

A SPIRIT OF THE EARTH:
VITALISM IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE

by

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Abstract

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A Spirit of the Earth: Vitalism in Nineteenth-Century Literature studies a movement that began in reaction to Mechanism, the view that all natural phenomena, including life, could be explained by observable physical causes. Due to its emphasis on material causation, Mechanism is interchangeable with empiricism, which holds that knowledge is based on experience and regular observation, and, by extension, with the Positivist application of the scientific method outside the natural world. Unlike the Mechanists, Vitalist scientists insisted that there was more to life than physico-chemical processes; life demanded a special cause: what Henri Bergson called the *élan vital* and Bernard Shaw—“the Life Force.”

What started in science acquired much broader philosophical ramifications. Vitalism became the sole source of hope for writers, philosophers, and artists committed to deeper questions of being who found it morally objectionable to turn to empiricism and mechanistic science for answers. Mechanism was objectionable on several counts. It emphasized the external over the internal, and framed our connection to the world as that of a subject observing a *dead* nature. Second, it denied human and artistic freedom, reducing agency to reflex action. Third, it denied existence any higher purpose: Charles

Darwin, in Samuel Butler's famous accusation, banished Mind from the universe and replaced it with random selection, thereby raising ethical and existential questions.

The nineteenth-century authors examined in this dissertation (George Meredith, Leo Tolstoy, Butler, and Shaw) did not reject science altogether and were drawn to contemporary evolutionary theories; seeing nature as a living being, they reinvented science and gave evolution a purpose, claiming that we could reconnect with nature through instinct, not reason, and becoming part of this organism, come to know it as well as ourselves. As a philosophy, Vitalism allowed them to expose everything unnatural: from abstract theories to outdated social institutions; as an aesthetic, it gave them an imagistic language to embody what Walter Pater called the "spirit of the Earth" in women, children, and child-like individuals. Each chapter reflects a separate area of Vitalist critique: the philosophy of science; poetry; the spiritual quest; Victorian education; and social evolution.

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FOREWORD

The Spiritual Tomb

All creation...is the result of a fortuitous concurrence of atoms,—but where the first atom is, or where any of the atoms came from, is beyond human ingenuity to discover.

We know nothing of the reasons why we live.

Marie Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*

In the second half of the nineteenth century, intellectually curious, ethically conscious, and socially aware individuals found themselves in a spiritual tomb. The poet, the artist, and even the speculative scientist fared no better. The Earth was dead. Nature was ruthless. The blind instinct for self-preservation was shown to be the driving force behind biological and social evolution. The human animal was little more than a product of heredity molded by experience. Political opinion and ethical choices were subject to faceless determinism. Rational egoism prevailed over empathy and altruism. The spirit was reduced to biochemical processes. The body, as all matter, was doomed to fall apart into meaningless atoms. The prospect of living a moral life was, in a word, grim.

By looking at even a handful of texts from this period, we can sense the broad critical implications of philosophical materialism, the view that all there exists is matter. In his poem *In Memoriam* (1849), Alfred, Lord Tennyson gives voice to a deep-seated despair, informed by an awareness of nature's complete indifference to human life. The poet wishes for an afterlife to justify his current suffering, hoping "that somehow good/Will be the final goal of ill,/To pangs of nature, sins of will"; for no single life to "be destroy'd,/Or cast as rubbish to the void"; and for no effort to go in vain, or be found to have "shrivell'd in a fruitless fire,/Or but subserve[d] another's gain." He is forced to

admit that, like an infant confronting an unknowable, alienating world, all he can do is cry, the only “language” available to him (Tennyson 79). For Nature—famously described in Tennyson’s dirge as “red in tooth and claw/With ravine”—is nothing like the nurturing maternal figure we find in myth, the Greek Gaia from whom Antaeus gathers his strength. The extinction of a “single life” is of no concern when “the type” can carry on without it. God remains, perhaps, the only source of solace, and the poet “stretch[es] lame hands of faith” knowing full well that there is no certainty; he can only “faintly trust the larger hope.” Conceived in materialist terms, Nature is utterly “careless.” There is no solace beyond the grave either, since the spirit expires along with the body that houses it: “She [Nature] cries, ‘A thousand types are gone:/I care for nothing, all shall go./‘Thou makest thine appeal to me:/I bring to life, I bring to death:/The spirit does but mean the breath:/I know no more’” (Tennyson 79-80).

Tennyson’s view of an impersonal Nature prefigures by a decade that described by Charles Darwin in *The Origin of Species*, in which the latter frames his discussion in deadly materialist terms, even as he expresses a healthy optimism about the scientific study of nature. When, for example, Darwin celebrates the complexity of higher animals in the concluding paragraphs of his book, he also reminds us that they evolved “from the war of nature, from famine and death” (459). When projecting the growth of empirical knowledge, Darwin compares the classification of organic beings to that of inorganic ones, a position taken by the Mechanists in the long-standing debate about life:

...when we contemplate every complex structure [of an organic being] and instinct as the summing up of many contrivances, each useful to the possessor, nearly in the same way as when we look at any great

mechanical invention as the summing up of the labour, the experience, the reason, and even the blunders of numerous workmen; when we thus view each organic being, how far more interesting, I speak from experience, will the study of natural history become! (Darwin 457)

Although intended to stimulate interest in science, the language of mechanism (“contrivance,” “invention,” “workmen”) communicates another, more sobering message about the mechanization and ultimate reification of that which, many still believed, was more than the sum of its mechanical parts.

Darwin also opposed any notion of “design.” In spite of what “natural selection” might imply, and however highly structured nature might have appeared to the scientist, it was not endowed with the agency to “select” any of its fittest organic specimens; the term was clearly misleading (Culler 245). For this reason, Samuel Butler “declared with penetrating accuracy that Darwin had ‘banished mind from the universe’,” as Bernard Shaw, Vitalist extraordinaire, reminds us. Natural selection, Shaw charges, is a creed of those “for whom Nature is nothing but a casual aggregation of inert and dead matter,” which operates “by blindly starving and murdering everything that is not lucky enough to survive in the universal struggle for hogwash” (*Methuselah* 36, 32).

The detached physiological explanation of the sexes in Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s *What Is To Be Done?* (*Chto delat’?*, 1864) grew out of the same tradition that produced scholars like Darwin. It is to medicine, physiology, and statistics that Chernyshevsky invites us to turn when exploring the difference between men and women, reducing a complex problem, as well as a volatile social issue, to statistical probability: “Yes, woman’s organism is more effective in its resistance to the [material] destructive

forces,—climate, inclement weather, insufficient food”; but the reason for this cannot be further removed from the exercise of her spirit or will. “Medicine and physiology have paid but little attention to this question as yet, but statistics has already given an eloquent reply: the average life of women is longer than that of men. We may infer from this that the feminine organism is the more vigorous” (Chernyshevsky 291).¹

Another Russian novel from the 1860s, Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* (*Otzy i deti*, 1862), opens on May 20, 1859, the year that *The Origin of Species* was published; it features a nihilist whose lack of emotional capacity and general spiritual void struck many of Turgenev’s critics as too unrealistic.² Yevgeny Bazarov lacks even “a drop of artistic sense,” which one of his interlocutors identifies with, at the very least, the ability “to understand people and study them”; rather, he substitutes physiology for psychology, and values what Tennyson laments as “the type” over “the single life.” A committed empiricist, Bazarov relies on his “experience of life,” not art or intuition, when studying people who, he explains, are “not worth studying...separately,” because they are “alike in their bodies as in their souls,” possess the same organs, and share the same “so-called moral qualities.” “People are like trees in a forest,” he reasons: “No botanist is going to be concerned with each individual birch tree”—so long as the “type,” to use Tennyson’s term, be preserved (Turgenev 84).³ The novel closes with an evocation of a “ravnodushnoi”—that is to say, “indifferent” or “insensible”—nature surrounding Bazarov’s grave, a nature merciless toward Bazarov and his innocent elderly parents, who bury their son in a tragic reversal of the familial cycle (Turgenev 201).⁴

Even the unconventional scientist aspiring toward the absolute would find himself misunderstood and ridiculed in this milieu. The Fleming Balthazar Claës, the hero of

Honoré de Balzac's *The Quest of the Absolute* (*La recherche de l'absolu*, 1834), incarnates, in the words of the author, "les efforts de la chimie moderne" (Balzac, Introduction 18).⁵ Devoted to science for its own sake and not for commercial gain, and pursuing the timeless *Absolu* ("Une substance commune à toutes les créations, modifiée par une force unique," that is, "la MATIÈRE UNE"),⁶ he even ends up neglecting all the historical events of the turbulent period between 1812 and 1831 (Balzac 124). But Balthazar's genius goes unnoticed in a utilitarian society, which has little regard for anything beyond the practical, anything, that is, which transcends the most immediate needs: "Tout y est frappé au coin de la jouissance temporelle. L'homme y voit exclusivement ce qui est, sa pensée se courbe si scrupuleusement à servir les besoins de la vie qu'en aucune œuvre elle ne s'est élancée au-delà du monde réel" (Balzac 60, 262; n10).⁷ Genius is "a form of excess," and as such, it is as good as vice; since it is concerned with remote ideals, not concrete goals, it therefore has no place in this society, the *État social*, which "préfère s'acquitter en ne lui pardonnant pas sa misère ou ses malheurs": "Le Génie," the narrator laments, "n'est-il pas un constant excès qui dévore le temps, l'argent, le corps, et qui mène à l'hôpital plus rapidement encore que les passions mauvaises? Les hommes paraissent même avoir plus de respect pour les vices que pour le Génie, car ils refusent de lui faire crédit" (Balzac 74).⁸ Only at the end, after Balthazar is publically stoned, do we sense any semblance of respect for his work.⁹

Education was not immune to this wave of impersonal approaches to human emotion and change. In Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854), the materialist founder of Coketown's education system, Thomas Gradgrind, is described as a "man of realities," "of facts and calculations," and one "who proceeds upon the principle that two and two

are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over.”

Gradgrind sees his subjects as “the little pitchers...who were to be filled so full of facts”:

the latter is one of the very first words of the novel and sets its tone (Dickens 13).¹⁰ In

and of itself, factual knowledge is not unnecessary, but what makes this pedagogical approach so alarming is that facts come to replace critical thinking, kill the imagination, and while they describe life as it is, tell little about what it could or should be:

“[Gradgrind] seemed a kind of cannon loaded to the muzzle with facts,” the narrator says.

“He seemed a galvanizing apparatus, too, charged with a grim mechanical substitute for the tender young imaginations that were to be stormed away” (Dickens 14). The ironic titles of the books comprising Dickens’ novel—Sewing, Reaping, Garnering—underline the incongruity of this mechanistic pedagogy within a vital natural setting; all referring to the agricultural potential of the earth, these terms imply change and evolution, not the staleness and rigidity of something that is *factus*, over and done with. After all, how can a person thus molded, filled to the brim with inert knowledge but not taught to think critically, interact with the world in any active, meaningful way?

To take a later example from Victorian England, the dedicatory note to Marie Corelli’s 1896 novel *The Mighty Atom* sets the author’s characteristically didactic and unsubtle tone: a manifesto against positivism, materialism, and atheism. Corelli accuses “those self-styled ‘progressivists’” of being “guilty of a crime worse than murder,” because they promote “the infamous cause of education without religion,” thus denying children “the knowledge and love of God, as the true foundation of noble living” (5). She blames France and her “lessons...in open atheism, ‘Simianism,’ and general ‘free’ morality” for making an irreligious education seem desirable (Corelli 67). But also

implicated is “our arrogant egoist-generation” and the impact of “Man [who] mars” the world so much that death becomes oddly merciful, a means of leaving it behind (Corelli 117). Suicide is, in fact, the fate of Corelli’s protagonist, Lionel Valliscourt. This may seem to us sensationalist and unrealistic, as it did to some of Corelli’s contemporaries; nevertheless, as the title of her recent biography indicates, Corelli (1855-1924) was “the Queen of Victorian Bestsellers” (Teresa Ransom, 1999) and enjoyed immense popularity among readers. Her most famous novel, *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895), can be considered the first modern bestseller (LaMonaca 153). *The Mighty Atom* was also an immediate hit, or a “fastseller,” to use Robert Escarpit’s term (Bassett and Walter 225).¹¹ Driven not by plot but by social critique, it is yet another example of how detrimental an influence philosophical materialism and Positivism had on late Victorian culture.

Corelli’s narrator tells us early on that, “owing to his father’s ‘system’ of education and ideas concerning religion or rather non-religion,” like too many victims of post-Enlightenment humanism, Lionel had no faith and was only too quick to ridicule those who appealed to anything beyond the senses (Corelli 55).¹² He learned that the “First Cause of the universe was merely an Atom, productive of other atoms which moved in circles of gratuitous regularity, shaping worlds indifferently, and without any Mind-force whatever behind the visible Matter” (Corelli 73-4). The irony of the novel’s title is, thus, revealed: to Lionel, “The Mighty Atom” is God. Due to being indoctrinated by his father, he cannot accept anything “supernatural” (to which he was introduced by his tutor William Montrose, subsequently removed for this very reason).

Corelli portrays the grave implications of materialism on moral life: if nothing exists except matter, and we were created as the result of some senseless coincidence,

there is little reason for us to live, let alone live morally. “Little Father Time,” the boy who is born already old in Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895), realizes this, and so does Corelli’s Lionel: “All creation, as you have already been told, is the result of a fortuitous concurrence of atoms,—but where the first atom is, or where any of the atoms came from, is beyond human ingenuity to discover. We know nothing of the reasons why we live,” says Lionel’s Professor in response to the boy’s inquiries, and based on that, the latter concludes that “life is a very cruel thing, and not worth having” (Corelli 163). “If there’s no reason for anything, and no future object for anybody, I don’t see why we should take the trouble to live,” Lionel adds (Corelli 164). By “the reasons why we live” Lionel’s Professor means the scientific explanations of the origins of the world; yet, the moral interpretation is, certainly, implied: we do not know our purpose either, and that is what shatters the young boy’s *Weltanschauung* and prompts him to look for answers in religion, albeit unsuccessfully, finding a God there who is just as cruel and inexplicable as the “mechanical twisty thing,” the Mighty Atom (Corelli 202).

Clearly, science and the philosophy of empiricism (the claim that we have no *a priori* knowledge and obtain information exclusively through the senses) forced nineteenth-century thinkers onto the brink of a spiritual abyss. The way out of materialism and the mechanistic logic it entailed lay in a philosophy flexible enough to combat deterministic thinking, which precluded true deliberation and thus undermined ethical behavior and political action; but this philosophy also had to preserve purpose, or *telos*, without which the world could neither be known nor transformed. For this to happen, life had to be given back to the lifeless universe. Around 1800 it had, in fact, become the focus of a heated philosophical debate in both the sciences and the arts. The

boundaries between the living and the non-living, the organic and the inorganic, and among living beings themselves, were interrogated, challenged, and subsequently redefined. Exceeding its original parameters, this debate spilled into a larger discussion of knowledge, agency, identity, and purpose, and so it reflects a broader paradigmatic shift without which we cannot fully understand the century's literary output.

¹ “Да, организм женщины крепче противится материальным разрушительным силам,— климату, погоде, неудовлетворительной пище. Медицина и физиология еще мало занимались подробным разбором этого; но статистика уже дала бесспорный общий ответ: средняя продолжительность жизни женщин больше, чем мужчин. Из этого видно, что женский организм крепче.”

² In “Apropos of *Fathers and Sons*,” Turgenev defends his use of the term “nihilism” in his novel against those who, he claims, used it as an “excuse, a pretext to put a stop on the movement which had taken possession of Russian society.” “But I never used that word as a pejorative term or with any offensive aim,” Turgenev insists, “but as an exact and appropriate expression of a fact, an historic fact, that had made its appearance among us” (Norton Critical ed., 174).

