolly, *Personal Library of James Joyce: A Descriptive Bibliography*. *The University of Buffalo Studies* 22 no.1 (April 1955), 38.

<sup>79</sup> Brown, 4.

<sup>80</sup> Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 13.

## Letting Bygones Be Bygones

Learning, perhaps, from Yeats's Library failure, and giving the lie to Martin Amis's view of *Ulysses* as a "war against cliché,"<sup>81</sup> Joyce strategically employs proverbial wisdom throughout his texts as an anchor for his more experimental, esoteric formulations. As a case in point, the simple proverb "let bygones be bygones" is woven throughout each of Joyce's major works, first as the sentimental uttering of an Irish nationalist in *Dubliners*, then amid Bloom's rumination upon the subjects of adultery and forgiveness in *Ulysses*. Finally, in *Finnegans Wake*, the bygones proverb goes viral, weaving throughout the minds of different characters, becoming part of the very texture of the book.

In Joyce's story from *Dubliners* (1914), "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," local supporters of the nationalist party gather around a fireplace in a dingy room, drinking and eulogizing about Ireland's past. Joyce uses cliché in *Dubliners* to ridicule the nationalists, who equate a history of exploitation, and the political and personal tragedy of Parnell, with something as trivial as "bygones." The men discuss King Edward's impending visit to Ireland:

-But look here, John, said Mr O'Conner. Why should we welcome the King of England? Didn't Parnell himself...

-Parnell, said Mr Henchy, is dead. Now, here's the way I look at it. Here's this chap come to the throne after his old mother keeping him out of it till the man was grey. He's a man of the world, and he means well by us. He's a jolly fine

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<sup>81</sup> Martin Amis, *The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews 1971-2000* (Miramax Books: 2001).



decent fellow, if you ask me, and no damn nonsense about him. He just says to himself: The old one never went to see these wild Irish. By Christ, I'll go myself and see what they're like. And are we going to insult the man when he comes over here on a friendly visit, Eh? Isn't that right, Croften?

Mr Croften nodded his head.

-But after all now, said Mr Lyons argumentatively, King Edward's life, you know, is not very...

-Let bygones be bygones, said Mr Henchy. I admire the man personally. He's just an ordinary knockabout like you and me. He's fond of his glass of grog and he's a bit of a rake, perhaps, and he's a good sportsman. Damn it, can't we Irish play fair?<sup>82</sup>

The empty futility of the proverb embodies the problem of Irish paralysis upon which *Dubliners* is premised. If nationalism is, in part, founded upon a sense of Ireland's responsibility *not* to let bygones be, the problem of Henchy, Croften, et al. is precisely their failure to judge when to seek retribution and when to let things go. In "Ivy Day" Joyce implies that the Dublin environment of suspicion, betrayal, and surveillance makes letting go of bygones practically impossible. Further, if the necessity of keeping bygones alive is part of the impetus of nationalism, the committee men are all too willing to forget the injuries of the past when it means possible economic benefits for the Irish, such as the visit of King Edward would entail. As early as *Dubliners*, the question of whether or not to let bygones be is largely circumstantial, often linked to greed and self-interest.

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<sup>82</sup> James Joyce, *Dubliners* (New York: Signet Publishers, 1991), 134.

In “Ivy Day” it is discussion of Parnell and his legacy that inspires the emergence of the ‘bygones’ phrase, the colonial context pointing to the worst kind of interpretation of the proverb to mean resigning oneself to a bad or unjust situation. In *Dubliners* letting ‘bygones be bygones’ encapsulates what Joyce viewed as the unimaginativeness of the colonial consciousness, or the failure of the oppressed to envision alternate historical possibilities from those which came to pass. Throughout Joyce’s writings the figure of Charles Parnell practically comes to stand for the instrumentalism of the distinction between bygone and pressing concern, for it was the politically motivated refusal of the Irish people to let bygones be that caused them to create a scandal out of an affair which was already public knowledge.

When the bygones proverb resurfaces in *Ulysses*, it is once again accompanied by attention to how a piece of information which is public knowledge suddenly becomes mobilized for private gain. The narrator describes Bloom’s meditation upon Parnell’s tragic love affair with Katherine O’Shea in the cabman’s shelter of “Eumaeus”:

On the other hand what incensed him more inwardly was the blatant jokes of the cabman and so on who passed it all off as a jest, laughing immoderately, pretending to understand everything, the why and the wherefore, and in reality not knowing their own minds, it being a case for the two parties themselves unless it ensued that the legitimate husband happened to be a party to it owing to some anonymous letter from the usual boy Jones, who happened to come across them at the crucial moment in a loving position locked in one another’s arms, drawing attention to their illicit proceedings and leading up to a domestic

rumpus and the erring fair one begging forgiveness of her lord and master upon her knees and promising to sever the connection and not receive his visits any more if only the aggrieved husband would overlook the matter and *let bygones be bygones* with tears in her eyes though possibly with her tongue in her fair cheek at the same time as quite possibly there were several others (16.535).<sup>83</sup>

The proverb emerges here as a plea of the guilty, it seems like something Bloom himself might proffer in his defense during his trial in “Circe.” Bloom imagines the same instrumental use of ‘bygones’ that the “Ivy Day” story conveys in his reference to Kitty O’Shea uttering the phrase ‘with her tongue in her fair cheek.’ Whether the analogy is between Parnell and King Edward, or between Captain O’Shea and Bloom, the figure of Parnell links the bygones proverb to both nationalism and adultery through dramatizing the problem of coping with betrayal.

The evocation of the bygones cliché amidst Bloom’s meditation upon the famously adulterous relation between O’Shea and Parnell also promotes a reading of Bloom’s “equanimity” at the end of the novel as a way letting bygones be. Although Joyce repeatedly associates bygones with mercantilism, the occurrence of this phrase in reference to the matrimonial suggests a more positive reading of ‘letting bygones be bygones’ to entail forgiveness. However, to paraphrase Derrida, if bygones were really bygones, there would be no need for forgiveness (for ‘letting them be’) in the first place. Although accepting bygones as past could be an antidote for jealousy, the question remains of what to make of the fact that throughout *Ulysses* Bloom treats as bygone

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<sup>83</sup> My italics.

something that is still to come. Bloom's letting 'bygones be bygones' seems to stand at the polar extreme from Stephen's "agenbit of inwit," or 'prick of conscience,' his morose dwelling upon spectres from the past.<sup>84</sup> The consolation of the proverbial is something that Bloom has learned to exploit in order to get through the day. More broadly, though, in showing the work that proverbs do, *Ulysses* dramatizes not just the need for the bygones proverb, but also its limits, or the need for "inwit" too.

The "let bygones be bygones," proverb undergoes several mutations throughout the course of *Finnegans Wake*, picking up the resonances of other, related clichés along the way. Tracing the evolution of the bygones proverb throughout the *Wake* reveals its essential interchangeability; one proverb could easily be replaced by another without any real damage to the integrity of the text. This linguistic interchangeability also reflects how in everyday life individuals get proverbs wrong; clichés are garbled and reinvented as they circulate in a community. What is important for Joyce is not just the moral content but the structural role of the proverbial meme, both as an axis for a character's psychological ruminations and for the text's narrative structure. For Joyce, the proverb acts as a kind of pivot from which a more nuanced reflection on experience can develop.

The prominence of the "bygones" proverb in the *Wake* links, through the subject of regret, the two principal themes of Joyce's writing: how to move on after marital and after politico-historical transgressions. "Forget, remember!" admonishes ALP in the final pages of *Finnegans Wake*,<sup>85</sup> and the question is raised of what is the utility of letting go

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<sup>84</sup> *U* 10.879.

<sup>85</sup> *FW* 614.22.

of bygoness within this Vichian scheme of eternal recurrence of the same, where “themes have thimes and habit reburms.”<sup>86</sup> While part of Joyce’s project is to preserve the possibilities history has ousted, the bygoness saying advises consigning such casualties to oblivion, and runs counter to the modernist investment in the imaginative potential of regret, anxiety, and history. The agonistic connotation of the bygoness saying highlights Joyce’s vexed relation to historical violence as both generative of identity and morally oppressive; “Ireland is what she is...and therefore I am what I am because of the relations that have existed between England and Ireland,”<sup>87</sup> he wrote.

In short, just because Joyce deploys the “bygoness” proverb does not mean his oeuvre endorses its morality. The bygoness saying is first alluded to in the *Wake*’s opening chapter, where a “gnarlybird” who is also identified as a hen and as ALP, rummages through the corpses and debris of battle, collecting “all spoiled goods”<sup>88</sup> and putting them into her “nabsack,” including the all-important letter to HCE.

Fe fo fom! She jist does hopes till *byes will be byes*. Here, and it goes on to appear now, she comes, a peacefugel, a parody’s bird, a peri potmother, a pringlpik in the ilandiskippy, with peewee, and powwows in beggybaggy, on her bickybacky, and a flick flask flecklinging its pixylighting pacts’  
huemeramybows, picking here, pecking there, pussypussy plunderpussy.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> *FW* 614.8.

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Jon Hegglund, “Ulysses and the Rhetoric of Cartography”. *Twentieth Century Literature*. (Summer 2003), 178.

<sup>88</sup> *FW* 11.18.

<sup>89</sup> *FW* my italics 11.08.

The proverb offers a life raft of common sense amidst a sea of narrative anomie, much like the maternal figure herself, who must tolerate the violence of men (boys will be boys), hoping it will come to an end (bye). Ironically, the first allusion to ‘letting bygones be’ occurs amidst the seemingly very contrary act of accumulating and salvaging the debris of the past.

The phrase “She jist does hopes till byes will be byes” also refers to ALP’s maternal role, and brings together the ‘let bygones be’ cliché with the platitude “boys will be boys,” a version of which is repeated again at the end of the text. ALP sighs “Let besoms be bosuns”<sup>90</sup> during her final monologue. ALP is thinking about her family, and remembering HCE’s desire to have a girl after the fights between Shem and Shaun. Compared to HCE, ALP is reconciled to her fate: “I’ll wait. And I’ll wait. And then if all goes. What will be is. Is. is.”<sup>91</sup> What will be will be, let bygones be bygones, these sayings tread the fine line between equanimity and resignation, much like Bloom in “Ithaca,” snuggling into the “the imprint of a human form, male, not his.”<sup>92</sup> The problem of when to ‘let bygones be’ has significant implications for how we read Bloom’s resolution of the dilemma he faces in regards to Molly at the end of *Ulysses*, before deciding upon “equanimity” as the best available choice.

As Joyce’s works progress, such proverbial nuggets as the bygones saying accrete significance that is detached from a particular character’s consciousness, woven into the very texture of the book. Taking the bygones proverb as an object-lesson of Joyce’s

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<sup>90</sup> *FW* 621.01

<sup>91</sup> *FW* 620.32.

<sup>92</sup> *FW* 17.2124.

privileging of formal more than thematic pedagogy suggests that Joyce's relation to common-reader didacticism is not merely antagonistic, but that he is interested in developing a contrapuntal heuristic, one which is not hermetic but associative, oscillating between platitude and estrangement. The proverb is not, for Joyce, something to be blindly adopted but it is something to be poked, prodded, and turned inside out, an orbit of polysemic play.

## **Conclusion**

Amid a cultural surfeit of more accessible advisors, readers today are turning to modernist texts for lessons about how to live. The case study of *Ulysses* helps us to understand this phenomenon by illuminating the surprising centrality of common-reader didacticism to the formation of the modernist aesthetic. Instead of imitating a particular character, each reader must produce the wisdom of *Ulysses* by navigating the text's demotic and rarified extremes. Max Eastman once asked Joyce why he did not offer the reader more hints as to the meaning of his text, to which Joyce apparently replied, "You know people never value anything unless they have to steal it. Even an alley cat would rather snake an old bone out o' the garbage than come up and eat a nicely prepared chop from your saucer."<sup>93</sup> Implicit in self-help guides to Joyce's work is the conviction that the reward or "bone" for working through his texts is the life-wisdom to be painstakingly mined from his pages. Such de Certeau-like "poachings" support Kenneth Burke's

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<sup>93</sup>James Joyce, quoted in Max Eastman, *The Literary Mind: Its Place in an Age of Science* (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1935), 104.

comment that even the most difficult work may contain “proverbs writ large”;<sup>94</sup> they evince the persistence of the impulse to trawl literary texts for advice, an impulse which even the most forbidding avant-garde complexity cannot fully deter.