³ “И так-таки у вас ни капельки художественного смысла нет?...Да хоть на то, чтоб уметь узнавать и изучать людей...Во-первых, на это существует жизненный опыт; а, во-вторых, доложу вам, изучать отдельные личности не стоит труда. Все люди друг на друга похожи как телом, так и душой; у каждого из нас мозг, селезенка, сердце, легкие одинаково устроены; и так называемые нравственные качества одни и те же у всех...Люди, что деревья влесу; ни один ботаник не станет заниматься каждою отдельною березой.”

⁴ “...о том великом спокойствии ‘равнодушной’ природы.” Freeborn translates this as “impassive,” but the term is archaic and does not carry the same weight as, e.g., “insensible” or “apathetic.”

⁵ Balzac asserted this in response to Sainte-Beuve’s description of his hero as “un vulgaire alchimiste” (Nadine Satiat’s Introduction to *La recherche*, 18).

⁶ “One Element common to all substances, modified by a unique Force” / “the Primitive Element” (trans. Ellen Marriage, 77).

⁷ “All their researches are of a practical kind, and must conduce to physical well-being. They look at facts and see nothing beyond them; thought must bear the yoke and be subservient to the needs of life; it must occupy itself with realities, and never soar above or beyond them” (trans. Ellen Marriage, 6).

⁸ “Vice and genius bring about results so similar that ordinary people are often misled by them. What is genius but a form of excess which consumes time and money and health and strength? It would seem that genius concerns itself with aims so far remote, that society is shy of casting accounts with it in its lifetime; such poverty and wretchedness are clearly unpardonable. Society prefers to have nothing to do with genius” (trans. Ellen Marriage, 21).

⁹ Due to the destructiveness of his obsession, which results in pecuniary damages and familiar discord, Balthazar is not an unambiguously sympathetic character; still, it is hard to imagine that Balzac did not empathize with a man whose name conceals his own (*Balthazar Claës*). Balthazar is called “the Titan” at least once (p. 224 in Marriage’s trans.), another indication of his grand but also defeated and outdated stature.

¹⁰ “Now, all I wants is, Facts.”

¹¹ It sold very well for a short time—appearing on thirty-three bestseller lists submitted by bookshops around the British Isles over the period of seven months (Bassett and Walter 206, 228).

¹² After the Enlightenment, the trust of many nineteenth-century European intellectuals in traditional religion had been undermined; Christianity no longer provided acceptable answers. The special status of religion was questioned by David Hume, who claimed, in his *Natural History of Religion* (1757), that it had been born in humankind’s fear of their surroundings. “No wonder, then,” Hume concludes in Ch. 3 of the *History*, “that mankind, being placed in such an absolute ignorance of causes, and being at the same time so anxious concerning their future fortune, should immediately acknowledge a dependence on invisible powers, possessed of sentiment and intelligence” (rpt. in Feldman and Richardson, 161-2).

INTRODUCTION

L'homme contre Machine: A Way Out of the Spiritual Tomb

The Vitalists said that a dead body and a live one are physically and chemically identical, and that the difference can be accounted for only by the existence of a Vital Force.

G. Bernard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah*

And so the grandeur of the Forest-tree
Comes not by casting in a formal mould,
But from its own divine vitality.

William Wordsworth, "A Poet! He Hath Put his Heart to School"

If any one will tell me what life is I will tell him whether the inorganic is alive or not.

Samuel Butler, "Mind and Matter"

Vitalism, "an eighteenth-century neologism created to distinguish its goals from that of mechanism" (Reill 11), was a small, little known movement that originated in the life sciences; its proponents sought, primarily, to oppose the Mechanist claim that life was subject to the same laws and could be explained by the same observable physical causes as non-living things. Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, biological Vitalism acquired far broader philosophical, political, and social ramifications. It became, in fact, a powerful vehicle—or, to use Felicia Bonaparte's term, "conceptual language"—for those thinkers who believed that life transcended physical and material limitations; who were disillusioned with metaphysics and religion, because they denied life and were too dogmatic; and who found science dominated by the philosophy of

empiricism too restrictive, because it reduced human agency to a chain of mechanistic causation. Building on Dr. Bonaparte's research on the history of ideas in the nineteenth century, I intend, in this thesis, to reconstruct the "language" of Vitalism without which we cannot fully understand major works from this period.

In her forthcoming book, *The Aesthetics of Poesis: The Making of Victorian Fiction* (2011),¹ Bonaparte argues that contrary to the view that the nineteenth-century English novel was a paragon of realist representation (an assumption held by many scholars of Victorian literature and culture, including M. H. Abrams and Ian Watt, who located the roots of the genre in the rationalist, scientific, and empirical tradition of eighteenth-century philosophy in his still influential *Rise of the Novel*), such categorization is too restrictive and does not account for individual works or even whole genres, which were immensely popular and are thus vital to the modern readers' understanding of the Victorian mind. These works tend to be ignored by critics, because they did not come out of empiricism, that is, theoretical discussions which looked to science as a model, focusing on sensory observation, truth to fact, and material circumstances.² More than the French, the English in the second half of the nineteenth century were concerned with the art of fiction, and as we see from their own extensive philosophical and critical discussions, they conceived of narrative as a great poem and of the novel—as an occasion to explore the subject of art and the very making of fiction.

"What the Victorians tell us themselves," Bonaparte maintains, is that more so than in realist principles, the theoretical underpinnings of their novels are to be found in the symbolism of the early German Romantics, who looked to art to "address the conceptual chaos to which, in their estimate of the age, the modern world had arrived":

the crisis of faith and, following David Hume's skeptical critique of knowledge, the crisis of empiricism. The act of creation, or "*poesis*," was for Percy Bysshe Shelley and the Romantics "the only hope of the modern world," and it was the responsibility of the artist to fashion this new form. Friedrich Schlegel—whose artistic and philosophical writings, along with those of other early German Romantics, were well known in England³—claimed that it was the role of the novelist to create order.⁴

Schlegel believed, specifically, that the artist could not only intuit the essential significance of any historical event, but could also symbolically represent noumenal and transcendent truth, thus creating for the modern world a new "*mythos*." Founded on the imagination, rather than the senses alone, symbolic art, as Schlegel called it, was meant to embody the ideal in the real and reveal to us the higher truths of human existence through symbol.⁵ The appropriate form of fiction for this was described by the Victorian Edward Bulwer-Lytton as "the novel of the 'double plot'," a narrative that combines "realistic historical portrayal of characters, action, and human existence as it has been observed by the writer," with another moral or "symbolical signification" embedded in the first.

We cannot understand the Victorians and their fiction without understanding "the symbolic thought of the age," which, Bonaparte argues, makes up its "conceptual language." However difficult the task may seem, it is crucial: "The repossession of this language is the recovery of an age." For it is through this "language of symbol," the "universal language" of thought functioning alongside and similarly to natural languages, that the nineteenth-century "deliberated and expressed itself in art." It has an extensive vocabulary of ideas figuring imagistically, a syntax connecting symbols into sentences, and a grammar that logically binds them together—ultimately allowing these parts to

join, whether in agreement or tension, “in a single argument that constitutes the grounding structure of a perspective on the world.” Once we begin to listen to this language, we can follow, through the course of a novel, the various permutations of a symbol as it introduces and comments on themes and characters, as well as their function in the text as a whole (Author’s Abstract, *The Aesthetics of Poesis*).

* * *

It is my contention that by the second half of the nineteenth century, philosophical Vitalism became the only epistemologically and ethically viable “conceptual language” for those authors who had become disillusioned with religion and the philosophy of empiricism, and who saw life as an uncontainable flow and the living world—as having not only purpose and order, but also freedom from the strictures of mechanistic causality. According to philosophical determinism, human agency was an illusion, and individual behavior, as well as character—a function of heredity and experience. But many thinkers still believed in the will; opposing randomness both in the universe and in human action, they were searching for a balanced paradigm, where humans would not be at the mercy of “senseless accident” (Shaw’s charge against the Neo-Darwinists), but capable of freely and meaningfully engaging in ethical deliberation and action.

This constitutes, in fact, what I call “the Vitalist logic of reconciliation” designed to balance philosophical extremes: on the one hand, there was religion, which offered each individual adherent a cosmic purpose for this life and the next but, like secular idealism, was fundamentally dogmatic; on the other, there was natural selection, attuned to change and growth, but postulating that humans were perpetually engaging in (what Herbert Spencer famously labeled) the “survival of the fittest,” with little to look forward

to other than becoming worm food in a materialist universe which promoted atheism and nihilism, the view that life, law, and morality have no intrinsic value. Vitalism's logic—a middle ground between philosophical materialism and idealism—reveals the movement's grounding in the early German Romantics, who promoted a healthy competition between science and religion, as well as between reason and the imagination; it also distinguishes the Vitalist movement from other, more unilateral philosophical approaches.

It should be evident from the summary of the argument out of which this thesis evolved, and which has established in print that the Victorians addressed the crises of faith and the philosophy of empiricism through art,—that the recurring symbolism of the *Living Earth* in the second half of the nineteenth century was a symptom of the need to repossess, reconceive, and enliven life and nature—in a word, to “revitalize” them. Higher truths and moral freedom were not to be sought solely within institutionalized religion; purpose could be found even in a secular world, and it did not conflict with science so long as the latter were conceived in less restrictive terms than those of the Experimental method, leaving space for non-sensory modes of knowledge acquisition. Committed to growth and change, the Vitalists adapted evolutionary thinking, since many of them were not, in principle, against science, but they did envision a new kind of “revitalized” science that would account for the purposeful evolution of the spirit.

Leo Tolstoy, George Meredith, Samuel Butler, and Bernard Shaw—the major European authors whose works I examine in the ensuing chapters—appealed to and themselves attempted to “revitalize” science, poetry, ethics, education, and social evolution. However different their artistic and existential goals, they all expressed an urgent need for a new foundation for knowledge and morality, especially since, after

Hume's skeptical attack, even causality had been shown to be an impression in the mind, and reason, coupled with the instinct for self-preservation, could justify egoism, a morally untenable stance. In their pursuit of noumenal and transcendent truths as well as moral guidance, some of the authors under consideration relied on "natural instincts," intuition, or the Butlerian "common sense"; others turned to the Romantic Imagination to reinvent and discuss "nature" and "human nature" in terms other than those of Mechanism (predicated on causality), Utilitarianism (focusing on the "practical" and, after Spencer, the commodity-driven, at the expense of the spiritual and the artistic), or Darwinism (condoning merciless competition to out-produce others).

The Living Earth is the image to which the aforementioned authors appeal time and again, and so a prominent feature not just of their individual but also of the age's "symbolic thought": it is the mythic origin of creation, the source of artistic inspiration, and the potential grounding for a new, "revitalized" epistemology and ethics. In their novels, poems, and philosophical writings, we find the Earth's creative power embodied imagistically in the Greek Corn-Mother Demeter and the fertility goddesses Gaia, or symbolically in women, children, childlike individuals, and peasants. These characters are able to preserve a strong connection to the soil, from which they have autochthonously sprung and to which they ultimately return, the latter being—as Butler reminds us by quoting I Kings 2:2 in the title of his definitive novel—*the way of all flesh*, "the way of all the earth." Wordsworth conceives the generative energy of the Earth as the "divine vitality" of the Forest-tree, Shaw and Walter Pater—as "a Vital Force" and "a spirit of the Earth," respectively, and Henri Bergson, famously, as the "*élan vital*." Richard Wagner gives us Erda, "The First Mother of life," in *The Ring*; in Shaw's

interpretation, it is she whose “eternal work” it is to “thrus[t] the life energy of the world to higher and higher organization” (*Perfect* 209, 235). Konstantin Levin, the hero of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, is happiest when “cutting more and more deeply into the earth, like a scythe” (*Sobraniye IX* 390; my trans.). On the other side of the Atlantic, Walt Whitman deciphers in grass “a uniform hieroglyphic [which] means, Sprouting,” and sees each of its leaves as “a child” of nature, “the produced babe of the vegetation” (29).

The century’s celebration of the generative power of the female Earth is rooted, in part, in the Goethian Eternal Feminine and the Romantic identification between women and *poesis*. “Women do not have as great a need for poetry,” Schlegel notes in one of his literary aphorisms, “because their own essence is poetry” (*Aphorisms* 127). In order to avoid the unfortunate misreading of powerfully suggestive characterization as essentialist or sexist, this point must be understood according to the Vitalist idiom. The surprisingly shrewd peasant Maid in Wordsworth’s poem “We Are Seven,” the astute Clara Middleton in Meredith’s *The Egoist*, Ernest Pontifex’s free-thinking aunt and godmother Alethea in *The Way of All Flesh*, whose name means, rather unsubtly, “the truth”; Jessamine, who embodies the simple pleasures of the Earth in Corelli’s *The Mighty Atom*; or almost any one of Shaw’s strong heroines, who carry the vital impulse—are all admirable examples of undiluted creative femininity.

Taking nonrealist nineteenth-century works of fiction to be shards of the new “*mythos*” Schlegel had in mind, meant to be pieced together to bring order to a modern universe torn by intellectual, spiritual, and technological chaos, I interpret that which is literal, or material, as a key to the narrative’s embedded symbolic meaning—so as to intuit the “‘idealistic in the real’,” in George Eliot’s wording. Symbolic insights are

sometimes conveyed through proper nouns, such as the names of characters (Sir Willoughby Patterne in *The Egoist*, who tries to fit his intended Clara into his “pattern”); place names (e.g., Crampsford, Battersby, and Roughborough, which oppose organic growth in *The Way of All Flesh*); rhetorical figures of organic nature (in his novel *Clara*, Schelling uses the metaphor of a tree to encourage abstract philosophy to find better grounding); or symbolic actions (Tolstoy’s Levin works in the field among peasants; Alethea advises that Ernest “kis[s] the earth” to regain strength and become healthier).

This is by no means an anachronistic exercise in *allegoresis*; it is, rather, one way in which nineteenth-century authors adapted the modus operandi of what Peter Hanns Reill calls “Enlightenment vitalism” in his recent book on the subject (*Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment*, 2005): “[t]hat which was immediately observable was...superficial,” and so “[u]nderstanding entailed a progressive descent into the depths of observed reality, using signs as markers to chart the way” (8). A similar idea is to be found in Brian John’s older, but still relevant book on literary vitalism (*Supreme Fictions*, 1974): “The imaginative man,” John writes, was a “priest capable of revealing the essence of things through his reading of symbols and his awareness of the transcendental nature of reality” (11). For this reason, I have selected authors who resort to images and symbols more often than to realist description, since many of them thought language itself was too rigid and limiting for the boundless human spirit: Butler qualifies Ernest’s “true inner self” as being “dumb”; Tolstoy’s Dmitry Nehliudov is described as embarking on his “completely new life” on the very last page of *Resurrection*, the final image ushering in a new age only after the narrative breaks off.

Such distrust of material language highlights, moreover, the spiritual component of Vitalist philosophy, and connects it to religion. Classicist Karl Kerényi (1897-1973) highlights the non-linguistic dimension of the Eleusinian mysteries in honor of Demeter: the initiates were shown a single kernel of grain (corn or wheat), in which the Demeter-Persephone dyad was encapsulated, and the very act of seeing (not a philosophical concept)⁶ communicated to them the myth of cyclical death and return. In addition to giving the initiates access to transcendent truth beyond the surface of observed reality, thus revealing the essence of things through symbols, the imagistic or symbolic language of the Living Earth could therefore be employed to inspire hope in an increasingly pessimistic age. Meredith celebrated “*the Joy of Earth*” as an *alma mater* (“For Earth, that gives the milk, the spirit gives”), opposing what one reviewer of *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth* (1883) described as the “deeply pessimistic note [that] has been the chief characteristic of [modern] poetry” (Unsigned rev., *St. James’s Gazette* vi, 25 Jun 1883: 241-2). Although more disillusioned toward the end of his life, Shaw saw in the mystical power of fertility, his “metabiological” religion of Creative Evolution, the possibility of transcending even the Shavian Superman.

* * *

Literary Vitalism and the question of vitality, which lies at the cross-section of the sciences and the arts, have been the subjects of several critical studies in the last few decades. Of these, however, only two are particularly relevant to this thesis because they tackle the problematic issue of defining the movement, while the others suffer from the same empiricist blindness which risks overlooking Vitalist texts on account of their non-

materialist/nonrealistic approach to life. Due to its ethical component, Vitalism can also be associated with, as well as relevant to, environmental theories and eco-criticism.

Because nineteenth-century Vitalism surpassed its limited scientific scope and became an important philosophical project in the broader context of the history of European ideas, we have to provide a broad enough definition to include its various permutations. If clear and straightforward in science, definitions are trickier in literature, especially since meant to promote perpetual growth, vitalistic thought is opposed to limitations of any kind, including those necessary to formulating a definition. In the introduction to Tom Quirk's *Bergson and American Culture* (1990), we do not even find a precise definition. Quirk describes "vitalism" as a moment when, on the verge of World War I, "a widespread sense of a 'new reality' appeared on the scene," and "something happened in America that altered in a real way the nation's perception of the world at large and the private understanding and ambitions of its individual citizens" (4). Although clearly associated with the publication of Bergson's works, "in the sense that it detonated and released pent-up energies or allowed certain dimly sensed but intensely felt truths to be realized," this moment, moreover, cannot be set at any given date. Rather, Quirk offers several possibilities: Hans Driesch's Gifford lectures (1907-1908), Rudolf Eucken's Nobel Prize speech in 1909, and the publication of Bergson's *Creative Evolution* in 1907 and William James' *Pragmatism* in the same year (Quirk 6-9).

Brian John, on the other hand, carefully grounds his definition in the individual texts he examines, underscoring that certain "distinctions derive from the personality of the individual writer and others from the character of the period in which he lived" (13). John examines these writers as part of the same "tradition [that] is obviously Romantic

and, more particularly, vitalist,” and proceeds to describe it as “a doctrine deriving ultimately from the Logos of Heraclitus and the entelechy of Aristotle”—based on the existence of universal purpose and order. At its core

lies the principle of Force—which Blake called Energy—running through all things, cosmic and individual...The vital Force, with accompanying images of flame and fire, gives to existence as a whole a dynamic character, provides a dialectical pattern within which things progress, and indicates a direction which ends in revelation and...apocalypse. (John 2)

“Romantic vitalism,” in John’s view, “is an aesthetic expression” of the same movement witnessed in science “from the cosmic and mathematical constructions of Newtonian physics to the chemistry of things, the biological, botanical, and zoological, verifiable by observation of the particular and organically mutating” (5). In addition to its connection with Romantic organicism (a more holistic view of living beings rather than a scrutiny of their individual parts), John sees “Romantic vitalism” in the context of other Romanticisms, specifically, in its “heightened emphasis upon the self” meant to “counteract the Augustan faith in general principles, abstraction, intellect, and the mind’s passivity in perception,” and the mechanic “cosmogony” typified by “the divinely created ‘gradation’” of the Great Chain of Being (8). Vitalism adopts, in fact, several Romantic tropes: the reassertion of “the particular and concrete, the revolutionary and individual, the supra-rational and intuitive, and the mind’s fundamentally creative character,” as well as the writer’s inclination toward symbolic expression (John 5).

Where I tend to disagree with John’s definition (partly due to a different time frame and set of authors) is in his singling out of the mode of “revelation” and

“apocalypse.” As will become evident below, the “evangelical zeal” which John identifies with the “Romantic vitalists” (5) runs the risk of turning dogmatic, thereby undermining fluidity, one of the prominent traits of nineteenth-century Vitalism. However theoretically diluted and somewhat misleading for readers interested in the broader history of Vitalism,⁷ Quirk’s definition seems, in comparison, truer in spirit.

Other studies on vitality tend to focus less on definitions and more on the connections between empiricist science and literature, as well as politics; although they confirm an ongoing interest in the topic, books such as Sharon Ruston’s *Shelley and Vitality* (2005) and Alan Richardson’s *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (2001), emphasize what Richardson labels the “materialist register” at the expense of its equally important spiritual dimension, assuming, perhaps, that Romantic idealism has already received ample critical attention. It is also possible that highlighting the empirical pursuits of those Romantics who have been examined primarily as Idealists, visionaries, or even lunatics is meant somehow to legitimize their pursuits; however, this approach entails that their fiction be seen as realist and their symbolism largely ignored.

Ruston focuses on politics, and argues that “[p]lacing Shelley’s work in the context of contemporary theories of the workings of the living body removes the ‘mist of familiarity’ from him and emphasizes the importance of his materialist thinking” (1). The debate about vitality carried on by surgeons John Abernethy (known for his “conservative vitalism”) and William Lawrence (who provided a “dissenting voice” on the subject) informed Shelley’s thinking, and “supplied him with a means to imagine revolution and utopia,” as well as to employ “the political implications of the scientific theories...as comments upon contemporary society” (Ruston 3, 6). Shelley remained “a

materialist thinker” all his life, Ruston maintains (agreeing with Paul Hamilton’s assertion that materialism was not just a youthful philosophy the poet later rejected), and she “examine[s] the skepticism and empiricism proposed by Shelley’s comments on vitality,” which he, along with Lawrence, employed “to attack the conservative and reactionary order” protected by certain journals (10, 23, 6).

Also interested in science and literature, Richardson proposes that “the innovative brain science of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries can usefully be thought of as Romantic”; neuroscientists have, in fact, acknowledged this (34-5). In his discussion, for example, of how David Hartley’s psychology influenced Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s intellectual development, Richardson notes some surprising commonalities between scientists (Erasmus Darwin, Pierre Cabanis, Franz Joseph Gall, William Lawrence) and their literary contemporaries, and concludes that, while “Romanticism has most often been associated with idealistic and transcendental conceptions of mind, the many points of contact between scientific and literary representations of the embodied psyche help to remind us of an antiindividualistic, materialist register within Romantic writing that has, until recently, been badly ignored.” Richardson adds that while they may not have been materialists themselves, “with however much ambivalence, Romantic-era writers did engage much more extensively and, in many cases, more directly than has generally been recognized with contemporary brain science” (36).

The “ambivalence” Richardson mentions is key; not all Romantics and, certainly, not all nineteenth-century writers were unequivocally enthusiastic about materialist science. Many attempted to save art from, not subject it to, the positivist readings which Émile Zola would eventually promote, building his theory of *le roman expérimental* on

the ideas of the French physiologist Claude Bernard (1813-1878). But the Vitalists were not anti-scientific either, and many even forged their own theories about nature. The ethical treatment of the Earth called for in their writings parallels the recent studies of nature within larger post-colonial, eco-critical, and feminist discussions (as the “new world,” as a “dark continent,” or as woman), as well as in “posthuman” critical theory (Michael P. Cohen, Helene P. Foley, Donna Haraway). In a new collection of essays devoted to Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854), Jason M. Wirth points out that “more than anyone else in the philosophical tradition, [Schelling] insisted that the birth of the Enlightenment was concomitant with the forgetting of nature and the deepening of our obliviousness to the earth”: “In Schelling one finds,” Wirth insists, “something like the first stirrings of what has come to be called deep ecology” (8). Because the proponent of German *Naturphilosophie* was also one of Vitalism’s intellectual fathers, contemporary environmental and ecological theories could be traced back to the same debate about life which had led to the evolution of the Vitalist movement.

Indeed, the century’s growing awareness of the detrimental impact of industrialization and urbanization led to what could be called a crisis of the environment, the reason why Friedrich Nietzsche encouraged us to become “friends of the earth” (Wirth 8). Railroads facilitated the exchange of commodities and stimulated the economy, but also became a metaphor for the new urban culture with geometrically planned, perfectly angular cities superimposed upon imperfect, wild, and otherwise untamable natural settings. Being anti-mechanistic, Vitalism entailed an anti-industrial cosmogony; hence, the mechanization, degradation, and fragmentation of the environment was often understood by nineteenth-century authors not only literally but

symbolically. John takes this up at some length in his book. He notes the analogy between the natural world and that of the self: “Since the vitalist cosmogony rejects the image of the universe as a machine,” he writes, “the increased industrialism of the last two hundred years becomes a suitable externalization of a similar scarring of the landscape of the self.” Coupled with materialism and commercialism, this ultimately produces “a whole world, mental as well as physical, committed to a perversion of spirit, to a fallen, inorganic, and fragmented vision which lacks the moral and imaginative strength to reverse the trend” (John 10).

The moral imperative to “revitalize” the Earth is clearly tied to living ethically. Its connection to so-called “deep ecology,” which is similarly opposed to limiting human worth to utilitarian concerns, testifies to Vitalism’s ongoing relevance and also adds urgency to our need to “repossess” this symbolic language. But, since epistemology and the question of human and artistic freedom was more integral to the authors whom I consider than was reclamation, I am forced to limit my discussion of the ecological dimension more or less to the remarks above.

* * *

By “revitalizing” the Earth, the Vitalists were simultaneously “revitalizing” humanity. At the core of what I go on to describe as nineteenth-century Vitalism (which includes certain twentieth-century texts, as well, up to the 1930s) lies the analogy between the Earth and the Self, which could also be thought of as “nature” and “human nature,” terms that fall under the purview of the so-called “physical” and “moral sciences.” Building on this analogy, thinkers could explore what constituted the Self; what constituted the Earth/World; and what (if anything) could bring the two together.

This is reflected in the following set of guiding questions: (1) Can we know anything about the nature of the Self and that of the Earth/World, and if so, by what means? (2a) Can the Self and the Earth be free, or are they subject to universal determinism? (2b) Can the Self and the Earth have purpose, or are they subject to universal randomness? (3) If there is no *telos* and no afterlife, can there be any hope, or must we accept that we are little more than worm food on a thoroughly material Earth? The first is the epistemological question, which entails that of ontology; out of these evolve the ethical and the existential, and since the latter found artistic expression in nineteenth-century literature, the aesthetic dimension is no less significant.

These questions were taken up, to a different degree, by the nineteenth-century authors whom I examine, and they help us identify some important Vitalist themes: (1) the need to see matter and mind dynamically, outside of mechanistic strictures, and open to growth and evolution; (2) the need to see reality as a whole, combining its material/mechanical half with the spiritual/vital, for only such a view could preclude narrow-mindedness or an over-reliance on reason; (3) the need to see, within this complex unity, the radical differences between organic/living and inorganic/dead entities, which are ontologically opposed and require different kinds of explanations (the crux of the Vitalist/Mechanist debate); (4) the need to have a non-material link to nature, via instincts and/or intuition, which would be free of religious or rationally-derived metaphysical strictures, and also to develop a “practical” but non-utilitarian “common sense”; and finally, (5) despite the complexity of the newly redefined modern reality, the need to have a stable foundation for knowledge, without which neither informed decisions nor moral action is possible.

* * *

The epistemological dimension is addressed in Chapter 1, “A Bundle of Rocks: Opposing Mechanism.” By synthesizing important arguments, I demonstrate that although both Vitalist (Idealist, Spiritualist) and Mechanist (Empiricist, Materialist) thinkers relied on the analogy between the Self and the Earth, the critical implications of the latter were really problematic for those who believed in the special status of life and living beings. According to mechanistic theories, both “nature” and “human nature” are intelligible because subject to discoverable laws. But, as Schelling implies in his critique, if nature is a knowable mechanism, then to understand it, we must also be (or become) mechanical. The title to Julien Offray de La Mettrie’s 1748 work—*L’homme Machine*—makes this point painfully clear. A century later, Alfred Smee published the *Elements of Electro-biology* (1849), in which he imagined the human body as a complex electrical network, with the brain, its central battery, communicating with the body’s extremities via “bio-telegraphs”—just one example of the Victorians’ enthusiasm for the new technology. In the following decade, American historian George Prescott celebrated the analogy between the nervous system and the telegraph (Morus 471). When the Mechanists asserted that all of life was subject to the same physical laws as the non-living, they won a battle for epistemology; yet they also *killed* both entities in this analogy by making everything subject to determinism—necessity, that is, either rationally determined (certain Mechanists, Leibnizian Finalists), or contingent and ultimately unverifiable (Hume).⁸ And without free will, moral responsibility was questionable.

The broad objective of this chapter is to discuss the epistemological and ethical ramifications of the mechanistic view, on the one hand, and on the other, of the new

dynamic view of matter informed by Hume's skeptical critique. Vitalism offered a middle ground, preserving purpose for the living while also accounting for nature's variability: too great a reliance on the laws of causality would imply a hard determinist outlook, based on observation and predictability, whereas the dismissal of such laws would make it impossible to know the world at all. Rather than reject science, the Vitalists chose to redefine both natural "evolution" and "instinct," linking the latter to intuition and not reason, the authority of which had been seriously undermined.

Devoted to the philosophy of science, this chapter offers a genealogy of the theoretical underpinnings of Vitalism, evolving along two strains of thought: what I call the "spiritualist" strain, rooted in Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, and the "biologistic," rooted in Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's zoological philosophy. It starts with a recap of the mechanistic view of Nature, which had prevailed up to the mid-eighteenth century; at that point, Mechanism came under attack by the skeptics and, most radically, by Hume, as the result of which matter was redefined dynamically, the explanatory basis for mechanistic causality was undermined, as was reason, because the latter could not justify it; and the very foundation of knowledge—uprooted. Consequently, without giving up causality altogether, the Neo-Mechanists assumed greater "epistemological modesty," as did the Enlightenment vitalists. But many thinkers still felt the need for greater certainty; seeing nature in dynamic terms and confident in the explanatory power of the Mind, they turned instead to Schelling and the *Naturphilosophen*. Giovanni Gentile and Benedetto Croce developed their "spiritualist" ideas, while others, who became disillusioned with rational explanations (finding Schelling's theories too abstract and his trust in reason unsubstantiated), came to rely more on "natural instincts." The "biologistic" alternative,

which had been suggested by Hume himself, is best exemplified in Lamarck's privileging of instinct over intellect; his view is a Mechanism *plus*: although grounded in empiricism and relying on causal explanations, Lamarck incorporated *telos* into nature's causal mechanism. Finally, Bergson synthesized aspects of Hume, Lamarck, and Schelling; without having to give up epistemological certainty, he sought as comprehensive a view of reality as possible, which combined life *and* mechanism.

In Chapter 2, "'The Mother of All': The Role of the Earth in Vitalist Poetry," I expand on the argument laid out in the preceding pages. I show that Vitalism was a reaction to the changing view of nature over the course of the nineteenth century, and as such, its evolution paralleled and reflected the growing separation between science and poetry. If, at the turn of the century, the two had still been in lively competition (Erasmus Darwin, William Blake, Wordsworth) by the time Pater wrote his seminal essay on Demeter, in which he outlined the two approaches to explaining changes in the world (the "more mechanical" and "unmechanical, spiritual, Platonic"), Mechanism all but dominated scientific discussions. Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* aided this process: the Earth was thoroughly materialized, and geological history was freed from anything remotely mythological. The view of myth as primitive science (J. G. Frazer), rather than a sophisticated vehicle for knowledge, profoundly undermined the status of the mythic Earth and, by extension, the very significance of poetry and art.

Drawing on *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Wordsworth and Meredith (my two examples of nineteenth-century Vitalist poetry) could help "revitalize" contemporary science by infusing it with poetic art. In his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth famously encouraged the Poet to collaborate with the Man of Science. This could help

restore to empirical sight—an important figure in Wordsworth’s and Meredith’s poems—its revelatory power, as insight into noumenal and transcendent truth, readily available to children but difficult for abstract adults to “see.” I summarize *The Hymn* and discuss its main themes many of which were shared by the Vitalists; through this analysis, as well as my brief account of important readings of the Eleusinian mysteries (Pater, Kerényi), I explore the symbolism of the Living Earth and its philosophical implications in an effort to answer why Demeter was such a popular image in the century’s literary imagination.

In the following chapter, entitled “The Soil, the Scythe, and the Spirit: The Quest in *Anna Karenina*,” I interpret Tolstoy’s novel as an expression of Levin’s religious and existential crises, which are informed by those of the author himself, and also reflect the major crises of the nineteenth century: the philosophy of empiricism and the crisis of religion, about which Felicia Bonaparte and Elizabeth J. Hodge have written extensively. Although the evidence presented by mechanistic science seemed cogent, and many felt optimistic about its potential, by reading *Anna Karenina* in the context of Tolstoy’s other works, we see that science did not answer the right questions, addressed purely materialist issues, and provided little solace; even worse, it could not point us toward a moral life. This was a vital concern because along with the question of origins came that of endings, and despite the impressive discoveries in pathological anatomy, which are briefly outlined in the preceding chapter, some still hoped that the beyond were populated by something other than filthy larvae.