Accounts of modernity’s antipathy to moral instruction do not hold up when one takes into account the literature’s popular use. Although Michael McKeon identifies “the relative unimportance of the moral in the modern evaluation of literature,”<sup>95</sup> in Joyce’s reception didacticism becomes a means of reclaiming modern literature for the common folk. Even Bloom, before retiring, “reflected on the pleasures derived from literature of instruction rather than of amusement” (17.384). Whereas age-old Horatian precept mixes the utile with the dulce, the modern readers represented by Bloom find the useful to be sweet in its own right. In a realist novel, a precept may appear an unwelcome diversion from the action of the story, but the same precept will be embraced as an oasis of common sense if inserted into a plotless modernist pastiche. For Joyce’s popular readers, the precept becomes the guilty pleasure, the taboo indulgence or reward, an association already latent in eighteenth-century works.

Today, understanding literature’s widespread appeal is a pressing task, and one for which modernism’s popular interpreters are uniquely positioned to offer assistance. One such interpreter, Arnold Weinstein, inquires:

So what is the case for Joyce, for the literate, interested, yet unprofessional reader? What will you get from the many hours needed to read

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<sup>94</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Perspectives by Incongruity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 296.

<sup>95</sup> Michael McKeon, “Prose Fiction: Great Britain” in *Theory of the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 610.



*Ulysses*? (We'll leave *Finnegans Wake* out of the picture entirely.) I sometimes feel that this—what's in it for me?—is the most ducked question in academic and intellectual culture. Partly, no doubt, because it is so hard to answer. But doesn't this no-nonsense principle lurk in all readers' hearts, even if one is loath to articulate it? Highbrow utterances about "edification" are customarily invoked as the rationale for reading; but I have written this book for the general reader, and I am obeying the principle that all reading—whatever the professors say to the contrary—is an affair of gains and losses, or usable or discardable insights, of equipment that does or does not add to one's repertory, one's life. *Ulysses* pays off on precisely this front.<sup>96</sup>

Weinstein's readerly empiricism may sound troublingly close to the "grinding all things into pounds and shillings," including art and ideas, that Yeats had woefully described. Despite Joyce's celebration of his "usylessly unreadable Blue Book of Eccles" (*FW* 179.26-27), Weinstein asserts that Joyce's practical advice is precisely what makes his narratives worthwhile; he suggests that reading can never be fully divorced from the economy of advice, whatever the decadent "professors" claim. In so doing, he joins a coalition of disaffected academics, also including Kiberd and de Botton, who use their self-help readings of modernism to articulate what is wrong with the current state of higher education.<sup>97</sup> These thinkers are faced with the problem of how to argue for the

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<sup>96</sup> 102.

<sup>97</sup> Alain de Botton observes, "The modern university has achieved unparalleled expertise in imparting factual information about culture, but it remains wholly uninterested in training students to use culture as a repertoire of wisdom—that is, a kind of knowledge concerned with things that are not only true but also inwardly beneficial, providing comfort in the face of life's

necessity of self-help readings of modernism while also insisting on their inevitability; the self-help hermeneutic appears at once intuitive and endangered. Joyce shows that one can no more escape self-help readings of literature than one can escape the self. When confronted with this self-help paradigm, the quandary of modernists and English professors is the same: how to be proactive in the face of the inexorable.

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infinite challenges, from a tyrannical employer to a fatal diagnosis.” His critique is noticeably reminiscent of the language used by Walter Benjamin in the storyteller to describe the shift away from “wisdom” and towards “information.” “Can Tolstoy Save Your Marriage?” *The Wall Street Journal*. December 18, 2010.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Modernism in the Advice Industry: The Itinerary of A Misreading

When in 1955 Eppie Lederer (née Eppie Friedman) won a contest to become the next Ann Landers, her editor gave her a copy of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Nathanael West's 1933 story of a disillusioned advice columnist. Landers read West's story as a handbook for rookie counselors, a lovelorn columnist's cautionary tale about what-not-to-do. "I have to separate myself from the readers and realize that what is happening to them is not happening to me," she said, "Too close an identification could put me in the same boat with Miss Lonelyhearts" (*Daily News*). Never one to be outdone, Landers's twin sister Dear Abby also got hold of West's novella and offered her own lengthy discussion of it in her column. "A couple chuckles a day, which is the least you can expect of a lovelorn column, would have saved Miss Lonelyhearts and ruined Mr. West's novel," she summarily concludes (*Best of Dear Abby* 166). West's narrative comes back to haunt the columnists when, following a scandal in the 1980s, they are compared pejoratively to his eponymous antihero, and their selective readings of his story come home to roost. Ultimately, the columnists' readings of West lay bare the paradoxes inherent in self-help's attempt to insert modernist negation into an affirmative program.<sup>1</sup>

In tracking the reception of West's modernism by contemporary readers Ann Landers and Dear Abby, this chapter might follow the well-worn path paved by other scholarly accounts of the hermeneutical insights generated by popular readers. Just as the

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<sup>1</sup> Put simply, "modernist negation" for me designates the movement's formal and thematic repudiation of paradigms of progress, participation, and integration.

previous chapter demonstrated how popular interpreters of Joyce expose his historical investment in self-improvement discourse, it might have pinpointed a “redemptive” meaning, as Bersani terms it,<sup>2</sup> behind the columnists’ seemingly haphazard accounts. Adopting such a familiar scholarly frame would not have been entirely amiss, for the self-help authors do invite us to look at modernism in a newly estranged way. But to make the recuperative argument here would be to elide the incontrovertible fact that, despite their copious experience as textual commentators, Abby and Landers simply are not reading West’s story very well. They miss his humor, dismiss his scathing critique of journalistic callousness, and erroneously claim that *Miss Lonelyhearts* commits suicide when really he is shot.<sup>3</sup> To transform the columnists’ hasty interpretations of *Miss Lonelyhearts* into penetrating, counterintuitive ones through some scholarly legerdemain would be to deny the social power and influence of the subjective, instrumental, and mistaken. After all, this world is shaped just as much by misunderstandings as it is by congruities; history is more often determined by crossed and garbled signals than by smooth, transparent communiqués. As anyone who has ever read Proust knows well, the broad social consequences of a misreading can be even more powerful and diffuse than the circumscribed ripples of authorized ones. Though such readings almost guarantee a departure from the author’s intention, turning a blind eye to narrative irony and even to the text’s explicit logic, they nevertheless form a part of our cultural history that should not be overlooked amidst the frantic scholarly effort to redress a history of unjust

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<sup>2</sup> Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Dear Abby, *The Lewiston Journal*. October 21, 1985, 6. One could make the ingenious claim of one of my former students that Miss Lonelyhearts purposely brought his murder on himself, and so that his death was, in this sense, a suicide, but this is not what Abby and Landers mean to suggest.

intellectual derision for “common” readers. It is for this reason that, though it may rankle the contemporary aversion to normative evaluation of all kinds, West’s reception by the advice industry is best described as the itinerary of a misreading. “Misreading” here designates an interpretation whose insight consists not in its content but in its status and implications as social act.<sup>4</sup>

West’s reception by Abby and Landers brings us to a problem that animates this entire project: how can we honor the badness of self-help’s readings of modernism while also addressing their social import and intellectual legitimacy? Further, how can we speak persuasively about self-help’s scholarly legitimacy without ingeniously transforming the bad into the good? The idea that one can learn as much from poor interpreters as from expert ones—as much from Clouseau as from Columbo—hinges upon an insight that is essentially sociological: situated practice is worth pursuing as an object of inquiry regardless of whether the research validates this practice or not. Indeed, one of the best models for this kind of analysis comes not from the field of literary criticism but from architecture: Robert Venturi’s classic *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972).<sup>5</sup> Venturi’s investment in learning from the so-called “low”—in the pedagogy of unlikely spaces—is an orientation this project shares. As Venturi explains, Las Vegas is built to be experienced from the highway, its billboards are meant to be absorbed at high velocities through the frame of a car window. Everything about Vegas, from the

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, one could argue, as Harold Bloom does in *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), that *all* readings are a matter of “weaker” and “stronger” misreadings, but my use of the term rather invokes the sense of the term used by Amy Blair, when she describes “misreading” as “a nod to generally accepted readings that purport to follow the ‘intentions’ of an author or the ‘truth’ of a text,” in *Reading Up: Middle Class Readers and the Culture of Success in the Twentieth Century United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Venturi, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).

proliferation of parking lots to the garish signs, privileges the communicative over the architectural. Similarly, self-help applications of difficult modernist works are geared towards the busy and unsatisfied masses; they are for people who do not have the leisure to plod through the entirety of a particular modernist oeuvre. Like the Las Vegas billboard, self-help's modernism is meant to be viewed while in movement, ideally from a distance, and this may be why academics are so vexed by it, we whose careers have traditionally involved examining literature slowly and close up. In self-help, modernism becomes a sign. This is drive-thru modernism at its most garish.

In order to track the itinerary of this particular misreading of Nathanael West, it is necessary to return to *Miss Lonelyhearts* to first understand how, in what ways, and to what ends Abby and Landers are misconstruing his work. Returning to the scene of West's own pastiche and parody of Susan Chester's real-life advice column for the *Brooklyn Daily Times* (1920s) enriches our sense of the contortions and elisions enacted by Abby and Landers in their literalist assessments of West's work. By ignoring West's condemnation of the violence of the universalizing authorial voice, the columnists end up reproducing this violence in their indifference to the singularity of their subscribers' voices and dilemmas. At the same time, insofar as their applications of West's work can be read as offering a performative addendum to his text, they bring into relief the potential violence of modernist indecision itself.

Moreover, the sisters' readings remind us of West's amenability to the same success ethos he critiques. A self-made man in the American tradition, like the Friedman sisters, West was a Jew who adopted a gentile pseudonym and reinvented himself: he was

admitted to Brown by shedding his youthful identity as “Nathan Weinstein” and pretending to be one “Nathanael West.” Further, as Abby points out, West exploits suffering for his art, just as the columnists do (“agony he was after and agony he got”), and he was not averse to pitching his stories as screenplays, or to profiting from the “business of dreams” himself (*ML* 84).

Chief among the very real social consequences of their misreadings of West’s tale is the recycled letter scandal that occurred in the 1980s, when the columnists’ were caught reenacting the very advisorly violence and indifference that West’s novella condemns. Less explicitly, though no less consequentially, the itinerary of Abby and Landers’s engagements with *Miss Lonelyhearts* has culminated in a new style of advice columnist, the “reluctant oracle,” epitomized by popular counselors such as Dan Savage and Cheryl Strayed. These contemporary writers have inherited Abby and Landers’s wariness of the waffling aesthete, yet they also recognize the new standards of moral sincerity that Westian irony instantiates. But as the reach of the modernist reluctant oracle figure extends far beyond West’s reception alone, a brief excursus into the self-help reception of another, equally unlikely author—Samuel Beckett—points to the evolving resonance of this problem of modernism’s pragmatic, cultural portability.

### ***Miss Lonelyhearts* Among the Agony Aunts**

They are mocked as would-be journalists, censured as unlicensed therapists, but little attention has been paid to the labor of textual analysis that advice columnists routinely undertake. Like other professional readers and writers, advice columnists sift through mountains of scrawl every day, looking for a glimmer of inspiration. They are

attuned to the nuances of linguistic usage, the variant meanings of loaded words, and the moral consequences of specific analogies. They know to be wary of misleading language and to mistrust authorial intention. Like the seasoned literary interpreter, they must continuously hold back the encroachment of moral indifference. Every piece of writing on their desks is an urgent demand for response and attention. Advice columnists are unsung textual critics.

Ever since Beatrice Fairfax (1872-1945), one of the first to write newspaper advice targeted primarily at women, advice columnists have positioned themselves as common-sense correctives to the sentimentalism of fiction.<sup>6</sup> Historically, the advice column purported to dispense with the novel's cumbersome narrative digressions, instead cutting straight to the practical message. The popular appeal of the advice column had to do with its offering a participatory reading space free of the orthodoxies of the writers' salon or academy, and one oriented toward real-world use. The alternate exegetical community of the advice column, with its insistence upon the pragmatic use of West's

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<sup>6</sup> One of the first advice columns was John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury* in 1690. In 1704 Daniel Defoe came across Dunton's publication and started an advice column of his own, which eventually became so popular he was forced to make it a separate publication, *The Little Review*. Soon thereafter the advice column crossed the Atlantic, where Benjamin Franklin offered counsel under the guise of different characters in his *Pennsylvania Gazette* (1720). In the early twentieth century, the advice column found an eager audience with Jewish immigrants to the United States, most notably in novelist Abraham Cahan's *Bintel Brief* (1906), which tackled problems pertaining to cultural integration in Manhattan's lower east side. But it was only in the writings of Fairfax and Dorothy Dix (1802-1887) that the advice column would emerge in the form we recognize today, with its specialization in social and domestic quandaries. These women's columns borrowed some of their popularity from the success of Victorian serialized, epistolary narratives. And the influence went both ways; the Edwardian novelist Arnold Bennett got his start penning a women's advice column under the pseudonym "Gwendolyn." For more on the origins of the advice column see W. Clark Hendley's "Dear Abby, Miss Lonelyhearts, and the Eighteenth Century: The Origins of the Newspaper Advice Column." Despite its promising title, Hendley's piece does not actually discuss Abby's references to West's novella.



tale, valorizes the very moral decisiveness that West's novella condemns. *Miss Lonelyhearts* supports the poststructuralist argument that there is an inherent violence to the decision, with Derrida going so far as to suggest that the instant of the decision must be mad.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the columnists' glib diagnoses of West's story act as populist counterparts to intellectual critiques of the poststructuralist "distaste for the definitive," as Terry Eagleton puts it,<sup>8</sup> or what Franco Moretti calls modernism's "spell of indecision."<sup>9</sup> Their pragmatic applications of West's novella, in their very unorthodox audacity, carry a critical charge.