The imagery of the Living Earth and the peasants, combined with an undogmatic espousal of life, makes *Anna Karenina* an excellent literary example of Vitalism. The main ideas of the novel are embodied in the metaphors of the scythe, the grass, and the

force; similar ideas are also found in other texts, of which I include *Resurrection* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, along with some short tales, philosophical pieces, and Tolstoy's autobiography, *My Confession*. As I explore Levin's (and Tolstoy's) grappling with questions of life and death, I look at how reason functions in the text: it is shown to be potentially dangerous (tied to egoism, it can be used to justify murder) and paradoxically, at once empowering and debilitating (promoting perpetual questioning, it can lead to intellectual and physical paralysis, but is, at the same time, necessary to the hero's growth). I supplement this discussion with my analysis of a less successful and rarely cited novel, *In the Country*, written by the Russian historical Vitalist and Tolstoy's friend, Konstantin Leontiev: the intellectual quest of Leontiev's protagonist provides an informative parallel to that of Levin, supplying another example of a longing for certainty that is embodied, symbolically, in the land (the Earth), in peasants, and in children.

In the next chapter, entitled "Beyond THE SCRIP: 'Revitalizing' Education in Meredith and Butler," I offer close contextualized readings of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* and *The Way of All Flesh*. Although they do not offer a vision or plan as John Ruskin does, Butler and Meredith provide us with negative models of Victorian parenting that make clear the vital function of education in forming free-thinking, responsible citizens, who trust their instincts and do not blindly follow arbitrary sets of rules. Butler criticizes forced learning, as well as the pecuniary pressures of following one's father (heredity); he sees education in evolutionary terms as a genetic development and occasion to replace one's old habits with radically new ones. Meredith dramatizes the tragic consequences of imposing a system of unrealistic expectations upon a growing

young man only to see his “nature” prevail, but then be crushed by the unfortunate “Scrip” he has internalized too well.

These two novels can be best understood in the context of nineteenth-century pedagogical debates; both were also, to some degree, responses to the “mechanical” education institutionalized by the *payment by results* reform of 1863, which promoted memorization and test-taking at the expense of developing critical thinking or an appreciation for the arts (a concern with which contemporary pedagogy is not unfamiliar). This discussion takes me to the major figures of the period, including James and John Stuart Mill (based on Benthamite principles, the father devised a plan for his son to become, essentially, a “Utilitarian robot”); Matthew Arnold (who reviewed the impact of the aforementioned reform); and Herbert Spencer (who placed practice above theory, and celebrated the role of empirical science in education). In Meredith’s reaction to Spencer, in particular, we see how his Vitalism opposed utilitarian theories, with which it shared a suspicion of “mechanical” education by rote and an interest in politics in the broadest sense of the term, but not the preoccupation with empiricist science and commercialism.

Privileging the “practical” (without which one cannot survive) over the strictly materialist or commodity-driven, and human instincts over cold rationalism, Meredith and Butler worked *with* modern science, not *against* it, reinterpreting it so as to find a way to create aware, responsible, politically viable members of society. Hence, the accusation that the Vitalists were conservative thinkers is not justified. From their fiction, we see that far from promoting the status quo, they opposed dogma in principle

(even if they came close to introducing it in practice), and they offer an acute critique of British education in the nineteenth century that continues to be relevant to this day.

By way of an epilogue to this chapter, Corelli's *The Mighty Atom* is briefly considered. Although didactic and unsubtle, her novel not only echoes, but also distills many of the ideas about education found in the debate at large (through Corelli's use of "cramming," "parrot-like," and "instinct").

Finally, no account of Vitalism would be complete without a discussion of Shaw, who opposed (and exposed) the mechanization of human endeavors. In Chapter 5, "From Lilith to Shavian Super(wo)man: 'Revitalizing' Social Evolution," I examine Shaw's views on evolution, Socialism, and social evolution, as presented in his critical works and dramatized in *Back to Methuselah* and other plays. What initially appears as a critical tension among three approaches to change—his gradualism, attuned to the Vitalist mode; his espousal of anarchism when it came to institutions, laws, and moral codes; and his more dogmatic adherence to the religion of Creative Evolution later life—can be reconciled given the broad scope of what I call "the Shavian evolutionary vector."⁹ Anarchism, embodied in the destructive potential of dynamite in *Major Barbara*, is a stage along this vector that is meant to clear the ground for the development of higher forms. Unlike the Marxists, Shaw opposed a materialist reading of history along with its logic of over-determinism, the two principles which any Vitalist would find not just theoretically untenable but morally objectionable. Creative Evolution was, for Shaw, "the genuinely scientific religion for which all wise men are now anxiously looking" (Preface to *Methuselah* 15). Rooted in biology and facilitated by economics, it gives us the most comprehensive view of his program for "real change."

I trace the development of Shaw's thinking from his call to shatter "Ideals," "idealisms," and "illusions of progress" in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* and the *Perfect Wagnerite* to his envisioning of "real change," as he puts it in the Epistle Dedicatory to *Man and Superman*, as a series of stages which requires the so-called "Protestant's" destruction of old forms to usher in the new: dismantling outmoded arrangements and institutions, such as marriage and property. This evolutionary movement is both facilitated by and demands the creation of "a Democracy of Supermen" (*Prefaces: Man* 173, 175). Shaw insists that we partake in social evolution no matter what the personal cost or time frame. In his 1944 Postscript to *Back to Methuselah*, however, he seems more pessimistic about such "real change," and admits that "it is better to cling to the hoarest of the savage old creator-idols...than to abandon all hope in a world of 'angry apes'" (*Methuselah* 318). This allows us to read Part IV of the *Methuselah* cycle, the otherwise nearly farcical "Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman," with much more compassion. I consider the latter in an epilogue to this chapter.

* * *

As indicated in the chapter outline above, this thesis follows Vitalism's broader critical implications, which extend to the philosophy of science; the plight of art and poetry; the quest for epistemological and spiritual certainty; and the need for politically viable education and social evolution. The goal is to demonstrate that reacting to major epistemological, religious, social, political, and environmental changes, the Vitalists based their ethics neither on traditional religion nor on reason alone; they sought a foundation that was still fundamentally humanist but not hyper-rationalist; and one that celebrated nature's complexity and variety without limiting the apprehension thereof to

the empiricist's observation of congealed facts. The search for a moral life required a new ontology of the natural world, for only a dramatic reconfiguration could help humans if not return to a Rousseauian nature, then, at least, get in touch with their instincts. The instincts they had in mind—what Dylan Thomas described as the “force that through the green fuse drives the flower”—are blind and not always faultless, but they carry the vital impulsion without which the universe would be lifeless, a veritable spiritual tomb.

Though it may have started as an obscure movement, Vitalism came to acquire philosophical ramifications well beyond its original theoretical and historical context—forming a philosophy *of* life and a philosophy *for* life, as well as a “conceptual language” to address crucial ontological, epistemological, and ethical questions about the philosophy of science, aesthetics, spirituality, education, and socio-political change. For this and others reasons, nineteenth-century Vitalism merits serious study and a new critical apparatus that would grant it, albeit posthumously, a new life.

¹ See also: Bonaparte, ““Let Other Pens Dwell on Guilt and Misery”” (forthcoming; 2011) and “The Deadly Misreading of Mythic Texts: Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*” (1999).

² In her introduction to *Middlemarch*, Bonaparte states that the “moral thought of the nineteenth century was in as chaotic a state as the religious and philosophic”: like many of her contemporaries, George Eliot believed that science could not help those who, having become disenchanted with religion, turned to it for answers to moral queries, because “[s]cience could only furnish a picture of the world as it actually was. It could never formulate a notion of how it ought to be” (Bonaparte, Introduction xii, xv).

³ The impact of the early German Romantics was felt, moreover, in the United States, in New England Transcendentalism, as well as in Russia, where it inspired Pushkin, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy, who even made a pilgrimage to Germany to study their ideas.

⁴ George Eliot makes this clear in her novel *Middlemarch* (1874) by having the main characters meet one of the Nazarenes, a group of painters who, following the German Romantics, tried to turn the graphic arts away from the path of realism: “realism was

materialism,” and an emphasis on the material neglected the transcendent, failing to grasp and give expression to the ““idealistic in the real’,” the purpose of art according to Eliot.

⁵ The poet’s pursuit of noumenal and transcendent truth goes against the very foundation of empiricism, since to an empiricist, like Hume, no knowledge can be derived except through the senses. It is this difference in epistemology that makes the early German Romantics problematic, but not inaccessible, to contemporary readers.

⁶ In his *Critique of Judgment (Die Kritik der Urteilskraft, 1790)*, Kant describes the imagination as a faculty of “sensuality,” capable of apprehending and representing a multiplicity of appearances (“manifoldedness”) while interacting with understanding, but not in subordination to it. In the domain of the aesthetic, the influence of understanding is reduced, and the two engage in “free play,” which allows for the aesthetic not to be purely subjective (e.g., taste) and become universally communicable (Behler 74-6). Kant goes on to define the “beautiful” as that “which pleases universally without requiring a concept.” Creative genius, the “faculty of presenting *aesthetic ideas*,” is capable of communicating certain ideas without a concept, which, in effect, may not be “intelligible by language” (Behler 76).

⁷ We must not forget that although immensely profound and influential, Bergson was neither the first nor the earliest of Vitalists, as Charles Darwin was hardly the first among their opponents.

⁸ As a result of the skeptical attack, voiced prominently by Hume in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), the authority of reason was cast in doubt. Hume charged that, if we could never prove that effects were necessarily determined by their causes, we could know nothing certain about the world. The most we could glean were the impressions it had left on our mind. As Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson write, Hume’s empiricism and philosophical skepticism “dissolve[d] the self and all certain knowledge of outside substances into a flow of discrete phenomena whose real causes or unifying principles escape us” (157).

⁹ It also reflects Shaw’s own growth as a Socialist thinker: from his initial fascination with Karl Marx to his espousal of Fabian constitutional gradualism and, finally, to his combining of the “equal income for all” principle—his favorite brand of Socialism—with his credo of non-Darwinian, purposive natural selection.

CHAPTER I

A Bundle of Rocks: Opposing Mechanism

They know that a human body is a mighty complicated machine: That many secret powers lurk in it, which are altogether beyond our comprehension: That to us it must often appear very uncertain in its operations...

David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

Vitalism—the insistence that there is some big, mysterious extra ingredient in all living things—turns out to have been not a deep insight but a failure of imagination.

Daniel Clement Dennett, *Sweet Dreams*

Vitalism originated in science as a reaction to Mechanism, the view that life can be explained without resorting to any non-material, non-physical, possibly hidden, or otherwise “unscientific” causes. The mechanistic view of nature as a series of causes and effects is the cornerstone of empirical science and Positivism, predicated on causal inference. According to the Vitalists, on the other hand, life required an organicist view that would account for the element of growth and evolution, as well as aging and dying, and would successfully counteract Mechanism’s preoccupation with quantification, calculation, and machine-like predictability. The psychological dimension—focusing on mind, consciousness, or inner feeling—was an integral component of the Vitalist notion of “human nature”; and since humans were part of nature, both entities in this analogy had to be redefined in vitalistic terms. In science and in philosophy, Vitalists meant to explain more cogently the manifestations of intelligence, voluntary movement, and

choice—aspects which, to a Mechanist, would be “nothing more than reflex action” (Lamarck, *Zoological* lxvi).

The philosophical objection to Mechanism is that it implies materialism, the view that only matter exists; hence, it cannot support a complete view of reality—primarily due to the kind of explanations upon which it is based. Vitalism was originally conceived to explain what the materialists had failed to do: “Materialism,” writes Vitalist embryologist Hans Driesch (1867-1941), “can explain only details, but never their relation to the whole” (110). The materialist mechanists failed to see, in other words, that “explain[ing] the mechanics of the articulation of limbs and some points in the circulation of the blood” could not “explain everything” (Driesch 110). Vitalist thinkers approached life holistically, seeking an all-embracing, reconciliatory whole. Driesch cites Hermann Lotze (1817-1881), the nineteenth-century German logician and author of “Life and the Life-Force,”¹ as a representative of the materialist critique of Vitalism; and what he says against Lotze, who (Driesch believes) is “preoccupied with the intentions of mechanistic physics,” applies to mechanistic theories in general: “What is then meant by ‘explain’ and by the ‘law’? Lotze is probably thinking of quantitative laws; but where are they to come from when the substance is not quantitative?” (Driesch 128).

Life requires a methodology of a different kind. If only empirically gathered quantifiable explanations and laws were acceptable, the predicted and calculated whole would be nothing more than the sum of its parts, a specific amount obtainable given sufficient data. The latter view might have dominated embryology, biochemistry, and genetics from 1880 to 1910, but it has been displaced in biology by what Paul S. Agutter et al. call “holistic materialism”: as scientists came to accept that “a physiological whole

is greater than the sum of its parts,” they could no longer trust the former reductionism (85). Although still within the materialist paradigm, this approach “shows less of a polarized antipathy towards vitalism than its predecessor” (Agutter et al. 85).

An example of this would be Bergson’s distinction between “l’organisation” and “fabrication” (“manufacture”); he considers these to be two different actions: “Autre chose est pourtant fabriquer, autre chose organiser” (Bergson, *Œuvres* 573). Whereas the Mechanists conceive Nature as a workman putting things together, and the assembled whole includes nothing other than what has been put in, the Vitalists view it in terms of “organisation,” seeing it as division from within, with energy spreading outward from the center, so dynamic it “has something explosive about it”: “le travail d’organisation va du centre à la périphérie...l’acte d’organisation a quelque chose d’explosif” (Bergson, *Œuvres* 573-4; *Creative* 102-3, 107). Science, however, can only treat organization mechanistically, examining organs or even an organism’s individual cells as though they were pieces of a machine, thereby ignoring Nature’s continuous growth.

But this does not mean that quantitative methods are irrelevant to knowledge formation. Unlike their opponents who reject vitalistic explanations on principle, Vitalists themselves vouch for reconciliation. The utility of mechanistic explanations is not necessarily denied even as their limitations are acknowledged. Philosophically, this may be seen in terms of categories of “inclusion” and “exclusion.” “[A] vitalist or teleological approach need not claim that every feature of the world be vital or susceptible to teleological analysis,” as Sylvia Berryman points out,

rather, these categories are ‘inclusive’, used to name accounts in which at least some vital properties or teleological explanations are thought to be

required. ‘Mechanistic’, like ‘materialist’, is a restrictive category, used of philosophical systems that not only take mechanics as a guide to investigation, but also propose that every feature of nature could, in principle, be taken to work by mechanical means. (Berryman 346)

This element of “inclusion” is immensely important and gives Vitalism the kind of fluidity its counterpart lacks. Further, it allows us to see the Earth, as well as humans, as functioning mechanistically at the same time as it creates space free of such restraints.

* * *

Prior to discussing how the ideas of Vitalist philosophy were transformed, applied to, and diffused through literature, I focus on philosophy and, more precisely, on the philosophy of science so as to present these ideas in the most undiluted form. What follows is a genealogy of the theoretical underpinnings of Vitalism. Because of the nature of the movement, this genealogy cannot be traced in a compact linear fashion; rather like a family tree, certain of its parts branch off only to reconnect organically at some later time. The layout of this chapter is intended to reflect this diversity.

Specifically, I review the main points of Hume’s empiricist argument, in which he claims that everything we know is derived from sensation, and goes on to reduce causality to an “illusion” at the same time as he points out the limitations of rational inquiry. This eighteenth-century skeptical critique of Mechanism, of which Hume is arguably the most forceful mouthpiece, coincides with a fundamental change in the conception of matter and nature. Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* is one reaction to Hume’s skepticism which accounts for these changes. Schelling demonstrates that there is at least one other way of gaining knowledge outside of mechanistic causality. (The other two

reactions came from the Neo-Mechanists, who preserved the older conception of inert matter but redefined and delimited the role mathematics in studying nature; and from the so-called “Enlightenment vitalists,” who adopted the dynamic view of matter along with what Peter Hans Reill calls “epistemological modesty.”) I trace this “spiritualist” strain in the views of the early twentieth-century Italian philosophers Croce and Gentile. This completes the first half of the Vitalist genealogy.

Those who, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, found Schelling’s rationalist approach too abstract or dogmatic, however, had recourse to the “biologistic” strain represented by the Vitalist Lamarck, in whose work the second half of this epistemology is rooted. The French zoologist offers a critique of Mechanism from within, adapting causality to a teleological model and adding to it a psychological aspect—what his followers, the Neo-Lamarckians, would call “effort.” To counter Schelling’s Mind, later thinkers could adapt some variation of Humean or Lamarckian “instinct,” but they had to “revitalize” this instinct and nature itself, to which it would provide an intimate bond, by defining both in other than restrictive materialist terms. I then turn to Bergson, a late Romantic, who adopts many of Schelling’s ideas, such as that of dynamic matter and “becoming,” but is also grounded in Lamarck’s empiricism.

One important recurring concern in this genealogy is causation, the basis for empiricism and Mechanism. As Hume forcefully argued, without the legitimacy of causes, the entire epistemological enterprise would become questionable. Charles Lyell’s theory of “uniformitarianism,” for example, relies on the association between causes and effects as a way of using present processes to study those operating in the past; without this link, the geological history of the Earth would remain inaccessible, and we would

have to settle for mythological accounts (the latter being coterminous with “fictional” for any materialist). In the widely read *Principles of Geology* (1830),² Lyell (1797-1875) “attempt[ed] to explain the former changes of the Earth’s surface by reference to causes now in operation.” He developed this doctrine based on the Scottish geologist James Hutton’s (1726-1797) notion that “the landforms we see about us were molded by forces acting in the world today” (Donovan and Prentiss 3). Hutton’s conception of matter, as a balance of repulsive and attractive forces, was based, in turn, on eighteenth-century Neo-Mechanist force theory (Donovan and Prentiss 4). Despite his emphasis on continuous geological evolution, Lyell did, in fact, hold on to a mechanistic framework as a basis for reconstructing the original causes from their present effects; and although he accounted for the Earth’s history, he still treated it not as a living entity, but as an inert bundle of rocks molded by external forces.

Lyell’s definition of the discipline of geology exemplifies this, as he stresses the importance of addressing change within a causal framework:

Geology is the science which investigates the successive changes that have taken place in the organic and inorganic kingdoms of nature; it enquires into the causes of these changes, and the influence which they have exerted in modifying the surface and external structure of the planet.

(Lyell, *Principles I I*)

Explaining the past in terms of the present was not Lyell’s invention, and was practiced by other geologists, including the English paleontologist William Buckland (1784-1856); but, as Martin J. S. Rudwick notes, it was Lyell’s conviction that only such method *exclusively* could yield “scientific” results that distinguished this geologist from others.

What Lyell came to understand by that was influenced by philosopher of science John Herschel (1792-1871), who “maintained that only *verae causae* (‘true causes’) had any business in a scientific explanation” (Rudwick ix). An explanation in which the causes of life were intentionally left hidden or undefined—as they were by the Vitalists—would, therefore, not qualify. He would not accept any “causal agents” which could not be “*observed* producing the kinds of effect that needed explanation” (Rudwick ix). A materialist approach is, of course, exclusive of all things non-material.

But, Hume’s opponents charged, the enterprise of knowledge formation would only become questionable if knowledge were limited to the causation-heavy empiricist approach. An added complication is that, though necessary as an epistemological basis, causation entails philosophical determinism that undermines the will. The solution to the problem of the will could be found in complete freedom from mechanism, suggested by Schelling and pursued by those whom I assign to the “spiritualist” strain; this freedom entailed, however, a leap of faith in the human consciousness, mind, or spirit (what will be further discussed in the context of Schelling’s Identity Theory). Alternatively, both the epistemological and the ethical problems could be resolved by espousing the “vital instincts” of the “biologistic” strain, with humans connected anew to a nature redefined “inclusively,” combining mechanism with purposiveness.

* * *

Let us go back to the beginning and recall that Vitalism originated as a reaction to Mechanism. According to the latter theory, (1) matter is inert; (2) nature, both living and inorganic, is part of mechanism; and (3) as such, it can be explained mechanistically, that is, employing the law of causality. The mechanistic view of nature had prevailed up to

the middle of the eighteenth century, at which point it came under attack by the skeptics. In *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (2005), Reill traces the evolving “languages of nature” from 1680 and through the end of the Enlightenment.³ He writes:

It is usually conceded that during the first half of the Enlightenment, roughly from the late 1680s to the 1740s, mechanical natural philosophy became dominant, aided by the increasingly widespread acceptance of Newtonian science. During this period the central project of natural philosophy had been to incorporate the methods and assumptions of formal mathematical reasoning into explanations for natural phenomena. The overriding impulse was to transform contingent knowledge into certain truth, to reduce manifold appearances of nature to simple principles. (Reill 5)

While forming this new epistemology, the Mechanists radically redefined matter, simplifying its “essence” and “defin[ing] [it] as homogenous, extended, hard, impenetrable, movable, and inert” (Reill 5).

By about 1740, however, Mechanism was “no longer considered satisfying or self-evident,” as it came under attack “most forcibly” by Hume (Reill 5).⁴ Reill outlines the impact of the skeptical critique as a “triple movement”: “the limiting of reason’s competence, producing a wide-ranging epistemological modesty; the expansion of nature’s complexity; and the historicization of nature.” Knowledge came to be seen as “extremely constricted” not only because empirically based, that is, based on the senses which were fallible, but also because reason itself saw its power “circumscribed.” The study of nature was, accordingly, adjusted to reflect the new paradigm. No longer

optimistic about explaining its operations under “the rubric of a few simple, all-encompassing laws,” “replac[ing] uniformity and identity” with “[v]ariety and similarity,” natural philosophers came to see nature as complex, and “in continuous movement, in which old forms of existence are replaced by new ones.” Because they could not have the same certainty as that claimed by the rationalists or the mechanists, late eighteenth-century natural philosophers had to switch their focus to “facts, observation, and controlled inference” (Reill 5-6). In effect, it could be said that, by the year 1800, the eighteenth-century epistemological shift had been completed: it was characterized by the displacement of the rationalist authority over knowledge formation with that of common sense and experience; and the displacement of metaphysics by science and the philosophy of empiricism.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, as the result of the skeptical attack: (1) matter was defined in dynamic terms (as force); (2) the explanatory basis for mechanistic causality was undermined, as was reason, because the latter could no longer justify it; and (3) the very foundation of knowledge was uprooted: knowledge now had to be checked against experience and adjusted accordingly. Hume’s contribution to the Vitalist theoretical genealogy was to add the epistemological dimension to the Vitalist/Mechanist debate over the nature of causation. Although absent from Lamarck and the earlier strain, in which causality was assumed (this being commonplace to science), the question of how (and if) we know that effects necessarily follow causes—became key.

Let us go over the main points of Hume’s attack on causality, which is integral to the evolution of Vitalist philosophy and the history of ideas in general.

* * *

The “patron and father of modern empiricism” in the words of Frederick Copleston (286; vol. V), David Hume believed that knowledge was acquired through the senses. In order to create a “true metaphysics,” he asked that we eliminate all suspicious knowledge: “When we entertain...any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?*” (*Enquiry* 20-1; original emphasis throughout).

We see his empiricism at work most clearly in the “mental geography” laid out in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Hume distinguishes three “classes or species” of perceptions: *Thoughts, Ideas, and Impressions*, which differ with respect to “force and vivacity”: in this hierarchy, ideas (by which he means *images*) are weaker than the “more lively” impressions because the former arise more immediately from sense perceptions; “all the materials of thinking” are also “derived either from our outward or inward sentiment” and are, in effect, “copies of impressions or more lively [perceptions]” (Hume, *Enquiry* 16-7). We cannot, in other words, form an idea of something without having experienced it (unless it be a complex thought consisting of simple ideas of things we have encountered before). Someone with a defective sensory organ cannot, for example, acquire the ideas corresponding to the sensations it would normally yield: “A blind man can form no notion of colours; a deaf man of sounds” (*Enquiry* 18). In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume famously defines human beings as “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement” (258). There is no distinct ego or soul, either: the “annihilation” of the self upon death is “nothing but an extinction of all particular perceptions” (Appendix, *Treatise* 274).

Since it is not a sensory faculty, reason is dealt a heavy blow by Hume, who undertakes in the *Treatise* the “task...of presenting an uncompromising antithesis to continental rationalism”; it is he, says Copleston, who “above all other classical empiricists” (John Locke, Bishop Berkeley) “embodies the anti-rationalist current of thought” (258, 300; vol. V). This has to do, on the one hand, with Hume’s empiricist curtailing of the power of reason, and on the other, with his emphasis on natural belief. Reason, he says in the *Enquiry*, must be checked by *custom* in order not to venture into highly suspect territory beyond “the limits of nature and reality” (16-7). In the fourth section entitled “Sceptical Doubts Concerning the Operations of the Understanding,” Hume divides all the objects of human reason into two classes: *Relations of Ideas* and *Matters of Fact*. The former, non-contradictory operations pertaining to mathematical reasoning, can be ascertained “without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe,” and of these he gives a rationalist account. But the latter, that is, matters of fact, reason cannot ultimately fathom without the help of experience. “*That the sun will not rise to-morrow*,” Hume famously argues, “is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction than the affirmation, *that it will rise*” (Hume, *Enquiry* 25).

Further inquiry reveals that such propositions are based “on the relation of *Cause and Effect*,” and that our knowledge of them relies on causal inference, a point on which Hume dwells. And for good reason. Hume insists that the “connexion between the present fact and that which is inferred from it” (in other words, the process by which we associate causes with effects) is not *a priori* but derived—“discoverable,” that is, “not by reason but by experience” (*Enquiry* 25-7). Put differently, causation—which makes up “experimental reasoning” and is the methodology of modern empirical science—cannot

be ascertained philosophically; all we can say is that a cause is “*an object, followed by another, and where all objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second*”; or “*an object followed by another and whose appearance conveys the thought to that other.*” Other than reducing it to some spatiotemporal relation, such as contiguity, temporal succession, and constant conjunction, Hume insists, “[w]e have no idea of this connexion, nor even any distinct notion what it is we desire to know, when we endeavour at a conception of it.” Hence, we must settle for something other than a clear and distinct notion, to use Descartes’ phrase: we can “*fee*[1]...events to be *connected* in [our] imagination,” a feeling which, experience tells us, arises in similar instances but can never be known for sure (Hume, *Enquiry* 82-3). Whereas mathematical sciences are “clear and determinate,” moral (psychological) sciences are ambiguous, “finer in sentiments,” understanding, and passions, and not immediately available to reflection; the most “obscure and uncertain ideas” are power, force, energy, and necessary connection (Hume, *Enquiry* 64-6).

Given that we know so little, Hume goes on, we should keep our “whimsical” imagination close at hand and not let it run amok, unchecked by judgment which “confines itself to common life.” If we cannot know for sure why a stone falls to the ground, how can we possibly know how the world was created, he asks (*Enquiry* 181-4), and concludes, rather dramatically, by urging us to burn any book which deals with subjects other than quantifiable math or matters of fact:

If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental matter of fact*

and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion. (Hume, *Enquiry* 184).

Hume's successors had to build a new epistemology upon the ashes of his skepticism.

* * *

There were three major responses to Hume's attack meant to counteract his undermining of causal inference and, by extension, of knowledge in general: the Neo-Mechanists, the "Enlightenment vitalists," and the *Naturphilosophen*. Of these, the latter two groups are more relevant to the current argument, since nineteenth-century authors adapted some aspects of these eighteenth-century "vitalists," but also insisted on the Nature Philosophers' epistemological certainty and emphasis on intuition.

After Hume, the Neo-Mechanists adjusted their views, assuming greater "epistemological modesty" without, however, giving up causality.⁵ This group comprised of the French mathematicians and philosophers Jean le Rond D'Alembert (1717–1783), Nicolas de Condorcet (1743–1794), and Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749–1827), among others, preserved the basic outline of Mechanism: they kept the older notion of matter as inert and dead, but "limited mathematics' role in describing nature to an instrument of discovery instead of considering it a model of reality" (Reill 6). If, prior to the mid-eighteenth century, the Book of Nature had been written in the unambiguous language of mathematics, now this language seemed less clear and required supplemental means to decode it.

The second response to skepticism came from the group that Reill calls the "Enlightenment vitalists," who held a dynamic view of matter, emphasized interconnectedness rather than causation, and practiced "epistemological modesty."

These Enlightenment vitalists were interested in “natural history, chemistry, the life sciences, medicine, and their interconnections”; they objected to Mechanism because it did not account for living matter and, furthermore, relied on “a radical separation between mind and matter that only God’s intervention could heal” (Reill 6-7). The view offered scientific thinkers a way to “bridge or dissolve this dichotomy by positing the existence in living matter of active or self-activating forces, which had a teleological character,” such as “elective affinities, vital principles, sympathies, and formative drives,” and it is the presence of “an immanent principle of self-movement or self-organization” that “vitalized” the world (Reill 7).

In order to address Hume’s objections, the Enlightenment vitalists readjusted their methodology. They opposed dualistic thinking (a trait which distinguishes them from the *Naturephilosophen*) and emphasized interconnectedness: “Relation, *rapport*, *Verwandschaft*, cooperation of forces, and reciprocal interaction replaced aggregation and strict causal relations as defining principles of matter.” The latter enabled them to redefine causality, focusing on a multiplicity of connections rather than strict cause/effect pairings: “In the world of living nature, each constituent part of an organized body was both cause and effect of the other parts, all symbolically linked through the universal power of sympathy.” Additionally, among living things, they favored gradualist and qualitative explanations of change, “modeled on the concept of stage-like development or epigenesis, in which a body evolves through steps from a point of creation” (Reill 7-8).

Although nineteenth-century thinkers who opposed Mechanism may have shared the Enlightenment vitalists’ emphasis on interconnectedness and evolutionary change, some later Vitalists, such as Giovanni Gentile, felt the need for greater certainty in

knowledge, which Hume had reduced to probability and the Enlightenment vitalists were too cautious to reassert. Seeing Nature in dynamic or energetic terms, and still trusting the intuiting and explanatory power of the Mind, philosophers like Gentile would turn, instead, to the *Naturphilosophen*.

Besides Neo-Mechanism and Enlightenment vitalism, a major reaction against Mechanism and Humean skepticism came from the proponents of *Naturphilosophie*, a movement in German philosophy characterized “as an attempt to reestablish our ties with nature, to recapture the subjective and unconscious realms of human existence, to curtail the mechanization of the world picture, and to reestablish a harmony between nature and humanity” (Reill 199). In response to the skeptical critique, the *Naturphilosophen* offered a rationalist account: “Turning to observation inevitably condemned one to wallow in a morass of contradictory and confusing results because of nature’s infinite phenomenal multiplicity. Thus, the only true path to discovering truth lay in investigating mind” (Reill 210). Instead of progressive linear motion, they espoused circularity and return, and hoped to reinstate a more stable world, not yet ravaged by the French Revolution and still subject to “organic understanding.”⁶

“Study yourself,” said Carl von Eschenmayer (1768-1852), “and you certainly will find her [nature]” (qtd. in Reill 209-10). The *Naturphilosophen* redefined the terms in the Self (human): World (nature) analogy, claiming that since humans and nature were part of a greater spiritual whole, the one could know the other through self-reflection. Reclaiming the power of the human Mind they identified it with nature’s processes. As one thinker defined it, “That which [the human] forms through consciousness is only a higher stage of that which nature unconsciously develops outside of him; indeed the

identity is so thorough that the free intellect in all of its conscious activities can only *reproduce* what nature unconsciously *produces*” (Wagner, qtd. in Reill 209-10).