West's fate to become grist for the advice industry is ironic given that *Miss Lonelyhearts* originated as a critique of Susan Chester's 1920s "heart-to-heart" column for the *Brooklyn Daily Times*. Critics have long believed that West's friend S.J. Perelman (humorist and screenwriter for many of the Marx Brothers' films) introduced him one evening over dinner to an advice columnist named "Susan Chester." Apparently, West saw Chester's letters and immediately recognized their literary potential, and he combined his experiences as clerk for the down-and-out patrons of the Sutton Hotel in New York with almost verbatim passages from Chester's column to construct *Miss Lonelyhearts*. In his seminal biography of West, Jay Martin notes, "If any one moment could be regarded as absolutely crucial in West's discovery that he was an artist, it

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority." *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. Eds. Cornell, Carlson, & Benjamin (New York: Routledge, 1992), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism*. (London, Verso Press: 1984), 98.

<sup>9</sup> Franco Moretti, "The Spell of Indecision." *New Left Review*. (I.164) July-August 1987: 27-33.

occurred during this night of 1929” when he was shown the Chester letters.<sup>10</sup> More recently, however, biographer Marion Meade has unearthed strong evidence suggesting that Susan Chester never existed, and that the true author of the “heart-to-heart” column was West’s old schoolmate Quentin Reynolds.<sup>11</sup> Reynolds likely used the Chester byline because he feared that his stint as an advice columnist would tarnish his reputation for more serious journalism.<sup>12</sup> Though it was common for advice columns to be collaborative efforts, Meade’s discovery about the female column’s male authorship is particularly intriguing in light of the import of gender passing to West’s novella, a theme that critics such as Jane Goldman have explored.<sup>13</sup>

Nestled next to a column titled “We Women,” a place for the exchange of tips, recipes, and advice, and a comic strip called “Modish Mitzi,” which kept women up to date on the latest trends, the Susan Chester column advertised itself as a forum for female “heart-to-hearts,” in adjacent columns. It was important to readers that “Dearest Sue” was a woman who they viewed as a role model for their own behavior. Chester’s columns corroborate T.J. Jackson Lears’s point that “tendencies inherent in the therapeutic ethos

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<sup>10</sup> Jay Martin, *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 110.

<sup>11</sup> *Marion Meade - Nathanael West and Eileen McKenney Archives*, University of Iowa Libraries.

<sup>12</sup> Box 7, Folder “Quentin Reynolds.” *Marion Meade - Nathanael West and Eileen McKenney Archives*, University of Iowa Libraries.

<sup>13</sup> As Goldman notes, with every reference to Miss Lonelyhearts in the third person masculine, a “crisis in gender categorization” comes to the fore. “‘Miss Lonelyhearts and the party dress’: cross-dressing and collage in the satires of Nathanael West.” *Glasgow Review* 2 (1993): 40-54. The jarring truth about the female advice column’s male authorship is something West exploits from the very first line of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, which reads: “The Miss Lonelyhearts of the New York Post Dispatch (Are-you-in-trouble?—Do-you-need-advice?—Write-to-Miss-Lonelyhearts-and-she-will-help-you) sat at his desk and stared at a piece of white cardboard” (*ML* 59).

helped to defuse demands for female equality” by promoting inner fulfillment above social change, self-realization instead of group liberation, accommodation instead of indignation.<sup>14</sup> “Know your place and stay in it,” Sue advises a secretary who is unhappy with her job and yearns for more.<sup>15</sup> Like therapists, advice columnists are society’s “cooling out” agents.<sup>16</sup> They provide a secular, relatively innocuous forum for frustrations that might otherwise seek a more inconvenient social outlet.

“The Susan Chesters, the Beatrice Fairfaxes and Miss Lonelyhearts are the priests of twentieth-century America,” proclaims Miss Lonelyhearts’s editor Shrike.<sup>17</sup> Chester’s letters alerted West to the advice column’s authoritarian tendencies, its dependence upon masquerade and deception, and its willingness to belittle readers for the sake of a breezy riposte. Like Theodor Adorno in his analysis of the *Los Angeles Times* astrology column, *The Stars Down to Earth*, West saw the advice column as a window onto the question of “What drives people into the arms of the various kinds of ‘prophets of deceit’,”<sup>18</sup> and both writers recognized this susceptibility at play in the totalitarian state.<sup>19</sup> Concerned with the possibility of an emergent American fascism, West and Adorno regarded the

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<sup>14</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, “From salvation to self-realization: Advertising and the therapeutic roots of the consumer culture, 1880-1930.” *Advertising and Society Review* 1.1 (2000), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Chester, “Never Too Busy.” *Brooklyn Daily Times*. 6 February 1929.

<sup>16</sup> Erving Goffman, “On Cooling the Mark Out: Some Aspects of Adaptation to Failure,” *Psychiatry* XV (1952): 451-463.

<sup>17</sup> Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts* in *Nathanael West: Novels and Other Writings*. New York: Library of America, 1997, 62. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>18</sup> Theodor Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth*. (London: Routledge, 1994), 155.

<sup>19</sup> West also explores the authoritarianism of the success industry in *A Cool Million*, which warns, as David Galloway explains, “that the inevitable outcome of the frustration of the success dream was the growth of Fascism” (119). A parody (and, at points, outright plagiarism) of Horatio Alger stories, *A Cool Million* follows the travails of Lemuel Pitkin as he gets embroiled in an American fascist organization inspired by the self-help philosophy of Benjamin Franklin.

advice column as a troubling symptom of the public's propensity to heed the irrational dictates of charismatic moral authorities.

Indeed, the advice column's readers are all too eager to be mocked and berated by spurious authorities like Susan Chester. One of Chester's readers, "Chubby Milly," writes in because she hates school and wants to leave it. "I know you're going to call me a silly kid," she writes, "but this means a lot to me, and what you say goes." Chester responds:

*My Dear Milly:*

*In other words, you just want to sit on a sofa and have the world brought to your feet. You lazy, foolish, fat girl. Throwing away what you will be so anxious to regain in later years... What you need is a good spanking, and a strong hand. I only hope your parents will see where you're drifting and put their individual feet down.<sup>20</sup>*

It is worth noting that "Chubby Milly" anticipates Chester's abrasive reaction, and this expectation of a harsh response even appears to motivate her appeal for help.<sup>21</sup> But at least one reader was appalled by Chester's comments. She wrote in and admonished:

*Dear Susan Chester:*

*I never thought you, of all the nice folks I know, would ever say to a girl who was tired of school that she deserved a nice sound spanking. I was amazed and*

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<sup>20</sup> Susan Chester, "School For You." *Brooklyn Daily Times*, 17 January 1929.

<sup>21</sup> Recall the masochism of the Sandow scene in Joyce's "Circe."

*disappointed that lovable, wholehearted Susan, would suggest an old fashioned treatment for a girl simply because she dislikes school...*<sup>22</sup>

That the subscriber feels she “knows” Chester reflects the intimacy of the column’s rapport with its readership. In response, Chester attempts to explain “her” strong reaction to Chubby Milly’s letter: “That attitude makes me boil and a girl of that particular caliber needs something to show her where AUTHORITY is as far as she is concerned.”<sup>23</sup>

Adorno could almost have been describing Chester’s advice column, with its frustrated appeal to a capitalized “AUTHORITY,” when he noted, “the astrological ideology resembles, in all its major characteristics, the mentality of the “high scorers” of the ‘Authoritarian Personality,’” confessing, “It was, in fact, this similarity which induced us to undertake the present study.”<sup>24</sup> For Adorno, the success of the astrology column indicates “a most sinister social potential: the transition of an emasculated liberal ideology to a totalitarian one.” He explains, “Just as those who can read the phony signs of the stars believe that they are in the know, the followers of totalitarian parties believe that their special panaceas are universally valid and feel justified in imposing them as a general rule.”<sup>25</sup> It is precisely this transition from emasculated liberalism to authoritarianism that West’s narrative depicts, with its account of the coercive potential of universalizing prescriptions.

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<sup>22</sup> Susan Chester, “Not a Smarty Type.” *Brooklyn Daily Times*, 31 January 1929.

<sup>23</sup> Susan Chester, “Response to ‘Not a Smarty Type’.” *Brooklyn Daily Times*, 31 January 1929.

<sup>24</sup> Adorno, *Stars*, 163.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

On the one hand, as David Gudelunas suggests, the advice column offered an interactive forum for public dialogue, and so at best can be viewed as a popular extension of democracy.<sup>26</sup> On the other, however, the assertive, judgmental approach of the early columnists acted to critique liberalism's communitarian ethos of tolerance, free speech and equality. The high demand for such columns reflected people's yearning for an advisor untethered by the constraints of political correctness or public consensus. Today's contemporary advice column represents a compromise formation: it is more discursive and participatory than its mid-century forbearers, but also less convinced of its capacity to offer transformative advice.

As if enacting the dangers of the "emasculated liberalism" Adorno describes, Miss Lonelyhearts and his acquaintance dub themselves "Havelock Ellis" and "Krafft-Ebing," and they decide to interrogate an older man whom they find in a park:

"Your age, please, and the nature of your quest?"

"By what right do you ask?"

"Science gives me the right."

"Let's drop it," Gates said. "The old fag is going to cry."

"No, Krafft-Ebing, sentiment must never be permitted to interfere with the probings of science."

Miss Lonelyhearts put his arm around the old man. "Tell us the story of your life," he said, loading his voice with sympathy.

"I have no story."

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 23, 206.

“You must have. Every one has a life story.”

The old man began to sob.

“Yes, I know, your tale is a sad one. Tell it, damn you, tell it.”

When the old man still remained silent, he took his arm and twisted it.

Gates tried to tear him away, but he refused to let go. He was twisting the arm of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impotent. He was twisting the arm of Desperate, Broken-hearted, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with tubercular husband. (77-78)

Miss Lonelyhearts’s abusive behavior toward the old man is a transparent displacement of his own sexual anxiety, which he attributes to the influence of the lovelorn column, and hopes might be corrected through a stint in the sports department. If the old man is a “fag,” it is Miss Lonelyhearts who crosses genders, switching from the man of science to the sympathetic confidant without missing a beat. Such a tactical combination of sympathy and clinical detachment was essential to the success of the advice column, which exploited both the maternal voice of compassion, as well as the cold logic of paternal common sense. The popularization of psychology fostered by figures like Ellis and Krafft-Ebing contributed to the advice column’s ascendancy in the 1930s, with columnists frequently borrowing their terminology from this field. Even Karl Menninger, the respected American psychiatrist, ran an advice column for eighteen months in the *Ladies Home Journal*. But unlike with Menninger, the Miss Lonelyhearts of the world needed no training or accreditation to dispense their advice. In this sense, the encounter between Miss Lonelyhearts and the “pervert” parodies, not just the violence of science,

but also what happens when these amateur authorities have free rein on the street. The vulgarization of psychoanalysis in the popular press spawned a legion of counselors who could go around twisting people's arms in the name of Havelock Ellis and Krafft-Ebing.

If Susan Chester is enabled by what West calls "that sureness that comes from the power to limit experience arbitrarily" (*ML* 71), Westian modernism is committed to undermining this sureness, and to exposing its pathology. However, as the following section will demonstrate, the antagonism between modernism and the advice column works both ways. Just as West critiqued the advice column's formulaic solutions, Abby and Landers offer correctives to the esotericism of his avant-garde fiction. Their readings push back against modernism's stance of superiority toward the pragmatism of commercial counsel. No matter what the aesthete says, in Abby's hands he is still just another troubled writer in need of diagnosis.