* * *

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854), a most telling representative of the group, combated Mechanism at the same time as he dealt with Hume, whose view of dynamic matter he accepted but whose skepticism he did not. Schelling investigated two themes present in the Vitalist/Mechanist debate, namely: the limitations of the mechanistic model when applied to organic life, and the dynamic notion of matter, as part of an interactive organized whole, rather than causal mechanism. Let us examine Schelling’s response to Hume before we consider some of the elements of his philosophical system which informs the work of the later Vitalists (including the original unity of humans and nature, which allows us to have certain knowledge; freedom from Mechanism, which Schelling associates with life; the dynamic conception of matter as comprised of opposing forces, or contraries; and the unity between the real/finite and the ideal/infinite, which he conceives in terms of the three *Potenzen*, or potencies).

The first step in Schelling’s epistemology is very much like that of Hume—an attempt to establish the nature of the relationship between the Self and the World; unlike Hume’s, however, his inquiry legitimizes the authority of the Mind, not experience or custom. The very idea of “scientific investigation” requires that it be “rigorously separated [from] empiricism” (an approach Schelling would have associated with Hume), as true philosophy must include a systematic discussion of “the *absolute* principles themselves” (Schelling, *Philosophy* 12). In *The Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature (Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur, 1797)*, he sets out to establish a new way of

understanding the world through natural science that “*arise*[s] philosophically.” Like the Enlightenment vitalists, he draws on the interaction between different branches of knowledge, though always setting philosophy apart, as it helps us understand and not just describe the world: “It is true that chemistry teaches us to *read* the letters, physics the *syllables*, mathematics *Nature*; but it ought not to be forgotten that it remains for philosophy to interpret what is read” (Preface to the 1st ed. of *Ideas* 5). Schelling opens with the same question with which philosophy itself begins: how and “whether Nature and experience be possible” (*Ideas* 9). Rather than seeing the mind as a passive receptacle sensing and reacting to the external world, he posits an “original unity” of mind and nature. In order to answer this question, he says, we must separate that which “was originally and necessarily united in the human mind” and “what Nature has always united”: “the object from the intuition [*Anschauung*], the concept [*Begriff*] from the image [*Vorstellung*],” and finally, insofar as we would then become our own “*object*[s], [ourselves] from [ourselves].”⁷ Reflection demands this separation, which is temporary and “only *means*, not *end*,” and the very fact that we can perform such a mental operation confirms our freedom from mechanism (Schelling, *Ideas* 10-1).

Further, exploring the connection between the mind and the world, Schelling criticizes the Kantian view of things-in-themselves because it relies on two unverifiable premises: that the “things-in-themselves, although altogether inaccessible to our faculty of intuition, must still be actually present,” and that “these things have to *affect* me in order to occasion my ideas”—however unclear this operation may be. The lack of explanation as to “[h]ow it happens that things come to be represented at all” makes the

Kantians' case less plausible, so much so that Schelling does not even bother refuting the system: "To propound it is to overturn it from the bottom up" (*Ideas* 26).

Turning to Hume, he accepts the terms of the argument, but finds the missing explanation equally debilitating. At least in theory, Schelling does not seem to mind the skeptical stance that the necessary connection between things and ideas is "pure illusion" that "takes place only in our ideas." He does, however, take issue with Hume's reluctance to "philosophize," demanding that Hume "at least explain the source of this *illusion*." Schelling finds the latter's summoning of "custom" (which "'like every long habituation, ultimately become[s] for us a *second nature*'") insufficient because it raises a further question, namely, what are the source of and reason why this custom prevailed (Schelling, *Ideas* 26-7).⁸

Like Hume, in other words, Schelling starts out with the relation between ideas and things, that is, our internal experience of the external world of nature, and admits that "we are acquainted with no *real* connection between *different* things other than that of *cause* and *effect*"; also like Hume, he acknowledges the unnaturalness of the step taken by the philosopher in interrogating what for many would be a given (*Ideas* 12).⁹ But the conclusion he draws cannot be more different. Whereas for Hume, things are, so to speak, *a priori*, and it is they that, according to his empiricist position, immediately precede and give rise to ideas; for Schelling, neither the notion that things are the effects of ideas nor that, conversely, they are the ideas' causes seems acceptable: both alternatives presuppose a "separation between the two" (not original unity), while the latter also threatens human freedom, requiring that "I subordinate myself to these concepts, and allow things external to affect me" (Schelling, *Ideas* 12-3). Although not

immune to criticism (the common accusation is dogmatism), Schelling's rational approach offers a more stable foundation for knowledge based on the unity of humans and nature, as well as their dynamic interaction (as opposed to causation, an unequal relation in which one would have to precede the other either temporally or ontologically).

Further, if, for the materialist Hume, causal inference is key to knowing the world, for Schelling, it is too ensconced in mechanistic views and unsuitable to "the realm of *organic nature*, [where] all mechanical linkage of cause and effect ceases for us." Like the Enlightenment vitalists, Schelling associates causality with inorganic bodies, separate and distinct so as to be manipulated within a causal mechanism, and interconnectedness or "interaction"—with living beings that are self-sufficient and do not rely on the external world for their existence. To distinguish between causes and effects, boundaries must be drawn, but such a separation among elements would disrupt the organic whole (what Schelling calls "*Organisation*"), which "consists only in the *interaction* of the parts" (Schelling, *Ideas* 30-1). Moreover, there is an ontological difference: in contradistinction to "[c]ause and effect," which "is something evanescent, transitory, mere *appearance*,"

The organism... is not mere appearance, but is *itself* object, and indeed an object subsisting through itself, in itself whole and indivisible, and because in it the form is inseparable from the matter, the *origin* of an organism, as such, can no more be explained mechanically than the origin of matter itself. (Schelling, *Ideas* 30-1)

Because it is self-sufficient, a living organism cannot be part of a larger mechanism:

"Every organic product exists *for itself*; its being is dependent on no other being... Every

organic product carries the reason for its existence in *itself*, for it is cause and effect of itself” (Schelling, *Ideas* 30-1). Similarly, Schelling refused to apply strictly causal explanations to “the realm of the intelligible.” To do so would mean that humans, too, are “nothing more than matter—as it were, an optical glass, in which the light-way of the world refracts. But the optical glass does not itself see; it is merely an instrument in the hand of a rational being” (*Ideas* 16).

Although the term “matter” in the quotation above seems to imply something inert, contrary to the Newtonian view of the Mechanists and the later Neo-Mechanists, Schelling in fact defined matter in Kantian “metaphysico-dynamical” terms, as would similar-minded Vitalists. His view that “the essence of matter itself” is in its component opposing forces enabled him to dispense with purely mechanistic physics.¹⁰ The Mechanists saw matter “as something which does not move self-actively, but can be moved by external causes”; this, however, did little to explain how “one body [could] impart motion to another without being moved itself,” nor how internal motion could itself operate (Schelling, *Ideas* 17-8, 20). Schelling, on the other hand, saw matter as neither dead nor inert, but as a “living” equilibrium [*Gleichgewicht*] of opposing [*Gegensatz*] forces of repulsion and attraction. These constitute the “conditions of the *possibility* of matter,” so that matter in general and individual bodies in particular “are themselves nothing but products of opposing forces, or, rather, are themselves nothing else but these forces” (*Ideas* 154-6).¹¹ And while these forces may be in equilibrium, they do not produce stasis: this equilibrium is “felt only in contrast to the *possibility* that [it] should be disturbed” (*Ideas* 148).

Schelling's notion of "dynamical chemistry" relies, similarly, on the principle of polarity. If the forces of repulsion and attraction were equal, they would cancel each other out, so they had to be of a different polarity, he reasoned following Kant, who had argued in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786), that internal opposition would prevent matter from "dispers[ing] itself into infinity" (Stern, Introduction x-xii; Schelling, *Ideas* 216-33). Bodies with opposite degrees of basic forces would have to enter into chemical reactions to restore their balance.¹²

The principle of the dynamic interaction of opposites allowed Schelling, who was inspired by the work of Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677), to combine unity with diversity.¹³ In *The Philosophy of Art (Philosophie der Kunst, 1802-3)*, he states that there is "only one essence, one absolute reality, and this essence, as absolute, is indivisible," and "[s]ince it is indivisible, diversity among things is only possible to the extent that this indivisible whole is posited under various determinations," which Schelling calls "*die Potenzen*" ("potences" or "potencies") (14). These are, more specifically: (1) relative identity, as transition from unity to difference (or, the universal to the particular, or the infinite to the finite), which corresponds in the *Naturphilosophie* to material existence, form, and being; (2) absolute identity, as transition from difference to unity (or, the particular to the universal, or the finite to the infinite), which corresponds to light, essence, and activity; and (3) absolute identity or indifference, as the original unity and its negation emerge after division into subject and object, which corresponds to the living organism (Stern xxi-ii; Schelling, *Ideas* 150; *Philosophy* 25-7). The organism, as absolute unity of subject and object, is thus the "perfect mirror image of the absolute in Nature and for Nature" (*Ideas* 51). The *Potenzen* form, on the whole, the basis of

Schelling's totalizing principle: "*Philosophy* emerges in its most complete manifestation," he claims, "only within the totality of all potences" (*Philosophy* 14).

Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, accordingly, combines the dialectic of contraries with a vision of heterogeneous unity. "Matter, too, like everything that exists, streams out from the eternal essence, and represents in appearance and effect, albeit indirect and mediate only, of the eternal dichotomizing into subject and object, and of the fashioning of its infinite unity into finitude and multiplicity." Because it originates in division and conflict, matter can be seen "as a visible analogue of the mind" and thus as alive and dynamic (Schelling, *Ideas* 177). The agonistic balance between material and spiritual forces in Nature constitute this "equilibrium" or "lasting, forever undecided, strife" which we experience, and this identity provides an epistemological foundation: "So long as I am *identical* with Nature, I understand what a living nature is as well as I understand my own life" (*Ideas* 57, 36). Nature considered as "a single Whole" consisting of Mechanism *and* purposiveness, or freedom from mechanistic causality, is entirely knowable by the Mind; and for philosophy to be possible Nature must "not only *express*, but *even realize*, the laws of our mind"—or, in the familiar iteration, "Nature should be Mind made visible, Mind the invisible Nature" (Schelling, *Ideas* 42; original emphasis).

Finally, although Schelling offers a rationalist account, he does not put all of his faith in, strictly speaking, reason. Rather, he privileges intuition, a faculty more primal and less philosophically compromised. According to Schelling, the operation of the mind can also be examined in terms of polarity, with intuition mediating between its restrictive and liberating aspects and enabling us to intuit the very existence of dynamic interaction. "The reason why matter is *necessarily* possessed of those [attractive and repulsive] forces

would have to lie in *intuition itself*,” Schelling writes in the exposition on the first origin of the concept of matter; intuition is, then, “an original activity” which precedes thinking and reflection, and is “absolutely *undetermined* and *unconfined*” (*Ideas* 173-4). In order for the Mind to become “restricted” and engage in “a *determinant* (thinkable) activity,” it must know what “confined” means: the Mind, therefore, “*feels its confinement* only insofar as it feels at the same time its original *lack of confinement*.” The union of the two is, in fact, what constitutes intuition, that is, “*that act of the mind wherein, from activity and passivity, from unrestricted and restricting activity, it fashions in itself a joint product*.” Consequently, it is also “*the primary one* [level of knowledge], *the highest in the human mind, that which truly constitutes its mental nature*” (Schelling, *Ideas* 175-7; original emphasis throughout).

For all of the above reasons (insufficient explanations, inert matter, and the lack of freedom within a causal mechanism), mechanistic theories were criticized and rejected by Schelling and the Vitalists. Schelling’s unique solution to the Vitalist/Mechanist debate was to conceive mind and nature within a single unity of spirit, or mind.¹⁴

* * *

It is possible to trace Schelling’s influence on the philosophy of Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944), who, to my knowledge, is not usually identified with Vitalism despite his emphatic rejection of mechanistic views. Benedetto Croce’s one-time friend and collaborator in the weekly *Voice* (*La Voce*, 1913-1914), Gentile became his political enemy after 1922, when, seeing Fascism as the direct outcome of idealist philosophy, Gentile joined Benito Mussolini’s party (Gullace, Introduction xiv-xv). Gentile may be assigned to Schelling’s “spiritualist” strain; he builds his idealism on a critique of

Mechanism. In the *Philosophy of Art (La Filosofia dell'arte, 1931)*, specifically, he attacks empiricism and naturalism, because they prove inadequate when applied to the spirit, which is dynamic and continuously evolving. But if, for Schelling, mind is identical with and mirrors nature without losing its identity (multiplicity and unity are reconciled), for Gentile, all reality is spirit: “Nature is mere feeling,” and since it is infinite and gradually realizing itself, it is not a “fact” that is “already given”; even our body is “sensation,” itself an element of the all encompassing spirit (Gentile 204, 58-9). According to Gentile’s philosophy of *attualismo* (Actualism or actual idealism), all of reality is an evolving act of thinking, *l’atto del pensare*—as opposed to that which has been thought, *l’atto del pensato*, the latter appropriate only for determined thought and science. Life and creation, not excluding the empirical world, are also part of a perpetual dialectic in which the self encounters its opposite, which may be material and foreign, and makes this *other* part of its new self through synthesis and mediation.

“What the spirit creates is the spirit itself; its creation is self-creation,” Gentile asserts (47). The separation between the subject and the object, spirit and matter is, in fact, arbitrary. “The material world does exist,” Gentile says in his *System of Logic as Theory of Knowledge (Sistema di logica come teoria del conoscere, 1917)*, “but only insofar as, by thinking it, we dematerialize it and resolve it entirely into the life of the spirit” (vol. II, 3rd ed., qtd. in Gullace, Introduction xxv). To be known and “transform[ed] into a better world...the moral world,” nature, and reality cannot “exist independently of human thought” (Gentile 133). By asserting their unity Gentile solves the epistemological problem: since reality is an act of thinking, non-spiritual objects are not external, but confronted by the ego as foreign and absorbed by it through thinking as

self-realization. We know things because we recreate them as part of our own consciousness, not because they are simply “there”—in the noumenal or phenomenal world—this “thereness” being a dogmatic assumption which Gentile criticizes in both traditional idealism and empiricism, echoing Schelling’s critique of the Kantians.

We must add, by way of a brief digression, that Gentile’s was not an armchair philosophy but one with serious political applications. We can sense in the powerful rhetoric of the self-realizing spirit the seeds of *The Doctrine of Fascism* (*La Dottrina del fascismo*, 1932), co-written a year after the *Filosofia* by Mussolini and Gentile. As in Gentile’s dialectic, the *Dottrina* reiterates the key synthesis of thought and action: “Come ogni salda concezione politica, il fascismo è prassi ed è pensiero.”¹⁵ The Fascist State, as a spiritual force, becomes the form, the content, and the higher expression of personality: “Lo Stato fascista, forma più alta e potente della personalità, è forza, ma *spirituale*...Non è un semplice *meccanismo* che limiti la sfera delle presunte libertà individuali. È forma e norma interiore, e disciplina di tutta la persona” (Mussolini, *I.Idee fondamentali* 7-42; my emphasis).¹⁶ The “spirito” we find in Gentile’s aesthetics is thus replaced with “Lo Stato fascista,” and the latter is conceived organically, emphasizing the “spiritual attitude” and the “spiritual existence” of humanity. The distinction between “spirituale” and “meccanismo” bears a specific trace of Gentile’s Vitalism; this spiritual conception is, furthermore, contrasted throughout with the materialist positivism of the nineteenth century. But the focus in the *Dottrina* on culture and on subjugating nature to the human will assumes nature is a fact, and radically departs from Gentile’s philosophical stance.

Although not acknowledged explicitly, the Vitalist/Mechanist debate informs the work of Croce, as well, who felt the need to oppose what Angelo A. de Gennaro calls

“the domination of the pseudo-scientific philosophy of [Herbert] Spencer which would hardly recognize any other form of knowledge which was not scientific,” and “attempt[ed] to fight the cult of matter with his own metaphysics” (43, 8). Croce fought against different positivist approaches to art (as pleasure derived from psychological associations, from habits, or from primitive animality or madness), which were fashionable at the time, as well as against applying positivist sociology to history, claiming that history “does not deduce, nor does it induce, but it directs itself *ad narrandum*, but not *ad demonstrandum* [as does empirical science]; it does not create universals and abstractions” (Croce, *Estetica* 32, qtd. in de Gennaro 43).

Croce belongs, by and large, with Gentile and the Schellingians, but such categorization is not clear-cut, as is the definition and nature of the Vitalist movement itself. Croce adapts Vitalist ideas not by adding purpose to mechanism, as Lamarck and Bergson do (see below). Rather, seeing all of reality as spirit, “a conciliation of spirit and sense,” he conceives it as divided into two *types* of activities, as projected by “the twofold operation of the human spirit”: the theoretical, which includes the intuitive and the logical; and the practical, which includes the economic and the moral (Croce 762). In this respect, his view resembles Schelling’s vision of reality in terms of the *Potenzen* interacting within a unified whole. A distinguishing trait of Croce’s Vitalism is that it has less to do with the world itself than with the way we look at it. In his essay “The Worldly Pair of Sciences: Aesthetic and Economic” (1931), he maintains,

there are not two orders of reality or two worlds, one spiritual and the other material or natural, one governed by purpose, the other subject to causality, one living and the other mechanical, but that there is on the

contrary one compact unseverable reality which can be, as occasion requires, expounded by means of the concepts of spirit, life, and purpose, or by means of those of matter, cause, mechanism. (Croce 757)

To avoid a dualistic conception of reality, which runs the risk of a serious misreading (seeing nature as “other” and the world as external) when employing only one of these lenses, Croce asserts the primacy of the former (“spirit, life, and purpose”) *along with* the useful but not essential complementarity of the latter (“matter, cause, mechanism”):

For the one and unique reality, being viewed alternately in two diverse modes, would undergo two modes of distortion and would be unthinkable and unknowable in itself. To escape from this impasse there is no other way available than of attributing to one only of these two ways, and recognizing as belonging to it alone, genuine thought and truth, attributing to the other what has been called an ‘economic’, that is a merely practical and instrumental function. (Croce 757)

Croce solves the Vitalist/Mechanist problem by acknowledging the usefulness of Mechanism, and confirming the unity of spirit of which it is an attribute.

Moreover, in one of his other essays, Croce comments on the absence of the term “sensation” from the Philosophy of Spirit. He suggests that, because there exists no such spiritual act, the “myth of sensation” (also the title of this 1942 piece) should be abandoned (Croce 72). Yet, this “myth” is perpetuated due to another false conception—namely, that of an “external reality of nature”—which stems from confusing a theoretical explanatory apparatus with actual reality: “the vice...of confounding the justified and appropriate exteriorization of living reality by the physico-mathematical sciences in their

mechanical constructions, with the truth of poetry and thought” (Croce 74). Mechanism is one way of seeing adopting which the spirit externalizes the world; but such externalization is, once again, practical, not essential: “The same conceptions of the external, mechanical and natural world are not external data but data of the same spirit. The spirit fashions the so-called ‘external’ world because it enjoys fashioning it, and re-annuls it when it has no more joy in it” (Croce, qtd. in Gennaro 10).

Both Gentile and Croce saw reality as spirit, and because they opposed skepticism and believed in the power of the mind, they either consciously or not hearkened back to Schelling and the *Naturphilosophen*. But there were others, who became disillusioned with rational explanations and who, like Tolstoy (Chapter 3), found Schelling’s theories too abstract and his trust in reason unsubstantiated.¹⁷ Instead of the mind, therefore, they came to rely on the more rudimentary instincts.

* * *

What I call the “biologistic” alternative to Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* offered nineteenth-century thinkers another cogent solution to skepticism. In fact, it had been suggested by Hume himself and corroborated by the evolutionists: although reason was fallible and could no longer be trusted and, they could still rely on “natural instincts.”

Even an anti-rationalist skeptic such as Hume needed some form of reassurance. Rather than relying on “abstract reasoning” which always fails in the face of “Nature,” he suggests that we rely on experience and “custom,” which is not only a significant part of “human nature” but “the great guide of human life”: “[Custom] is that principle alone which renders our experience useful to us, and makes us expect, for the future, a similar train of events with those which have appeared in the past” (Hume, *Enquiry* 43-4). That

is the “skeptical solution” to doubt, says Hume; and he insists that any thinking not confirmed by habit, or immediately present to our memory or senses, be considered hypothetical at best—that is, “entirely without foundation unless traceable to a matter of fact” (*Enquiry* 48-9). The “conclusion of the whole matter” is not uncomplicated. On the one hand, there is no rational basis for causality, or for our knowing how the world operates, and hence, the very enterprise of knowledge building, which is predicated on causal inference, cannot be trusted. On the other hand, our experience of causality is so strong that we readily associate causes with effects having experienced an event but once: the sentiment of love we feel upon receiving a benefit, or that of hatred upon injury, is as “unavoidable” as it is incapable of being either “produce[d]” or “prevent[ed]” by reason, since “[a]ll these operations are a species of natural instincts” (Hume, *Enquiry* 49).

The “blind and powerful instinct of nature” that forces us to believe there exists an external universe (even without a Berkeleyan external perceiver) is quite compelling. It also leads us to believe that the images in our mind are those external objects and “never [to] entertain any suspicion, that the one are nothing but the representations of the other” (Hume, *Enquiry* 169). Philosophers (whose view Hume contrasts with those of “the vulgar” as well as with “Nature”) question this instinct, however, finding it at odds with reason, and send us, rather, into the depths of skepticism (*Enquiry* 169-73). But Pyrrhonian skepticism is hardly “beneficial to society,” and is but a “dream” to awaken from and laugh. To avoid such destabilizing delusions, Hume urges us to curtail our insatiable curiosity and settle for a description, short of an explanation (the very aspect of his theory that Schelling criticizes): “mankind...must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the

foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them” (*Enquiry* 179). The combination of the curtailed power of reason and Hume’s reliance on natural belief is why his analysis is so crucial: “Hume’s general position, that it is natural belief analogous to animal ‘belief’, which does and should prevail in human life, and that reason is powerless to justify these beliefs, if ‘justify’ is taken to mean something more than giving a psychological account of the genesis of the beliefs, is of great historical importance” (Copleston 300; vol. V).

The Mechanists’ preoccupation with the rules of causality rests on the assumption that there is a link between humans and the world. This is the “noble lie” upon which empirical science and positivism are predicated. If we could never prove that effects were necessarily determined by their causes, as Hume noted in his *Enquiry*, we could know nothing about the world. Nor could we know anything about ourselves. Predictions could not be made. But even Hume, who found “moderate” skepticism to be “a necessary preparative to the study of philosophy” (*Enquiry* 167), was forced to acknowledge that our common experience of causation might tell us something, however little. Natural instincts, therefore, offered the hope of reconnecting humans with nature by eliminating the metaphysical rift between the two, which philosophers had dug open.

* * *

Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s (1744-1829) empiricist critique of reason echoed that of Hume; he also relied on the mechanistic element of causality. On matters of life, however, Hume and Lamarck could not disagree more. In Lamarck’s *Zoological Philosophy* (*Philosophie zoologique*, 1809), we find that reason itself cannot always be trusted because it is not an organ, but a state of understanding (*l’entendement*), one not

unique to humans, but shared with other animals: “La *raison* n’est pas une faculté; elle est bien moins encore un flambeau, un être quelconque; mais c’est un état particulier des facultés intellectuelles de l’individu; état que l’expérience fait varier, améliore graduellement, et qui rectifie les jugemens, selon que l’individu exerce son intelligence.”¹⁸ Hence, reason should be best conceived as “*un degré acquis dans la rectitude des jugemens,*” with respect to which younger animals appear less capable than older ones (Lamarck, *Philosophie* 441; original emphasis throughout). Because it may be based on an erroneous judgment, and this is true of simple as well as complex ideas, reason may very well lead to “les déterminations d’action qui en proviennent, peuvent être mauvaises ou inconvenables,” that is, unsuitable or wrong determinations of actions, “lorsque les jugemens qui les produisent sont erronés, ou faux en tout ou en quelque point.” Because instinct is, in contrast, driven by an internal necessity and does not result from judgment, it never errs: “l’*instinct* qui n’est qu’une force qui entraîne, et qui est le produit du sentiment intérieur qu’un besoin quelconque émeut, ne se trompe point à l’égard de l’action à exécuter; car il ne choisit point, ne résulte d’aucun jugement, et n’a réellement point de degrés” (Lamarck, *Philosophie* 442, 447).

Lamarck was grounded in empiricism, relied on explanations from physical causes, yet also critiqued the system from within, redefining causality without rejecting it. His conception of matter, as a solid interacting with various fluids, belongs more with the Newtonian Neo-Mechanists than with the *Naturphilosophen*. But his inclusion of purpose brings him closer to Leibniz’s finalism and to Schelling. Lamarck’s Vitalism can thus be seen as Mechanism *plus*: relying on causal explanations, he “revitalized” them to include *telos* and the psychological aspect of effort. While an empiricist,¹⁹ he

still created a more “inclusive” category for causation, which could account for the unpredictability and immateriality of life *within* a causal, deterministic universe by including purpose, a teleological concept, within a mechanistic explanation.

As he states in the Avertissement to *Philosophie Zoologique*, Lamarck set out “à examiner en quoi consiste réellement la vie, et quelles sont les conditions qu’exige ce phénomène naturel pour se produire, et pouvoir prolonger sa durée dans un corps,” the same power present and expressed in the simplest organisms as in the most complex ones (*Philosophie* iv).²⁰ The necessary conditions for life are identifiable even in the simplest life form and clear in its “organisation,” but to understand how a simple form develops into a complex one, we need to examine life from an evolutionary perspective. Lamarck identifies two causes of such evolution: “un changement de circonstances” (“the influence of the environment”) and the “mouvement des fluids dans les parties très-souples qui les contiennent” (“the movement of the fluids within animals”); these, in turn, represent the two main principles of his study: (1) *Use-inheritance* has to do with changes of habit, which are the outcome of changes in the environment; and (2) *Differentiation*, that is, the formation of different organs through fluid movements (*Philosophie* v).²¹

Mechanism pertains to external stimuli, and helps us differentiate between simpler and more complex life forms, the latter of which possess “mouvemens vitaux” (“vital movements”) in their interior organization and thus do not require “la *puissance excitatrice*” (“the *excitatory power*”) from outside (Lamarck, *Philosophie* xvii; *Zoological* 6). It is from these “mouvemens vitaux,” which cannot be transmitted but only stimulated, that “living beings derive the peculiar force which animates them”; these are invisible and uncontainable in simpler animals but become “containable fluids,

though still invisible” in those of higher organization; and it is the latter that form a nervous system in complex animals (*Zoological* 186, 296). Plants and simpler animals lack a nervous system, so “la nature varioit ses moyens, lorsque cela étoit nécessaire,” adjusting their organization to achieve the same end as that of the more complex brain: “les animaux très-imparfaits qui manquent de système nerveux, ne vivent qu’à l’aide des excitations qu’ils reçoivent de l’extérieur” (*Philosophie* xvi).²² The environment is, in other words, more important for the simpler forms, whereas “the exciting cause of life”—invisible and beyond mechanistic empiricism—is developed “within” the more perfect ones (Lamarck, *Zoological* 186). Although in these organisms the movement of the so-called subtle fluids implies a more or less limited mechanistic view, Lamarck’s use of the active voice (“la nature varioit”) when referring to nature is not just a rhetorical convention, but frames evolution in purposive terms.

This “excitatory cause” of life is the most important of the attributes distinguishing living beings from the rest. It is conceived in physical terms suited to Lamarck’s empirical study, yet not devoid of a special kind of force. The “cause particulière” (“a special force”) is not identical with the laws governing organic beings and opposes those of the non-living, originating in a different order, “un ordre de choses essentiel à l’existence de la vie,” and always the result of the “excitatory power”—“surtout dans une force qui résulte de la *cause excitatrice* des movemens organique [vivans]” (Lamarck, *Philosophie* 101-2). This force is “puissante et continuellement active,” as well as creative, having “la faculté de former des combinaisons, de les multiplier, des les diversifier” (Lamarck, *Philosophie* 101).

Lamarck's understanding of how the environment influences the organization of animals is the most important aspect of his argument for the Vitalists, like Bergson, since it requires a teleological reinterpretation of Mechanism. The environment does not produce any simple and direct modifications in an animal; rather, an alteration in environmental circumstances leads to an alteration in an animal's needs, which, in turn, leads to that in its activities, and, finally, forces the organism to adapt new habits. Function, in other words, defines and determines structure: the existence of a new part comes "as a result of efforts," that is, "subsequent continued efforts to satisfy [needs]," while the disappearance of an old part comes from "total disuse" (Lamarck, *Philosophie* 74; *Zoological* 108-20).²³ Hence, it is the effort of the giraffe to reach the leaves at the top of the tree that guides this animal's development of a longer neck—the famous example which, surprisingly, receives but a paragraph in Lamarck's extensive study.

To take another example: Lamarck disagrees with the French physiologist Pierre Cabanis' (1757-1808) notion that melancholy is linked to the degeneration of the abdominal viscera; finding it too determinist, he argues that physical causes in the environment are important only insofar as they give us a propensity or tendency toward something: "l'état d'altération des organes...influe seulement à donner à l'individu un penchant qui le porte à se complaire dans tel ordre de pensées, plutôt que dans tel autre" (Lamarck, *Philosophie* 292). Thus, Lamarck softens the hard causality between the exterior and the interior, which presupposes passivity on the part of the animal; at the same time, he reasserts the importance of individual "*penchant*" to produce change.

In addition to the simpler mechanics of living beings, Lamarck discusses "*sentiment*" (feeling), a faculty that, as the "mouvements vitaux," requires "inclusive"

rather than “restrictive” causality. If perceptions based on sensations are available to living beings without any special organs, “*sentiment*” is not: different in nature from less complex animal “*irritabilité*,” “*le sentiment intérieur*,” or “inner feeling,” is not tied to muscular movements, nor is it explainable by mechanics alone; it is, in fact, that “*sentiment d’existence que possèdent seulement les animaux qui jouissent de la faculté de sentir*,” a force (“*puissance*”) that is triggered by “*les besoins physiques et moraux*” and becomes the source of action based on such needs (Lamarck, *Philosophie* viii, xiii).²⁴

In the “*sentiment intérieur*” Lamarck combines a Vitalist conception of force with a mechanistic explanation of movement. It operates “*simply by dispatching to the required muscles the nervous fluid to excite them.*” The sum-total of this process transcends Mechanism, approximates Schelling’s consciousness of self, as well as prefigures Bergson’s consciousness of existence: it is that which enables complex animals to have feeling, “*un sentiment fort obscur, dont sont doués les animaux qui ont un système nerveux assez développé pour leur donner la faculté de sentir*,” and also a “*force singulière*” by which individuals initiate movement and action, based on “*émotions intérieures*” and in response to their basic needs. This “*feeling of existence*” is more nebulous than the “*sensations intérieures*,” which make the animal sensible; equally important, marked by the word “*obscur*” is the Vitalist embrace of life’s mystery and a gesture beyond mechanics: “*l’ensemble de ces impressions et des sensations confuses qui en résultent, constitue dans tout animal qui s’y trouve assujetti, un sentiment intérieur fort obscur, mais réel, qu’on a nommé sentiment d’existence*” (Lamarck, *Philosophie* 280-1). As such, it constitutes the ego, “*moi*” (281).²⁵

An empiricist, Lamarck emphasizes facts and is suspicious of the power of the mind, associated with idealist philosophy; whereas Schelling relies on a rationally derived identity, Lamarck offers an evolutionist approach grounded in biological reality. He stresses the importance of facts and “connoissances positives”: “Observer la nature, étudier ses productions,” he states in the opening sentence of the “Discours Préliminaire,” associating his work with the empirical tradition (*Philosophie* 1). Although thus rooted, he still defines nature and living beings not in strictly mechanistic terms: the first, as a dynamic laboratory engaged in creation, “un laboratoire immense et toujours actif”; the second, that is, “les corps vivans,” as experiencing fundamentally different influences from those of the “corps privés de la vie”; short of asserting that the laws for organic and inorganic bodies are the same, as do the Mechanists, Lamarck notes the difference in their impact due to the circumstances given (*Philosophie* 91, 97). In living bodies, he clarifies, the “mouvemens vitaux” never cease to operate; he ties this to a perpetual battle between creative and destructive forces, similar to Schelling’s dynamic conception of nature: “il existe dans ces corps [vivans], pendant leur vie, une lutte perpétuelle entre celles de ces circonstances qui y rendent la force vitale composante, et celles, toujours renaissantes, qui la rendent décomposante” (Lamarck, *Philosophie* 97). Vital activity is to be found in the relationship between the organisms’ parts, the fluids, and the stimulating cause; this is a mechanistic explanation, but Lamarck qualifies it by reminding us that it is the “besoins, toujours renaissans” which motivate change.