West wrote in a letter to Malcolm Cowley from May 11 1939, "The ancient bugaboo of my kind—"why write novels"—is always before me. I have no particular message for a troubled world...The art compulsion of ten years ago is all but vanished."<sup>27</sup> The paralysis resulting from having "no particular message" is Miss Lonelyhearts's predicament as well; he is unable to aid his subscribers because "he was busy trying to find a message. When he did speak it would have to be in the form of a message" (114). In addition to depicting the moral impotence of the writer, West's sentence also registers the fatalism of the didactic in the current moral marketplace. Miss Lonelyhearts fears he

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<sup>27</sup> Nathanael West, Letter to Malcolm Cowley." May 11, 1939. In *Nathanael West: Novels and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 794.



is destined to be interpellated as a life-coach, despite his unpreparedness for this role. His anxiety eerily prefigures West's own fate to be appropriated by therapeutic culture. That Miss Lonelyhearts would "*have to speak in the form of a message*" signals the limits of aestheticism in Susan Chester's world.

### **The Sob Sisters Write Back**

Decades after West's exposé of the advice-racket was published, sisters Dear Abby and Ann Landers offered their own interpretations of Miss Lonelyhearts's ills. Born Esther (Eppie) and Pauline (Popo) Friedman, Ann Landers and Abigail Van Buren (Dear Abby) were identical twin sisters born in Sioux City Iowa in 1918. The twins were always together, dressed alike throughout their high school years, marrying in a dual ceremony in 1939 (Eppie married Jules Lederer, who would go on to become a founder of *Budget Rent-a-Car*). After a decade of volunteer political work and childrearing, in 1955 Eppie applied for a job to replace the original Ann Landers as advice-columnist for the Chicago *Sun Times*. When Popo learned of her twin's new gig, she got herself a job as an advice-columnist too, but without consulting her sister, a decision that caused a rift in their relation and led to decades of estrangement.

Nathanael West's novella pops up in almost every interview Landers gave, becoming a part of her professional mythology. As Rick Kogan relates, "Eppie read the novel and once described it succinctly to a TV interviewer 'This is a story about a man who was an advice columnist, and he let the problems get to him to the point where he

couldn't function himself".<sup>28</sup> In an interview for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) with Adrienne Clarkson (who received an MA in English Literature from the University of Toronto before eventually moving on to become Governor General of Canada from 1999 to 2005), Landers further discusses West's novella:

Clarkson: It used to be that your kind of column was called a "Miss Lonelyhearts" column. I don't know if you know the novel by Nathanael West?

Landers: Yes, yes I do, it was called *Miss Lonelyhearts*.

Clarkson: Yes. That was really a column which broke your heart, I mean, that novel showed you how the person became so involved that they weren't able to keep apart from it and gradually got a Christ complex and ended up killing themselves.<sup>29</sup> Do you ever get so involved that you feel this?

Landers: Well it's very hard to be callous and cold when you read some of these tragic sad letters [...] But I learned early in this work that if I'm going to be effective and useful I cannot sit down and cry with these people. I must be the strong one, I must be the wise one, and I must show them where they must go.<sup>30</sup>

On the video, Landers's repetition of the imperative "must" is reinforced by a cutting hand gesture. Like with Susan Chester's insistence upon "AUTHORITY," Landers sees herself as compensating for the weaknesses of others; she is a martyr of the hard line. One of her techniques for evading Miss Lonelyhearts's fate was reading her letters in the

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<sup>28</sup> Rick Kogan, *America's Mom: The Life, Legacy, and Letters of Ann Landers*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 73.

<sup>29</sup> Evidently, Clarkson also misreads the end of West's story, unless she has been misinformed by Landers's written comments about the story during her interview prep.

<sup>30</sup> Ann Landers, Interview with Adrienne Clarkson. "Ann Landers on Take 30," CBC digital archives, (aired 14 Feb 1968) <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/discover/programs/t/take-30/dear-ann-landers.html>, last accessed 06/18/2013.

bathub, a practice that kept her relaxed while she read, and offered a healthier substitute to the booze in which West's protagonist seeks relief. Having sex with his readers, drinking and fighting with them, Miss Lonelyhearts personifies failed professionalism. In contrast, despite prodding from interviewers, Landers rarely betrayed any inkling of self-doubt, declaring that for every unwitting mistake she has provided 1,000 good answers. "Do you worry about being 'for real?'" asked interviewer John Day. "Never. No. Because I know who I am and this has never been a problem. For *other* people it is a problem," Landers replied.<sup>31</sup> Eager to consult her elite network of professional contacts for input about readers' dilemmas, Landers viewed herself as an altruistic mediator between lower class readers without access to expert counsel and the top specialists of American society.<sup>32</sup>

In keeping with their competitive dynamic, Landers's twin Abigail Van Buren offered a detailed assessment of *Miss Lonelyhearts* in her column too. Despite West's dramatic negation of "the joke" of the advice column, Abby prescribes the tonic of laughter for his protagonist. She writes:

*Miss Lonelyhearts* is a literary masterpiece. Or so the critics seem to agree.

But as a representation of how a "lovelorn" column goes, the picture is not

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<sup>31</sup> John Day, "Interview with Ann Landers." *Day at Night*. 12 February 1974. The Paley Center for Media, New York.

<sup>32</sup> David Gudelunas, *Confidential to America: Newspaper Advice Columns and Sexual Education* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 96. However, critics charged that rather than offering access to experts Landers merely supplanted their accredited advice with her own unfounded opinions. Nevertheless, according to her, it was this willingness to consult her many contacts from her political years, including a Supreme Court Justice and the president of Notre Dame University for their input on readers' problems that landed her the job. According to other accounts, however, it was simply her physical resemblance to the previous Ann Landers, a nurse from Chicago named Ruth Crowley, that got her hired. Although she downplayed the work of her predecessor, the column had already been successful for seven years when Landers took over the Dear Ann mantle in 1955.

without its flaws...[A] tougher minded Miss Lonelyhearts, one who could laugh and bring healing laughter to his sorry clients, might have accomplished something useful with his life. But he didn't, and alas, the poor guy gloomed along and came to grief.<sup>33</sup>

Abby reads West as if modernism never occurred. In this respect she seems the quintessential "popular reader" who Pierre Bourdieu says "subordinates form to function," who "refuses the refusal of the aesthete" and recognizes only "realist representation."<sup>34</sup> Abby's approach results in a tempering of aesthetic claims to detachment and superiority. Referencing "[t]he late Mr. West, who saw the world dark and dealt in despair as a matter of practice,"<sup>35</sup> she troubles the facile dichotomy between the nobility of art and mass-cultural commodification, pointing out that modernism too exploits agony and negativity, that perhaps the novel has a vested interest in leaving readers' problems unsolved.

Abby's interpretation of West also brings into relief the advice columnist's status as textual critic. In their responses to readers' letters, the sisters are constantly engaged in suspicious, even deconstructive readings of the text ("you say this man is an uncle 'by marriage.' I hope you don't mean he's your dad's brother and married. Sometimes people phrase questions in an odd way to get a desired reply").<sup>36</sup> Not only were the columnists seasoned close readers of others' letters, but they were also acutely aware of their own

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<sup>33</sup> Abigail van Buren, *Best of Dear Abby*, 166.

<sup>34</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), 44.

<sup>35</sup> Abby, 166.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in David Grossvogel, *Dear Ann Landers: Our Intimate and Changing Dialogue with America's Best-Loved Confidante* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, Inc., 1987), 28.

language use, particularly their adoption of euphemism and slang. One particular exchange documents Landers's embroilment in a protracted discussion with a reader over the etymology of the word "lady." When a reader was irritated by her use of the term, she replied that it originally meant "kneader of bread," adding "which means there aren't any honest-to-goodness ladies left."<sup>37</sup> The columnists had no choice but to be hyper conscious of their phraseology; one poor word choice could garner thousands of angry retorts. Thus, it is not that Abby and Landers's misreadings of West stem from a failure or inability to read his story well. Rather, these misreadings reflect a deliberate turn away from both the text's intention and its ontology.

Dear Abby subjects West's avant-garde text to the hardheaded standards of advice-column realism. Her hermeneutic introduces a genre crisis by refusing to acknowledge West's ironic, modernist self-presentation. With her turn to literalism as an escape from authorial intention, Abby on West represents a strange situation where suspicious reading and surface reading converge. Her approach is consistent with the literary-critical origins of the advice column genre, at least since Beatrice Fairfax articulated its mission in 1899. Fairfax censured:

The lady novelists of the last generation have much to answer for; they sent their heroes sighing through twenty chapters, madly in love, yet keeping away from their inamoratas through fear, doubt, delicacy and numbers of other foolish feminine reasons that never enter into a man's philosophy. When a man wants to

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 32.

see a woman he manages it. When he wants to stay away he is indifferent, all of the lady novelists with their little pernicky manikin heroes to the contrary.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, Elizabeth Bennet, Mr. Darcy is “just not that into you.” Even Susan Chester would engage in a little bit of textual analysis with subscribers, as in the following curious exchange: “My Dear Miss Chester: One day last week I came across an article which stated that the memory of an old person was like a rag bag, filled with odds and ends, worth very little, more often worth nothing. Please tell me what you make of that statement.” Chester replies, “I disagree that old people know there is nothing worth while in life. They know that sacrifice, love, work, patience, and service are worth while...They glory in the feeling of duty done.”<sup>39</sup> Here the advice-column offers an excuse for hermeneutical, even philosophical conversation.

Reading Miss Lonelyhearts’s moral crisis as temperamental flaw, Abby and Landers elide West’s trenchant critique of the violence of advice. Of course, West did not “forget the saving grace of humor,” as Abby claims,<sup>40</sup> but he feared its anesthetizing effects. Humor is disturbing, not palliative, in his world. Indeed, West’s ambivalence toward the comedic is integral to his art. From the story of the novella’s inception, when Perelman supposedly gave him the “Susan Chester” letters thinking they would make a great comedy, West was wary of imposing the comedic paradigm on his tale. Dear Abby, on the other hand, would have written the story Perelman wanted.

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Gudelunas, 40.

<sup>39</sup> Susan Chester, “Old Memories Worthless?” *Brooklyn Daily Times*, 4 January 1929.

<sup>40</sup> 166.

Nevertheless, Abby's individualist misreading raises the possibility that perhaps the systemic violence of the culture industry is not the whole story; that perhaps there is some dispositional accountability in *Miss Lonelyhearts* too. West would likely have agreed with Abby's view of pragmatism and the artistic temperament as opposed. As Max Eastman declared just two years after *Miss Lonelyhearts* was written, "there is no clearer demarcation among human types than that between the artist and the man of action."<sup>41</sup> Describing his life in California as he was writing *The Day of the Locust* (1939), West confided to Malcolm Cowley:

[O]ut here we have a strong progressive movement and I devote a great deal of time to it. Yet, although this new novel is about Hollywood, I found it impossible to include any of those activities in it. I made a desperate attempt before giving up. I tried to describe a meeting of the Anti-Nazi League, but it didn't fit and I had to substitute a whore house and a dirty film. The terrible sincere struggle of the League came out comic when I touched it and even libelous.<sup>42</sup>

A King Midas of cliché, everything West touches turns to comedy or commonplaces. In contrast to West's failure to promote the anti-Nazi league, Landers had no qualms about enlisting people to support her cause of cancer research, or her petition for nuclear disarmament. In this way, Abby and Landers's appropriation of West's modernism is more than a mere case of commercialism triumphant. In their hands, instrumentalism is

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<sup>41</sup> Max Eastman, *Art and the Life of Action* (London: George Allan & Unwin Ltd, 1935), 66.

<sup>42</sup> LOA 794-95.

not merely an automatic reflex but it carries the critical charge of showing up modernism's ethical paralysis.

Literary critics have advanced various arguments regarding the insights to be garnered from instrumental readers like Abby and Landers. As Louise Rosenblatt suggests, far from merely "belated" or "regressive," utilitarian (or "efferent") readers are also forward-looking in their concern for what will remain once the reading experience is finished.<sup>43</sup> Rather than wholly innocent of aestheticism, Rosenblatt invites us to view utilitarian readers as dissatisfied with the shortsightedness of the disinterested premise. It is in this sense that Abby and Landers's misreadings act as a form of critical performance, and so can be said to operate as failed hermeneutics and yet also as capable of galvanizing new, "illegitimate" insights into the text. Such instrumental readings testify to the inherent incompleteness of all fictional acts, and to art's dependence upon those maligned porters who ferry the spoils of the literary across to the shore of practical use.

However, there is a final twist to this intertwined history of West and the Friedman sisters; this last twist reminds us of the dangers of over-idealizing the populist approach. While Abby and Landers offer useful challenges to intellectual orthodoxies, the final chapter of their engagement with West should caution us against romanticizing

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<sup>43</sup> She writes, "The kind of reading in which attention is centered predominantly on what is to be carried away or retained after the reading event I term "efferent" (after the Latin *efferre*, to carry away)." Rosenblatt, Louise M. *Writing and Reading: The Transactional Theory*, National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy Technical Report (UC Berkeley & Carnegie Mellon: January 1988), 5.



popular readers as alternatives to the “routinized [reading] protocols” of academics.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, as we shall see, these advice columnists had their own routinized protocols to contend with.

### **Compassion Fatigue**

In 1982 an attentive reader of Ann Landers noticed that some of her columns seemed familiar, and soon a scandal rattled the advice column industry. It was discovered that both Landers and Abby had been recycling old letters for years, rather than printing new material. Some people brushed off the deception, likening it to reruns on television, but admonishing that the reused material should have been labeled as such. Others were less forgiving, and wrote in expressing their outrage. They charged that the recycling evinced that Landers was not motivated by an earnest desire to help, that, in addition to laziness, her actions revealed a sense that all problems are the same and all sufferers interchangeable. The column was almost cancelled as a result. Keeping in mind that Landers received over 300,000 letters a year, it is troubling to think of all those “tear drenched mail bags,”<sup>45</sup> and not a single appeal with a hope of response, because Landers was no longer even bothering to pull out her letter opener. It turns out that the reprints were an act of deliberate deception, for “not only were the letters reprinted, but the ages

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<sup>44</sup> Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, “The Common Reader and the Archival Classroom: Disciplinary History for the Twenty-First Century” *New Literary History* 43.1 (Winter 2012), 114.

<sup>45</sup> Editorial. *The Globe and Mail*, New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1982. 539. Print.

of the writers were changed and different signatures attached, apparently to make the letters look fresher.”<sup>46</sup>

The professionalism that began as a defense against internalizing the problems of readers ultimately produces a perfunctory indifference to the singularity of readers’ crises. In addition to ethical carelessness, the incident indicated historical indifference on the columnists’ parts. As one editorial noted, what was most remarkable about the whole affair was that Landers could have recycled letters from the 60s in the 80s with nobody noticing. “Where is the evidence in Landersland for the shaking of customary social foundations, or the future-shock sweep of a postindustrial age, for constant pervasive change in the human condition?”<sup>47</sup> For some readers the episode revealed the advice column’s atavism and imperviousness to historical change, while for others it offered depressing proof of the banality of human experience.

Like Miss Lonelyhearts, the character whose crisis she blithely dismissed, Landers “had given her readers many stones” (*ML* 63). The scandal brought home the poignant repetitiousness of existence to readers in a way that West’s modernist novella never could. The episode implied that Landers was bored by her subscribers’ problems, regarding them, as West says, all “stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife” (*ML* 59). “There is little about the banalities of the human condition that is new,” sighed one reader in the *Kansas City Star*. “In the end, Ms. Landers has shown, we’re all on our own” and she “proves that nothing’s sacred” (*The Sun*). The

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<sup>46</sup> Editorial. *Nevada State Journal* [Reno] 7 May 1982. Rpt. in *Editorials on File*, Volume 13, Number 9. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1982. 540. Print.

<sup>47</sup> Editorial. *Minneapolis Tribune* [Minneapolis] 9 May 1982. Rpt. in *Editorials on File*, Volume 13, Number 9. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1982. 538. Print.

disillusionment among loyal fans was severe; they regarded the incident as a sign of “the general decline of scrupulous, to-the-last-drop honesty” (*Nevada State Journal*).

“Another ikon shattered, another illusion wiped away,” another subscriber sighed.<sup>48</sup>

With the recycled letter scandal, the fiction of the advice column’s speciation from the novel was exposed. It revealed that the advice column was always deeply novelistic, more invested in fiction than cures, despite its resistance to sentimentalizing narratives. In a defense that evokes Renaissance disputes over whether literature should delight or instruct, Landers retaliated that her column was read for entertainment more than real advice. “In her initial response to the discovery, Miss Landers defended herself by saying people read her column for entertainment and that ‘the technique doesn’t matter’.”<sup>49</sup> Downplaying the moral offense as a technical one, Landers selectively disavows any allegiance to the standards of “high-brow” aesthetics. The published responses to the scandal document a society attempting to parse the difference between art and advice. At least one subscriber countered, “There are many works of literature and journalism worth repeating, phrases and quotes worth hearing again and again. But Dear Ann columns somehow don’t qualify.”<sup>50</sup> Or, as Cyril Connolly puts it, “Literature is the art of writing something that will be read twice; journalism what will be grasped at once.”<sup>51</sup> Further, the scandal brought to light the social confusion over this new figure of the commercial, syndicated advice columnist, raising the question of whether the column

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<sup>48</sup> Editorial. *The Kansas City Star* [Kansas City] 6 May 1982. Rpt. in *Editorials on File*, Volume 13, Number 9. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1982. 538. Print.

<sup>49</sup> Nevada State Journal.

<sup>50</sup> Editorial. *The Hartford Courant* [Hartford] 6 May 1982. Rpt. in *Editorials on File*, Volume 13, Number 9. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1982. 540. Print.

<sup>51</sup> *Enemies of Promise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 19.

should aim to help the individual reader or the thousands of readers with a similar problem whom the individual reader represents.

Vancouver's *The Sun* pleaded with subscribers to continue writing letters to Ann: "Don't let Miss Lonelyhearts live up to her name."<sup>52</sup> And the *Virginian-Pilot*, perhaps unwittingly, alluded to the plot of Nathanael West's novella,

Advice columnists have come a long way since a bygone editor invented Miss Lonelyhearts and invited readers to tell her their troubles. Considering the bind that our Ann Landers got herself into last week by using fictitious names and rehashing old material, we blush to recall that the original Miss Lonelyhearts column was secretly written by a mister, not a miss.<sup>53</sup>

The allusion to West's novella is apt, given that the story is an extended meditation on what happens when the advising relation becomes perfunctory. Although Miss Lonelyhearts yearns to develop a meaningful response to the letters piled high on his desk, he ends up sounding "like a conductor calling stations" (68). He falters when he must put the aesthetic ideals he learned in college into practice, when he must translate others' expressions of suffering into fresh, impassioned material. The story recounts what happens when literary commentary loses its zest; it documents the threat of inaction and indifference that haunts every textual exchange. (At one point, his editor Shrike reprimands Miss Lonelyhearts for recommending suicide to a reader, joking that his job is to increase not diminish the paper's circulation) (87). Yet as *The Sun* editors point out,

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<sup>52</sup> Editorial. *The Sun* [Vancouver, B.C.] 7 May 1982. Rpt. in *Editorials on File*, Volume 13, Number 9. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1982. 539. Print.

<sup>53</sup> Editorial. *The Virginian-Pilot* [Norfolk, Va.] 10 May 1982. Rpt. in *Editorials on File*, Volume 13, Number 9. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1982. 541. Print.

deception goes hand in hand with the history of the advice column, with authors including Abraham Cahan, Arnold Bennett, and Quentin Reynolds each masquerading as women advisors, and sometimes passing as a different ethnicity.

The sisters' refusals to consider West's critique of the violence of moral authority ultimately leads them to reproduce this moral violence by failing to honor the particularity of their subscribers. But this failure also produces a cascade effect in the writings of advice columnists to come, with the younger generation struggling to correct the moral complacency of their plucky Midwestern forbears. Paralleling changes in the modernist novel, the advice column increasingly embraces fragmentary wisdom and doubt. Randy Cohen, author of the *New York Times* column "The Ethicist," confesses, "I admired Lederer's jaunty self-assurance, but I understand Miss Lonelyhearts's crisis."<sup>54</sup> An interview with Cheryl Strayed for *The Oregonian* similarly relates, "She's read "Miss Lonelyhearts," Nathanael West's classic 1933 novel about a nameless advice columnist overwhelmed by the misery and meanness in the world. It's big responsibility, trying to solve people's problems, and Strayed has attacked it by playing to her strengths, telling stories and putting her nurturing nature on full display."<sup>55</sup>

West's popular legacy corroborates Raymond Williams's argument that modernism's "isolated, estranged images of alienation and loss have become the easy iconography of the commercials and the lonely, bitter, sardonic and skeptical hero takes

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<sup>54</sup> "Stealth Progressive," *The Ethicist*, *New York Times*, 29 December 2002.

<sup>55</sup> Cheryl Strayed, Interview with Jeff Baker. "Portland author Cheryl Strayed, also known as Dear Sugar, writes personal stories that bond with her devoted readers" *The Oregonian*, 18 February 2012.

his ready-made place as the star of the thriller”<sup>56</sup> (or, in this case, of the newspaper column). Instead of heralding a counsel-free art, as many understand modernism’s mandate, *Miss Lonelyhearts* instantiates a new breed of popular, self-negating advice. As William Grimes declared in a 1997 *New York Times* editorial:

The once gentle, helpful American advice column has grown fangs. Readers who write in these days are likely to get a faceful of attitude along with their answers, if the answers ever arrive in the course of the winding narratives. The advice column has waved farewell to “Dear Abby” and “Ann Landers,” and in this process it has become something else: one of the most vital, unpredictable literary forms going, built around a vivid and decidedly cynical personality.<sup>57</sup>

Literary critics might wince at this description of the advice column as “one of the most vital... literary forms.” But as we have seen, the advice column does indeed have a literary import. It is a forum where a short text can generate tremendous response, and where the public will eagerly converge to analyze a specific textual case. With early proponents including Daniel Defoe, Benjamin Franklin, and Abraham Cahan, the literary and advice industries have always overlapped. West’s reception by future advice columnists is an extension of this entwined genealogy, which culminates in the new social figure of the reluctant oracle.

Born of the clash between popular and modernist counsel, between the styles of Abby and West, the reluctant oracle is the culture industry’s attempt to come to terms

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<sup>56</sup> “When Was Modernism?” *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 1989), 35.

<sup>57</sup> “Dear Abby Doesn’t Live Here Anymore.” *New York Times*. 30 March 1997.

with modernism's critique of its moral complacency. Although wary of mass culture's commodification of counsel, the reluctant oracle cannot relinquish the impulse to offer some wisdom of use. Far from disappearing in modernity, as Walter Benjamin claimed, advice has become a "growth industry," according to Rita Barnard.<sup>58</sup> Contemporary columnists synthesize Dear Abby's pragmatism and Westian irony to produce more trustworthy guides. For instance, Dan Savage's column resembles a "blank parody" of the advice column genre, it is "anti-advice" for those "who are sick of advice."<sup>59</sup> Another popular columnist, Carolyn Hax, is equally self-reflexive about the clichés of her trade; "weary of the stock answers of advice columnists," Hax "constantly winks and nods at the tradition she is taking part in while simultaneously distancing herself from being simply another sob sister."<sup>60</sup> Likewise, *The Rumpus*'s immensely popular Cheryl Strayed "is unlikely to tell you what to do." Aware that "giving advice is often futile," she offers compassionate, personalized responses instead.<sup>61</sup> West's self-reflexive moralism and his ironic engagement with cliché are conceits that the modern advice column is just now learning to exploit.

A chart constructed by David Gudelunas plots out these epistemological shifts in the advice genre over time. While in 1950 ninety-one percent of readers wrote to Ann

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<sup>58</sup> Rita Barnard, "The Storyteller, the Novelist, and the Advice Columnist: Narrative and Mass Culture in 'Miss Lonelyhearts.'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 27.1 (Autumn, 1993). 44.

<sup>59</sup> David Gudelunas, *Confidential to America: Newspaper Advice Columns and Sexual Education*. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 158.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Jessica Weissberg, "The Advice Columnist We Deserve," *The New Yorker* (October 9, 2012).

Landers to “ask a question,” by the 1990s only thirty-four percent of people wrote in with personal questions, the other incentives being to share information, and to comment on a columnist’s or a writer’s remark. The chart indicates a shift from an instructional to a participatory mode. This interactive trend has found its ideal forum in the internet, where every reader is also a writer, every sufferer also a self-appointed guide. The chart suggests that the enduring appeal of the advice column is its capacity to incite hermeneutical exchange.

Instead of sure-footedness, it is the ambivalence of the contemporary advice columnist that makes her persuasive; the idea being that a salesman or propagandist wouldn’t need to be coaxed into offering their insights. This new self-consciousness about the columnist’s limits assumes different guises in contemporary columns: in some cases, as an embrace of the role of listener and confidant, in others as a shift to a more raucous, comedic approach. While “Dear Sugar” eschews explicit counsel in favor of digressive personal essays inspired by the letters she receives, both Dan Savage and Carolyn Hax underplay their function as actual dispensers of advice (“problem solving isn’t really the point” says the *New York Times*).<sup>62</sup> These writers are aware that the desire for advice is no longer the primary reason that people turn to their columns, the stronger incentive being the occasion for public exchange, the airing of opinions, and the opportunity to follow another person’s intimate dramas—desires similarly exploited by fiction. Because of the time-lag between letter composition and columnist’s response, and the poor odds of having one’s letter selected, it is unlikely that the advice columnist will be able to offer the individual letter writer any useful aid. When the possibility of solving

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<sup>62</sup> Grimes.



the particular problem of an individual reader is eliminated, the column's generalist advice and fabricated scenarios are increasingly difficult to distinguish from the universalizing precepts of fiction.

### **Beckett for Businessmen**

Aside from West, perhaps no contemporary oracle is more reluctant than Samuel Beckett, whose wisdom has exhibited a surprising appeal for business types in a trend that journalists from *New Inquiry*<sup>63</sup> and *Slate*<sup>64</sup> have begun to observe. As these journalists note, this appeal is epitomized by Timothy Ferriss's self-help text *The 4-Hour Workweek* (2007), a "manifesto for the mobile lifestyle." Ferriss writes, "I deal with rejection by persisting, not by taking my business elsewhere. My maxim comes from Samuel Beckett, *a personal hero of mine*: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.' You won't believe what you can accomplish by attempting the impossible with the courage to repeatedly fail better."<sup>65</sup> Beckett is the most counterintuitive example of the self-help usage of modernism in this dissertation; if any author would seem inculpable for affirmative appropriations of his writing, it would be him. Beckett relentlessly rejects the affirmative, utilitarian imperative. He writes "Texts for Nothing," as one of his collections is called. "How it Is," the name of a late work, is very pointedly not "How it *Should Be*." There is a persistent negation of the prescriptive

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<sup>63</sup> Ned Beaman, "Fail Worse" *The New Inquiry*. February 9, 2012. <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/fail-worse/>

<sup>64</sup> Mark O'Connell, "The Stunning Success of Fail Better" *Slate*. January 29, 2014. [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/01/samuel\\_beckett\\_s\\_quote\\_fail\\_better\\_becomes\\_the\\_mantra\\_of\\_silicon\\_valley.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/01/samuel_beckett_s_quote_fail_better_becomes_the_mantra_of_silicon_valley.html).

<sup>65</sup> Timothy Ferriss, *The 4-Hour Workweek* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2009), 56. My italics.

throughout Beckett's career, in which—in contrast to self-help books stressing the power of “yes”<sup>66</sup>—the word “no” is the “leitmotif,” as Richard Seaver observes.<sup>67</sup> As with West, Beckett's resistance to explicit didacticism has only enhanced his moral appeal in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Like an itch that demands to be scratched, negation exercises a kind of irresistible irritation in the positive-thinking era; corporate culture simply cannot leave Beckett's “no” alone.

Beckett's “fail better” piece of anti-advice is originally from *Worstward Ho* (1983); the title is a play on “Westward Ho!,” an adventure tale by Charles Kingsley (1855). The original text reads:

All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever  
tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again.  
Fail again, Fail better.<sup>68</sup>

Ferriss finds a maxim in Beckett's guttural lament. He turns Beckett's descriptive statement about “failing better” into a prescription, in a way that illustrates the tenuousness of the distinction (is true, neutral description even possible? Or, is all description implicitly advancing an argument about how to live). For Ferriss, to “fail better” means to resist the fantasy of perfection, to allow oneself a margin for error and growth. And yet, even if Beckett is in fact being prescriptive, the point of the quote is unclear (does Beckett mean that one should become a more extreme kind of loser, or that

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<sup>66</sup> See, for instance, Roger Fisher, *Getting to Yes: How to Negotiate Agreement Without Giving In* (New York: Penguin Press, 1981).

<sup>67</sup> Richard Seaver, “Introduction.” *I Can't Go On, I'll Go On: A Samuel Beckett Reader*. Edited by Richard W. Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1976), 352.

<sup>68</sup> Samuel Beckett, “Worstward Ho” (London: John Calder, 1983), 45.

one should become less of a failure, i.e. a success?). This ambiguity did not escape Beckett's attention, of course, but is built into the text. "Fail again. Better again. Or better worse" he writes, highlighting the many gradations between the poles of inadequacy and accomplishment. Evidently, what Ferriss's extraction of Beckett elides is the text's formal enactment of the painfulness of the journey it represents—the "worstward ho" of language itself. In the same way that, as Beckett said of Joyce, "his writing not just *about* something; it *is* that something itself,"<sup>69</sup> Beckett's writings reproduce the circuitous unpleasure they describe.

The remarkable popularity of Beckett's "fail better" motto tells us two things. First, that self-help readings of modernism have to undertake some fairly extreme omissions and repressions in order to fit an author like Beckett into their agendas. This suggests that authors like Beckett and West must offer these readers something that a more obviously affirmative, inspirational author—such as, for instance, Emerson—does not. Far from a deterrent, Beckett's moral recalcitrance operates as an advertisement of his authenticity for contemporary readers negotiating our advice-saturated marketplace. In addition, this reluctance leaves an opening for the agency of the advisee to fill in the prescriptive blanks, thereby offsetting the potential authoritarianism of the conventional self-help relation with an opportunity for reader participation. Second, it tells us that hundreds of Kindle readers are first encountering Beckett through *The 4 Hour workweek*. The second fact confirms once again the work of knowledge transfer that self-help

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<sup>69</sup> Samuel Beckett, "Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce." in *A Samuel Beckett Reader* (New York: Grove Press, 1976), 117.

accomplishes. It is not always as crude a form of knowledge transfer as recounted here. As we have seen, self-help texts have historically acted as significant vectors of international literary exchange, with writers like Smiles importing key Western texts to nations across the globe.

Ever alert to the buried self-improvement subtext underlying Irish modernist works, Declan Kiberd points out that Beckett's works "are filled with ferocious assaults on the Protestant ethic of effort, work, and inevitable reward."<sup>70</sup> In his early writing, Beckett was fascinated with the character of Dante's Belacqua—the archetype of the lazy man—who defers repenting in favor of lying around in the shade of a rock. When asked by Dante to explain his apathy, Belacqua complains, "O Brother, what's the use of climbing?"<sup>71</sup> *The Unnamable* laments,

All this business of a labor to accomplish...I invented it all, in the hope that it would console me, help me to go on, allow myself to think of myself as somewhere on a road, moving, between a beginning and an end<sup>72</sup>

The chronotopes of the road and quest figure prominently in Beckett's corpus. His pared down tableaux bring the pathos of ambition and expectation that much more starkly into view. As Celia in *Murphy* concludes, she "cannot go where livings are made without

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<sup>70</sup> "Samuel Beckett and the Protestant Ethic" in Augustine Martin, *The Genius of Irish Prose* (Dublin and Cork: Mercier, 1984), 123.

<sup>71</sup> Dante. *Purgatorio*. Translated by Allen Mandelbaum (Toronto: Bantam Books. 1982). Canto IV, 123.

<sup>72</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*. (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 314.

feeling they were being made away.”<sup>73</sup> For Beckett, self-help is merely one facet of the mirage of productivity that all worldly goals sustain.

Ferriss’s application incites us to read Beckett’s most famous play not as existing outside of the puritan work ethic but in its heart of darkness. *Waiting for Godot* and self-help literature deal with many of the same themes: habit, codependency, ambition, and happiness. In a perverse way, Vladimir and Estragon are the very picture of protestant-ethic perseverance. The tramps do not suffer from apathy—as many critics claim—but from a diligence verging on the ridiculous. They wait, desperate for the slightest hint of upper-level encouragement, ever rationing their meager resources and deferring their rewards. As Vladimir observes, “We are not saints but we kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?” (“Billions,” Estragon rejoins) (51). And yet, Vladimir is somewhat right. Vladimir and Estragon suffer from an automatism of counsel; they are trying to implement instructions and not getting them quite right. (“He said to wait by the tree”...“You’re sure it was here?”) (10). Their frequent garbling of familiar proverbs suggests that their assimilation of cultural knowledge is slightly askew: “hope deferred maketh the something sick,” (8) they fumble, “strike the iron before it freezes” (12). Their discourse is sprinkled with half remembered precepts that have outlived their usefulness.

In addition, the tramps are constantly scrutinizing the state of their happiness—wondering whether they are more happy now than before, more happy together or apart. Vladimir intones: “Say, I am happy.” Estragon: “I am happy.” Vladimir: “So am I.”

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<sup>73</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*. (New York: Grove Press, 1957), 67.

Estragon: “So am I.” Vladimir: “We are happy.” Estragon: “We are happy. [*Silence.*]  
What do we do now, now that we are happy?” (39). This repetition of positive precepts was a technique advanced by positive thinking schools. Emile Coué, the French positive thinking pioneer, advised readers to repeat this mantra twice a day: “every day in every way I keep getting better and better.” Likewise, it is not a stretch to say that a character like Winnie in Beckett’s *Happy Days* (1960) offers a retort to the rise of positive thinking culture. “So much to be thankful for,” She insists— “great mercies” “that is what I find so wonderful”—endlessly repeating her “survival kit” of clichés.<sup>74</sup> Beckett establishes a grotesque contrast between her affirmative words and her decaying body trapped in the sand.

In *Godot*, the characters of Pozzo and Lucky further problematize the Western ideal of self-fashioning. No one better embodies the reality of the self-made man than Pozzo, the landowner who is not really self-made at all, but needs a slave in order to succeed. Like the self-made man, Pozzo has a very strict “schedule” that he observes.<sup>75</sup> He entirely approves of the tramps’ commitment to their rendezvous: “I myself in your situation, if I had an appointment with Godin...Godet...Godot...anyhow you see who I mean, why I’d wait till it was black night before I gave up” (24).

Pozzo lives by the monosyllabic commands that he hurls at Lucky, his “slave,” and most critics agree that the pair embodies the impulse toward worldly domination. Pozzo’s grand monologue towards the end of the First Act of *Godot* can be read as a

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<sup>74</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 11, 52, 24.

<sup>75</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (Grove Press: New York, 1954), 25. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

lesson in the importance of time management. “Behind this veil of gentleness and peace night is charging (*vibrantly*) and will burst upon us (*snaps his fingers*) pop! Like that! (his inspiration leaves him) just when we least expect it. (*Silence, Gloomily.*) That’s how it is on this bitch of an earth” (25). As self-improvement discourse knows well, an awareness of one’s finitude offers the best incentive for productivity. “Do not squander Time,” warns Benjamin Franklin, “for it is the stuff life is made of.” Pozzo embodies both the instrumentalism and the maudlin sentimentality of self-improvement discourse (“From the meanest creature one departs wiser, richer, more conscious of one’s blessings...” he pontificates) (20). In contrast, the pathos of the tramps stems from their inability to metabolize prescription into action. Unlike with the authors of self-help, however, this failure is not for Beckett something that can be overcome through a mere temperamental adjustment. For him, all of culture represents a heap of unusable counsel, and life itself is nothing but an overly-literalized obeisance to an expression meant to be taken figuratively.

Although *Godot* is sprinkled with epigrammatic insights, it withholds a literary message in the crucial places. Throughout Beckett’s works, the maxim operates more as a linguistic tic than as a culminating flourish. In Act Two, for instance, curtains rise to Vladimir, singing this:

A dog came in the kitchen  
And stole a crust of bread.  
Then cook up with a ladle  
And beat him till he was dead.

Then all the dogs came running

*And dug the dog a tomb—*

...

And wrote upon the tombstone

For the eyes of dogs to come:

A dog came in the kitchen

And stole a crust of bread.

Then cook up with a ladle

And beat him till he was dead. (37-8)

Vladimir's song makes the extraction of a portable lesson impossible—the only moral to the song is its repetition. Similarly, Krapp of *Krapp's Last Tape* fast-forwards in disgust all of his youthful “revelations;” his epiphanies and insights about life. The recorded voice excitedly exclaims, “What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely—(Krapp switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, switches off again).”<sup>76</sup> Beckettian form is characterized by this cycle of promised and thwarted moral summation.

The pieces of life insight that Beckett does offer are presented not as the directed didacticism of his Victorian precursors but as the unavoidable byproduct or detritus of aesthetic production. As Beckett sighs in *Molloy*, “you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten.”<sup>77</sup> Indeed, the “fail better” quote (“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again, Fail better.”), is reminiscent of William McGuffey's popular children's rhyme from 1836, whose logic is already entirely

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<sup>76</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces* (New York: Grove Press, 1957), 21.

<sup>77</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (New York: Grove Press, 1955), 41.



circular, and which Beckett may have heard in his youth, “try, try again/If you find your task is hard/ Try, try again.” As with West, the author’s parodic critique of popular culture’s triumphalist stance is reconfigured by the self-help industry into an affirmation of this same stance. For Beckett, the literary maxim signifies the irresistibility of communication and the inescapability of the past. It’s a reminder of the fundamentally social, borrowed quality of all language and thought. As with D.H. Lawrence on Benjamin Franklin, there is the sense that it is impossible to entirely shake the early influence of these moralizing texts. In this way, self-help operates as a humbling reminder of the determinism of the social and natural order. There is no escaping death or prescription.

None of Beckett’s pieces of “anti-advice” has acquired more popular traction than the “fail better” motto. It even makes an appearance in Stephen Brown’s corporate manifesto “Fail Better! Samuel Beckett’s secrets of business and branding success” (the exclamation point says it all).<sup>78</sup>

Brown writes that Beckett’s “secrets of branding success” constitute

A characteristically Celtic worldview which is antithetical to the essentially Anglo-Saxon ethos that dominates contemporary management thought. Whereas the Saxon perspective foregrounds facts, figures, order, rigor, and incredible attention to detail (all laudable and necessary traits), Celticity relies on imaginative leaps, compelling storytelling, irreverent iconoclasm...and the crock of good fortune at the end of commercial rainbows (Aherne, 2000). Both

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<sup>78</sup> See Ned Bauman, “Fail Worse” *The New Inquiry*. February 9, 2012.

are needed in business.<sup>79</sup>

This must be what it would look like if Don Draper read *Waiting for Godot*. Instead of simply opposing capitalist culture, Beckett challenges corporate operators like Brown and Ferriss to be more creative and reflexive. What is latent in Brown's text, of course, is an argument for the value of Beckett apart from his corporate applicability, for certainly we do not *need* Beckett to learn techniques that can as easily be gleaned from Microsoft or Tide themselves. Yet in citing Celticity as a model of less predictable business practice, Brown is not alone in attributing a productive potential to Irish modernism's resistance of the business ethic. The literary critic Gregory Dobbins similarly argues that the stereotype of "Irish idleness" actually offers a form of colonial dissent. Dobbins argues, "If Irish modernism is indeed distinct from other national modernisms, then I want to suggest that the specific function idleness had within it is one of the primary indicators of that difference."<sup>80</sup> Brown's preference for Beckettian "idleness" above productivity discourse has precedents in the Revival tradition of celebrating Ireland's rural anti-modernism as an alternative to British industrialization.

## **Conclusion**

Ever since the Renaissance era of courtiers and monarchs, counselors have struggled with the problem of how to make their wisdom heard. The need to persuade advisees of one's authority without challenging their autonomy does not go away in a

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<sup>79</sup> Stephen Brown, "Fail better! Samuel Beckett's secrets of business and branding success." *Business Horizons* 49.2 (2006): 168.

<sup>80</sup> Gregory Dobbins, *Lazy Idle Schemers: Irish Modernism and the Cultural Politics of Idleness* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2010), 5.

modern democracy, but one's ruler shifts from the monarch to the greater reading public. The problem for twentieth-century advisors is how to offer meaningful reflections upon life that readers will not resent or mistrust as a sign of ulterior motives or pedantry. The anonymity of advertising represents one solution. Modernism's reluctant oracle is another.

The fact that readerly appeals to modernism for counsel persist amidst such a cultural surfeit of more willing advisors indicates a popular desire for knowledge that resists being absorbed into an economy of practical use. At the same time, such appeals are paradoxically attempting to apply the modernist aesthetic to practical ends. The paradoxes of this social compulsion to make negation serviceable (a need from which this very dissertation is not exempt) are nowhere more apparent than in self-help applications of modernist texts. Nevertheless, the problem Brown, Ferriss, Abby, and Landers open up is not confined to modernism but has to do with the limits of negation itself. These authors inspire us to take the long view of modernist negation, or to think about the use of aesthetic uselessness. The detachment from modernist dogma they inspire, despite their professed celebration of it, is an example of the illegitimate insights self-help can engender.

As the cases of West and Beckett make clear, the desire for textual advice never disappears but rather, society develops changing standards for what counts as acceptable, persuasive moral authority. As Lionel Trilling observed, regarding the changes undergone by the cultural ideal of sincerity, "A chief part of the inauthenticity of narration would seem to be its assumption that life is susceptible of comprehension and

thus of management.”<sup>81</sup> In contrast to the “inauthenticity” of conventional narration, Trilling notes that no literature is so “shockingly personal” as modernism, “it asks us,” he says, “if we are content with our marriages, with our professional lives, with our friends...It asks us if we are content with ourselves...”<sup>82</sup> With parables increasingly incorporated into self-help and advertising copy in the early twentieth century, it suddenly appears vulgar and suspicious for writers to broadcast their moral insights. Modernism both exacerbates and exploits this newfound suspicion of facile solutions.

In speaking of the advice-industry’s “misreading” of modernism, we begin via Beckett and West to approach a clearer definition of just what kind of misreading this is: not simply a decontextualization but a translation into pragmatic speak of ironic modernist diction. This translation, in the original sense of “transport” or “carry over,”<sup>83</sup> is not without revelatory potential, but it is revelatory only insofar as it enacts and corrects modernism’s limits through its stubbornly affirmative zeal. The self-help application of modernism is not literally revelatory in the way that it fancies itself to be, by reducing the modernist text to a proverbial lesson or, as is often the case, using the modernist author’s biography as a way of illuminating his or her narrative’s practical applicability, but it is revelatory in the way that it stages the clash between reticence and use, intention and legacy. Self-help readings like Ferriss’s unwittingly perform what is wrong with modernism and with the very hierarchy of the reader-text relation, eschewing authorial manifestos and disciplinary axioms. Moreover, despite their claims, what the popular self-help readers show is not that modernism secretly *is* self-help, or can be

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<sup>81</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1972), 135.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>83</sup> “translate, v.: to bear, convey or remove from one person, place or condition to another; to transfer, transport” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

reduced to this, but the extent to which modernism is engaging in a critique and rewriting of self-help. Of course, all critique is, in a sense, prescriptive, entailing an alternate sense of how to live. It is chiefly in this respect, as regards the prescriptive impetus of all critique, the normative impulse of all description, that we can say that modernism is secretly also self-help, or that it is anti self-help, as the case may be. This is what is entailed by references to modernism's "counter" or alternate counsel.

Pointing out another instance of overlooked contemporaneity between modernism and self-help, Brown urges, "*Waiting for Godot*, lest we forget, was first published in the same year as Peter Drucker's *Practice of Management*. Though years have passed, we still pay heed to Drucker. It's also time we looked at the seven sizzling secrets of Samuel Beckett's success."<sup>84</sup> Although the conventional model of the authoritative, confident self-help guru retains a great deal of force, the tides of moral persuasion are shifting in modernism's more indirect and subjective direction. It remains to be seen what modernism's triumph presages for the actual usefulness of future advice.

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<sup>84</sup> 162.

## CONCLUSION

### Slot-Machine Wisdom: Literary Counsel in the Digital Age

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“One original thought is worth a thousand mindless quotations.”  
— Diogenes Laërtius

like

34 likes

When Walter Benjamin wrote “The Storyteller” in 1936, he worried that the rise of the novel and the newspaper signaled a decline in the public’s aptitude for giving and receiving advice.<sup>1</sup> However, as this dissertation has made fairly clear, rather than disappearing advice has become more nimble and diffuse in modern life. Indeed, what self-help readings of modernism demonstrate above all is the tremendous durability of the act of reading for counsel, which persists even in the face of modernist mockery and advice-industry immorality. Nevertheless, the transition from “wisdom” to “information” Benjamin espied remains a useful characterization of 21st-century advice culture, particularly with the rise of the technosphere. Rather than signaling the obsolescence of the figure of the counselor, however, the digital information overload emphasizes the urgent need for curators willing to do the normative labor of evaluating the excess of online information and translating it into directives for practical use, much like modernism itself produces the demand for commentators (or what Leo Bersani calls

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), translated by Hannah Arendt.

“rear-guard” readers)<sup>2</sup> able to translate its radical experiments into everyday insights. Self-help’s task of organizing and hierarchizing a surplus of life-wisdom was once the vocation of the humanities; Erasmus called proverbs the first pedagogy.<sup>3</sup> Though no longer openly practiced by institutional humanities departments, this is a role all the more pressing in our digital era.

Online culture is host to a dramatic shift in the agency of advice from giver to recipient. Its counsel is fragmented, its maxims detached from an omniscient authority, its often contradictory guidance sprawled out for the advisee to reassemble at will. Although intensified by the internet, the problem of how to negotiate competing directives is already a source of frustration for Flaubert’s pre-digital copy clerks (“One does not go swimming in the sea without having first cooled one’s skin. Bégin recommended jumping in while bathed in perspiration. A glass of wine after soup was considered excellent for the stomach. Lévy accused it of ruining the teeth...”).<sup>4</sup> The modernists attempted to resist Victorian moral schematism and hypocrisy by offering a smorgasbord of the proverbial in the place of the previous generation’s hierarchic “message.” Virginia Woolf’s anti-authoritarian didacticism, *Finnegans Wake*’s mutating maxims, the automatism of counsel in *Waiting for Godot*: this deconstructed life-wisdom find its apotheosis in the online world. The internet is a repository of unsatisfying

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<sup>2</sup>Leo Bersani, “Against Ulysses.” *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 159.

<sup>3</sup>He writes, “There appears to be no form of teaching which is older than the proverb” in *The Adages of Erasmus*. Selected by William Barker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 12.

<sup>4</sup>Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, Translated by Mark Polizzotti (Paris: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), 67.

advice—of decontextualized homilies and aborted conversations—and no literary movement has perfected the art of unsatisfying advice better than modernism.

Consider the character of the hack doctor Matthew O’Conner in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, whom the other characters turn to for advice:

“I also know this,” he went on: “One cup poured into another makes different waters tears shed by one eye would blind if wept into another’s eye. The breast we strike in joy is not the breast we strike in pain; any man’s smile would be consternation on another’s mouth. Rear up, eternal river, here comes grief! Man has no foothold that is not also a bargain. So be it! Laughing I came into Pacific Street, and laughing I’m going out of it; laughter is the pauper’s money. I like paupers and bums,” he added, “because they are impersonal with misery...”<sup>5</sup>

Looking for a solution on the internet is like asking for guidance from a psychopath. O’Conner’s run-on moralism is a modernist reprisal of the wise fool figure of the Renaissance. Then, as now, the seeming insanity of the counselor mitigates the “face-threatening” character of the advice relation.<sup>6</sup> Exchanging advice is described as face-threatening because it poses a “challenge to ‘the hearer’s identity as a competent and autonomous actor.’”<sup>7</sup> To compensate for this, the wise fool’s prescience appears not as a product of his superior knowledge, an inherently embarrassing disparity for all concerned, but as a product of luck or chance. Likewise, the Doctor’s penetrating pronouncements

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<sup>5</sup> Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*. Preface by Jeanette Winterson, Introduction by T.S. Eliot. (New York: New Directions Book, 2006), 35.

<sup>6</sup> Miriam A. Locher, *Advice Online: Advice-giving in An American Internet Health Column* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2006), 52.

<sup>7</sup> Dana J. Goldsmith & Erina L. MacGeorge, “The impact of politeness and relationship on perceived quality of advice about a problem.” *Human Communication Research*, 26, 235.



(“in the end you’ll all be locked together, like the poor beasts that get their antlers mixed and are found dead that way...”)<sup>8</sup> are sandwiched between nonsensical ramblings, and thereby stripped of their potentially condescending or dictatorial implications. The inoffensive, inconclusive moralism espoused by modernism and the internet emerges when advice is detached from a single authoritative consciousness and objectified as a surfeit of unmoored and interchangeable truisms.

Online, users submit their questions about anything from health to relationships with the desperate irrationality of a casino gambler plugging in her last coin. In turn, the internet mechanically regurgitates similar cases, queries, and cultural memes. Consider, for example, Pinterest’s greeting-card moralism, which domesticates the face-threatening character of advice through the use of “inspirational” quotes. As one reporter notes, “The explosively popular image-sharing site has fallen under the spell of words — that is, quotes from the great minds that offer lessons to live by.” He continues,

Skeptics may scoff at searching for deeper life lessons among the hair-tutorial photos. But on Pinterest, the pretty graphics can function as the proverbial spoonful of sugar. Advice that might seem hectoring coming from a loved one...seems more palatable when rendered as wall decoration.<sup>9</sup>

While conventional counselors “hedge” their moralism with the use of humor, self-deprecation, and indirection,<sup>10</sup> and modernism circumvents its own anti-didacticism through the figure of the reluctant oracle, Pinterest neutralizes the potential violence of advice by turning it into background décor. Even the Pinterest executives were surprised

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<sup>8</sup> *Nightwood*, 107.

<sup>9</sup> Alex Williams, “The Gospel According to Pinterest” *New York Times*. October 3, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> *Advice Online*, 121, 123.

to see a platform “designed to be a visual experience” so embrace the quoted word.<sup>11</sup> These ornamental aphorisms result when modernism’s technique of moral estrangement—in this case, its isolating and repurposing of proverbial wisdom—is domesticated, a tendency Raymond Williams observed.<sup>12</sup> At its best, self-help’s appropriation of modernism could potentially take the form of a subversive redeployment of the literature for local, personal, or radical ends that disrupt the purported self-containment of the aestheticist programmatic. At its worst, it results in the wallpaper wisdom that Pinterest disseminates and is the very definition of cliché, a form whose artistry both modernism and self-help celebrate. Baudelaire remarked that “genius is the creation of a cliché,”<sup>13</sup> and confessed this to be his ambition, and Dale Carnegie agreed when he observed “it was easier to make a million dollars than to put a phrase into the English language.”<sup>14</sup>

The aspiration shared by Baudelaire and Carnegie tangibly demonstrates how, as Williams writes, modernism’s “forms lent themselves to cultural competition.”<sup>15</sup> What Williams fails to address, however, is that this influence between the aesthetic and the commercial is not unidirectional but works both ways: commercial self-help appropriates the strategies of modernism, but modernism also learns from self-help’s tactics of persuasion (recall Baudelaire’s feverish consumption of “get rich quick” handbooks).

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond Williams, “When Was Modernism?” *New Left Review*, no. 175 (May/June 1989), pp.48-52.

<sup>13</sup> “The original reads, “Créer un poncif, c’est le génie. Je dois créer un poncif” (“To create a cliché, this is genius. I must create a cliché.”) Charles Baudelaire, “Fusées” in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 23.

<sup>14</sup> Dorothy Carnegie, “Preface to the 1981 Edition,” *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (New York: Pocket Books, 1981), xi.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, 52.

Both modernism and self-help have mastered the art of producing books that beget the need for further books. Though self-help handbooks purport to provide readers with clear-cut, definitive solutions to life's quandaries, their longevity stems from their exploitation of the inconclusive, a technique in which modernism is likewise invested.<sup>16</sup> Critics of the self-help industry cite the fact that the "the most likely customer for a book on a given topic [is] a customer who [has] bought a similar book within the preceding eighteen months."<sup>17</sup> Likewise, modernism is the first literary movement to practically necessitate accompanying paratexts and guides. Despite this cycle of textual dependency they instantiate, the two industries share the same investment in the gesture of the autonomy claim.<sup>18</sup> Even as they advertise the self-sufficiency of the text, both industries bring into relief the insufficiency of reading alone, which always needs to be integrated through action and application. As modernism and self-help each remind us in different ways, reading can become pathology if it is not integrated into everyday life. This figure of the idle and impotent reader has long haunted higher education in the humanities, but nowhere is the pathology of reading without action more pronounced than online.

Pinterest is not the only source of "virtual verities."<sup>19</sup> Ask.com and *Yahoo! Answers* are other popular online advice resources. On *Yahoo! Answers*, a problem is posted and multiple users submit responses, ranging from the snarky to supportive, usually under an alias. These responses are then rated from most useful to least. Just as

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<sup>16</sup> Recall Joyce's notorious comment that he will "*keep the professors busy for centuries*" in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, Oxford University Press, New York, Revised Edition (1982), 521.

<sup>17</sup> Steve Salerno, *SHAM: How The Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless* (New York: Random House, 2005), 6.

<sup>18</sup> For more on this in relation to self-help, see Scott Cherry, "The ontology of a self-help book: a paradox of its own existence" *Social Semiotics* 18.3 (September 2008), 337-348.

<sup>19</sup> The term is Alex Williams's in "The Gospel of Pinterest."

D.A. Miller has said that self-help makes us “narrative junkies...addicted to the format that teaches us to believe in and practice our own liberating self-fashioning,”<sup>20</sup> the *Yahoo! Answers* phenomenon offers users a double rush of authority, first through the act of advising and then through the opportunity to evaluate the answers of others.<sup>21</sup> Much as modernism is described as a democratizing aesthetic, which eschews omniscient authority to let the everyday speak, *Yahoo! Answers* shifts the counsel prerogative from the theorists to the practitioners, and thereby appears to democratize the advising process. Of course, in the cases of both modernism and *Yahoo!*, this consolatory agency of the reader is painstakingly orchestrated and directed by an authorial entity or conglomerate. Nevertheless, the online shift in advice agency from author to reader roughly parallels what Roland Barthes, using *Bouvard and Pécuchet* as his example, describes as the “tissue of quotations” that the text becomes following the “death of the author.”<sup>22</sup>

Of course, both Pinterest and *Yahoo! Answers* are mediated by the online ur-advisor: Google. These platforms are only two possible hits amongst Google’s surfeit of potential advice resources. A troubled individual looking for advice on the Google search engine would be immediately reassured by the autofill function that she is not the first to face this particular dilemma. If her question does not immediately appear, autofill will guide her toward similar yet more popular articulations of her same problem, one of which she then clicks on to be brought to an archive of similar cases and queries. In this

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Anita Sokolsky, “The Case of the Juridical Junkie: Perry Mason and the Dilemma of Confession,” *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 2.1 (3.22.2013), 3.

<sup>21</sup> For an ethnographic analysis see Maria Elena Placencia, “Online Peer-to-Peer Advice in Spanish *Yahoo!Respuestas*” *Advice in Discourse*. Edited by Holger Limberg & Miriam A. Locher (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2012), 289-306.

<sup>22</sup> “The Death of the Author” in *Image—Music—Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146.

way, autofill not only offers the searcher the appearance of an instantaneous community of sufferers, but it also frames her articulation of her problem as it is being posed. If she forgoes the autofill suggestion and yet her query is interpreted by the engine to be eccentric or erroneous, Google will use the “did you mean” function to gently nudge her toward more common searches, or it will brashly proceed with its version of the “correct” search term and declare “showing results for X instead.” On Google, the intimacy of the advisor/advisee relation is objectified to become only one “hit” among many possibilities. Our searcher will either find solace or exacerbated anxiety in discovering the commonness and universality of her plaint.

Moreover, Google makes the example/precept ratio that has historically dominated debates over textual morality (the issue of how much narrative illustration is necessary to communicate a moral) go haywire. Moralists in Samuel Richardson’s puritanical eighteenth-century Britain objected to his detailed narrative examples of sexual manipulation, for instance, which overshadowed the ideals of modesty and purity that they were meant to convey. A similar proliferation of what Beckett called “demented particulars”<sup>23</sup> occurs on Google, which offers the user a plethora of individualized cases and anecdotes but no method for appraising these examples and applying them to one’s own situation. The problem of how to move between the general and the particular—which, according to the philosopher Hubert Dreyfus constitutes the essence of human, commonsense understanding, has always been the thorn in the side of the computer industry. In *What Computers Still Can’t Do*, Dreyfus observes that “nothing resembling

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<sup>23</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (New York: Grove Press, 1957), 13.

human generalizations can be confidently expected” of machines.<sup>24</sup> Dreyfus continues, “the network [can exhibit] the intelligence built into it by the designer but will not have the common sense that would enable it to adapt to other contexts as a truly human intelligence would.”<sup>25</sup> Though dated (he first articulates this argument in the 70s), Dreyfus’s critique of the limitations of mechanical thought is still relevant today. (In fact, engineers involved in Carnegie Mellon’s NEIL project are currently attempting to redress this failing by building a machine with what they call “common sense”).<sup>26</sup> Recently, the Jeopardy supercomputer Watson embarrassed its designers at IBM when it answered “Toronto” to a question about U.S. cities. Despite the surplus of examples poured into its database, Watson could only mimic and approximate the process of commonsense reasoning through its statistical method; it failed to make the simple move of applying this information to the problem at hand.<sup>27</sup> With technology’s current failure to offer individually tailored guidance unmediated by human input and selection, advice represents a limit of the mechanical. The moral neutrality that began in modernism as a critique of the author’s ethical omnipotence is now a defining flaw of artificial reasoning.

The distinction online advice stages between technical and commonsense knowledge can be explicated through Hans Georg Gadamer’s discussion of *techné* and

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<sup>24</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus, *What Computers Still Can’t Do: A Critique of Artificial Reasoning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), xxxvii.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxviii.

<sup>26</sup> Carnegie Mellon’s NEIL (Never Ending Image Learner) is an attempt to teach computers common sense through the use of images. The computer scans images and is learning to identify how they relate to each other, with the goal being for the computer to be able to learn cognitive associations it was never directly taught. See <http://www.neil-kb.com/> for the project’s website.

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Baker, “How Could IBM’s Watson Think that Toronto is a U.S. City?” *Huffington Post* (February 16, 2011).

*phronesis*.<sup>28</sup> Though Aristotle originally used *phronesis* to describe practical, situated morality in contrast to the abstract morality of Socrates, Gadamer finds *techné/phronesis* a generative opposition for thinking about the different kinds of knowledge espoused by the sciences and the humanities. The technical knowledge (*techné*) of the sciences can be taught, Gadamer says, much as IBM attempted to teach Watson such a superabundance of factual knowledge that it could mimic human understanding. However, practical moral knowledge or *phronesis* is always context dependent and so cannot be learned in advance; in short, “*phronesis* is the capacity to find the right thing to do in a situation.”<sup>29</sup> It is the advisor’s “awareness appropriate to a particular situation,”<sup>30</sup> or what Benjamin called the storyteller’s “ability to exchange experiences,”<sup>31</sup> that constitutes *phronesis* and explains why Google can only parrot anecdotes and examples rather than offering individualized directives. For Google, the right solution to a query is not the most appropriate but the most frequently clicked, which then becomes the earliest suggested. This Family Feud ethos where the right answer is not what is correct but most popular was once described by Alexis de Tocqueville as the “tyranny of the majority.”<sup>32</sup> Yet Google’s ideology of a user-based search hierarchy is belied by the sponsored advertising content that masquerades as a legitimate first “hit.” In the place of democracy or

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<sup>28</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method: Second Revised Edition* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1994), 312-318.

<sup>29</sup> Donna M. Orange, *Thinking for Physicians* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 117.

<sup>30</sup> Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 138.

<sup>31</sup> 83.

<sup>32</sup> *Democracy in America* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000).

phronesis Google produces a Foucauldian version of discourse as the predetermination of what one can say and how one can say it.<sup>33</sup>

Outside of morality, Gadamer says, the true import of phronesis is linguistic:

The real miracle of language is to be found where someone—perhaps contrary to all prescription—succeeds in finding exactly the right word or discovers the perfect expression in the words of someone else. It is this which proves to be the ‘right thing.’<sup>34</sup>

This project of “finding exactly the right word”—Flaubert’s “mot juste”—over and against the dogmatism of prescription is an apt description of the morality of modernism. Gadamer’s “miracle” of phronesis is akin to what Benjamin described as the “aura” possessed by the storyteller who has practical counsel to give, which he elsewhere likens to the magician’s practice in contradistinction to that of the surgeon.<sup>35</sup> It is also, perhaps, close to what Erasmus had in mind when he described the “almost holy” “power of truth” possessed by the proverb.<sup>36</sup> “Otherwise how could it happen,” he enquired, “that we should frequently find the same thought spread abroad among a hundred peoples, transposed into a hundred languages, a thought which has not perished or grown old even with the passing of many centuries, which pyramids themselves could not have withstood?”<sup>37</sup> The truth of commonsense wisdom is, like the resonance of the cliché, not the quantifiable sum of the particulars it encompasses in its universalizing sweep; it is the

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<sup>33</sup> The Google archive enacts what Michel Foucault calls the first “law of what can be said” *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. (London: Routledge, 1972), 128.

<sup>34</sup> *Enigma*, 138.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, 233.

<sup>36</sup> *Adages*, 11, 16.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.



precarious truth of the generalized, which improbably endures and applies in the face of the greatest disparities of circumstance. This irrational universalizing of advice is what makes it so troubling for Adorno, who associates it not with miracles or magicians but with the charismatic sway of fascism.<sup>38</sup> But this spell of phronesis—this marvel of linguistic resonance—cannot be dismissed simply out of fear for its worst and most violent possible iteration. As this dissertation has shown, the proverbial possesses an irresistible allure even for a group of authors who staked their reputations on claims of impersonal aestheticism. Computers mimic the enchantment of advice with slot-machine wisdom based on probability and statistics. Nevertheless, language’s capacity to beguile us with its relevance is the particular domain of the literary, as the practical, popular applications of modernism attest.

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<sup>38</sup> Theodor Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth*. (London: Routledge, 1994).

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