The latter, moreover, justifies Lamarck’s claim that living beings can form themselves, a radical redefinition of spontaneous generation to reflect purposive effort: “Je persiste donc à dire que les corps vivans forment eux-mêmes,” Lamarck writes, “par

l'action de leur organes, la substance propre de leur corps, et le matières diverses que leurs organes sécrètent," a process by which plants produce new tissue directly whereas animals, who differ in degree but not in essence, do so only indirectly (transforming food into blood, muscle, and other cellular tissue). What is more, everything stems from the living and is its residue: "les *corps vivans* sont la source première où toutes les matières composées ont pris naissance" (*Philosophie* 106-7, 111). Lamarck grounds his zoology, appropriately, in the creative force of life rather than in lifeless causality, but does so without abandoning his fundamental empiricism.

It should come as no surprise then that Lyell, whose empiricism is not at all "inclusive," would ridicule Lamarck's account of evolution for lacking the necessary facts. Lyell interrupts his extensive recapitulation of the main points of Lamarck's zoological treatise to "point out to the reader [an] important chasm in the chain of the evidence...when Lamarck talks 'of the efforts of internal sentiment,' 'the influence of the subtle fluids,' and the 'acts of organization,' as causes whereby animals and plants may acquire *new organs*"; to make matters worse, "with a disregard to the strict rules of induction, [Lamarck] resorts to fictions, as ideal as the 'plastic virtue,' and other phantoms of the middle ages" (*Principles II* 8). Later on, Lyell refers to the idea that species have the power to modify their nature indefinitely as "some hypothesis as violent as that of Lamarck" (*Principles II* 169). At the same time, Lyell fails to realize how ironic his reference to "the machinery of the Lamarckian system" and "so complicated a piece of mechanism" is, since he criticizes Lamarck's argument for lacking causal cogency (*Principles II* 14). The fact that he devotes the entire first chapter of Volume II to Lamarck's book only confirms its importance—even as Lyell prepares to undermine it.

* * *

When we turn now to Bergson, a representative of early twentieth-century Vitalism who is key to reading Shaw's evolutionary plays, we notice that he combined certain aspects of Hume, Lamarck, and Schelling; recalling the tree metaphor mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, we can say that in Bergson's theory, the various theoretical branches really do intertwine. To Hume's and Schelling's complex dynamic understanding of matter, Bergson added a human-like, creative nature, found also in Lamarck and Schelling; without having to give up epistemological certainty and in order to combine life with mechanism, he sought as comprehensive a view of reality as possible. He complemented Schelling's idea of matter, as forces opposing and delimiting each other, with Lamarck's understanding of evolution in the form of subtle fluids, molding matter, and making it more supple and welcoming to life. Finally, following the upsurge of evolutionary theories and Hume's curtailing of the power of reason, Bergson privileged "natural instinct" over abstract intellect, as an intimate link to a living nature.

According to Irwin Edman, Bergson is "in a romantic, almost a German romantic tradition."²⁶ His philosophical ancestors include the Neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus, whom Bergson himself acknowledged, along with Schopenhauer, Schelling, Fichte, and Rousseau (Edman, Foreword xii, xvi-xvii). Although initially a disciple of Spencer, Bergson became disillusioned with the "reality" revealed by scientific laws, which precluded continuous change and freedom from "the fixities of space, of logic and of habit" (Edman, Foreword to *Creative* xii-xiii). His fascination with life and time, as well as commitment to change, makes Bergson's view of evolution anything but the

mechanical elimination of the unfit. Incidentally, he was also Croce's self-acknowledged "precursor" in anti-positivist critique (de Gennaro 12).²⁷

Bergson opens *Creative Evolution* (*L'Évolution créatrice*, 1907) with his famous position, that we have a profound internal perception of existence, of "change...without ceasing": "La vérité est qu'on change sans cesse, et que l'état lui-même est déjà du changement" (*Œuvres: EC* 496). Although each individual mental state undergoes change, our memory "conveys something of the past into the present," thus filling up and continuing the flow of *durée*: "La durée est le progrès continu du passé qui ronge l'avenir et qui gonfle en avançant"; it is not, therefore, "a faculty of putting away recollections in a drawer," but one that actively brings the unconscious past to bear upon each instant (Bergson, *Œuvres: EC* 498; *Creative* 3-8).²⁸

Duration is, moreover, extended from the self to the world. Even ordinary objects have duration between intervals insofar as we experience them (as, for instance, in the case of my waiting for the sugar to melt in my cup): "L'univers dure" (*Œuvres: EC* 503; *Creative* 12-4). The "endless flow" of *durée*, "a moving zone which comprises all that we feel or think or will—all, in short, that we are given at any moment," seems discontinuous to attention, however; because it operates through intellect, and the latter is suited to handling solids, it can only perceive an "impassive ego" with separate states and is incapable of experiencing duration: "Notre attention se fixe sur eux [apparitions de l'incidents] parce qu'ils l'intéressent davantage, mais chacun d'eux est porté par la masse fluide de notre existence psychologique tout entière. Chacun d'eux n'est que le point le mieux éclairé d'une zone mouvante qui comprend tout ce que nous sentons, pensons, voulons, tout ce que nous sommes enfin à un moment donné" (*Œuvres: EC* 496-7;

Creative 5-6). For this reason, life cannot be subject to mathematical treatment.

Whereas mathematical systems which isolate objects or influences are “artificial,” insofar as they paint the world as dying and being reborn at any given focal point, the living body endures, and always “something ages”: “la connaissance d’un être vivant ou *système naturel* est une connaissance qui porte sur l’intervalle même de durée, tandis que la connaissance d’un *système artificiel* ou mathématique ne porte que sur l’extrémité.”

Because life, like consciousness, is “creating something” “at every moment,” Bergson concludes that it, too, demands real “durée” (*Œvres: EC* 513; *Creative* 23-7, 34).

Due to the aforementioned factors, Bergson criticizes mechanism and finalism, which he finds ill-suited to treating life. Let us summarize the main points of his argument as presented in the *Évolution créatrice*: “L’essence des explications mécaniques,”²⁹ Bergson says, “est en effet de considérer l’avenir et le passé comme calculables en fonction du présent, et de prétendre ainsi que *tout est donné*” (*Œvres: EC* 526).³⁰ (In Croce’s or Gentile’s terms, this would correspond to a *fact*, as opposed to an *act*.) Intellectual, or scientific, knowledge operates on the principle “le même produit le même,” or “like produces like”: science gains its precision from the experience of the past and from “*répétition*” (Bergson, *Œvres: EC* 519; *Creative* 34-5). But while the latter may be part of the scientific method, it is completely foreign to the living organism, which has extension and is subject to chemical and physical laws, but also, and more importantly, possesses individuality (the notion we find both in Schelling and Lamarck) that “is not fully realized anywhere, even in man,” whose “vital properties” are not perfect though “always on the way to become so”; hence, the latter are better conceived as dynamic “*tendances*” (“tendencies”) rather than static “*états*” (“states”) (*Œvres: EC*

505; *Creative* 15-6).³¹ The Mechanist claim can only be based on a limited “cinematographical” perspective of reality perceived through a series of solidified “discontinuous images” or snapshots, arbitrarily “stable views of...instability”: this illusion, Bergson writes, “consiste à croire qu’on pourra penser l’instable par l’intermédiaire du stable, le mouvant par l’immobile” (*Œuvres: EC* 726; *Creative* 328-9). Schelling similarly criticized the Mechanists for attempting to materialize and otherwise delimit the infinitely evolving spiritual reality: the “dogmatist, who assumes everything to be originally *present* outside us” fails to realize that, within the causal mechanism, there is no room for “*coming to be* and *springing forth*” (Schelling, *Ideas* 30).

Life requires purposiveness which is absent from Mechanism, but a different kind than that of finalism, the view that Bergson, like Schelling, associated with Leibniz: although it allows for purpose, finalism also falls short of realizing the full potential of life, and is, furthermore, equally challenged by our perception of “real duration.” That “nothing unforeseen” can ever take place in this system suggests that time plays no role. Bergson denies “*finalité interne*” (“internal finality”), according to which individual organs all work to promote an organism’s well-being, claiming instead that all parts and tissue are alive and live for themselves; but he does accept “*finalité externe*” (“external finality”), one which “includes the whole of life in a single indivisible embrace,” the vital impulsion or *élan vital*. This is dramatically different from the teleology of Leibniz, which “implique que les choses et les êtres ne font que réaliser un programme une fois tracé,” thereby limiting their potential (Bergson, *Œuvres: EC* 528-9; *Creative* 45-50).³²

Bergson’s philosophy of life combines finalistic aspects with a mechanistic framework, to which, like Lamarck, he adds the element of purpose; but it is where he

departs from both theories that we perceive his Vitalism most distinctly. Insofar as an act is a realized intention, there is Mechanism; however, what is produced—through this evolutionary process—is “a present and *new* reality,” which is inaccessible to reason bound to the relative and so incapable of intuiting the absolute (Bergson, *Creative* 54). Seeing life as “the continuation of one and the same impetus, divided into divergent lines of evolution” (a notion of an original force that harks back to *Naturphilosophie* and the Romantics), Bergson is able to explain the presence of identical organs, a similarity for which mechanistic evolution, based on accidents and divergences, cannot account (*Creative* 60-1). Less so than mechanism, Bergson’s view resembles that of radical finality in which the world is represented as “a harmonious whole,” with “harmony” in principle, not in fact, so as to support heterogeneity and complementarity. Bergson’s “whole” is, however, not perfect and leaves space for adaptation, using the energy of the “universal vital impulsion...in its own interest”: this harmony, he writes, “est loin d’être parfaite”; rather, “[e]lle admet bien des discordances, parce que chaque espèce, chaque individu même ne retient de l’impulsion globale de la vie qu’un certain élan, et tend à utiliser cette énergie dans son intérêt propre; en cela consiste *l’adaptation*” (*Œuvres: EC* 537; *Creative* 57-8). Similarly, evolution is neither a “series of adaptations,” which, he says, “explains the sinuosities [like the occasional hills, ups, and downs of a road] of the movement of evolution, but not its general direction”; nor is it the “the realization of a plan,” because the evolutionary force is “unceasingly renewed,” and “it creates as it goes on” (Bergson, *Creative* 113-4). Bergson adapts the finalist directionality of variations, in other words, provided this evolution be free and not predetermined.

When it comes to variations, Bergson draws largely not on Lamarck's own work but on that of his followers, the Neo-Lamarckians. Specifically, he develops the notion that variations arising from the use or disuse of organs are internally or psychologically motivated—having “[sprung] from the very effort of the living being to adapt itself to the circumstances of its existence”: “Elle naît de l’effort même de l’être vivant pour s’adapter aux conditions où il doit vivre.” Lamarck combined a mechanistic notion of pressure from the external environment with the potential of “conscience et volonté” (“consciousness and will”); the Neo-Lamarckians explained similar structures in terms of effort: with “the same effort” corresponding to “the same circumstances,” an effort Bergson now wants to trace to an even “deeper cause” to explain variations not only in size (external) but also in form (internal) (*Œuvres: EC 560; Creative 86*). Bergson calls this “un principe interne et psychologique de développement,” and extends it to the original impetus, arguing that whereas individual conscious effort cannot produce difference in form, “an effort of far greater depth,” “une cause plus profonde” common to most species and independent of circumstances, can (*Œuvres: EC 560-1; Creative 94-7*).

In addition, since reality is a “harmonious whole” and requires that we combine theories all of which give only a partial view, Bergson draws also on the legacy of Darwin, thereby adding another branch to the Vitalist genealogy. From Neo-Darwinism, which presupposes mechanism, he adopts the concept of deviations created through germs, rather than habits acquired in the course of an individual organism's life span (Lamarck); however, he conceives these changes not merely as accidental but as “the developments of an impulsion.” Bergson thus “revitalizes” Darwin.

A critique of mechanism and rigid causation is also a prominent feature of Bergson's famous essay on comedy. We laugh, Bergson maintains, when and because we perceive mechanical elements in life, "[d]u mécanique plaqué sur du vivant": "vous aurez du mécanique dans du vivant, vous aurez du comique" (*Œuvres: Rire* 405, 423; original emphasis throughout). He claims that "the fundamental law of life...is the complete negation of repetition": "Changement continu d'aspect, irréversibilité des phénomènes, individualité parfaite d'une série enfermée en elle-même, voilà les caractères extérieurs...qui distinguent le vivant du simple mécanique" (*Œuvres: Rire* 429; *Laughter* 81). Art, unlike the solidified intellect which thrives on repetition, "always aims at what is individual," which happens once and cannot be repeated (*Laughter* 164). Its function is, therefore, to lift "the veil" that we adopt so as to act, and to remind us that "a fuller view of reality" requires more than "only...the utilitarian side of things": "Vivre consiste à agir. Vivre, c'est n'accepter des objets que l'impression *utile* pour y répondre par des réactions appropriées." But for the artist, the "voile"—which separates "la nature et nous" and "nous et notre propre conscience"—is almost nonexistent, "presque transparent" (*Œuvres: Rire* 459; *Laughter* 168, 158). Artists are blessed with a "pure perception" of the "immateriality of life," traditionally connected with idealism: the artist's soul "apercevrait toutes choses dans leur pureté originelle, aussi bien les formes, les couleurs et les sons du monde matériel que les plus subtils mouvements de la vie intérieure." What art gives us is, however, not just the "immaterial," but also "a more direct vision of reality": "L'art n'est sûrement qu'une vision plus directe de la réalité." Artists not only reveal the unique colors of "actual things themselves," which we tend to read as "labels" only, but also "la[y] hold of the potential in the real" and, as it were, fill

in the “outline or sketch” left by nature in their soul so as to produce “a finished work of art”: “le réalisme,” Bergson claims, “est dans l’œuvre quand l’idéalisme est dans l’âme” (*Œuvres: Rire* 461-2; *Laughter* 159-62, 169). The latter identity echoes Schelling’s “ideal realism,” and is another way in which Bergson builds on the earlier tradition.

On the whole, Creative Evolution is a site where earlier vitalistic thought intertwines. Bergson grounds his notion of evolution on a dynamic definition of matter, which recalls that of Schelling, as does his focus on tendencies to express characteristics rather than on the characteristics themselves: “*le groupe ne se définira plus par la possession de certains caractères, mais par la tendance à les accentuer*”; hence, we can examine, at any particular juncture, whether one species chooses to manifest a certain variation while another does not (Bergson, *Œuvres: EC* 585).³³ That his philosophy is an amalgamation of Schelling’s and Lamarck’s views is evident, furthermore, in Bergson’s conception of the Life Force: “*l’élan vital*,” he explains, “traversant la matière, voudrait obtenir tout d’un coup,” and it would succeed if it were not for material limitations, and if applying an external force were not a threat to its otherwise free expression: “Il y réussirait, sans doute, si sa puissance était illimité ou si quelque aide lui pouvait venir du dehors. Mais l’élan est fini, et il a été donné une fois pour toutes. Il ne peut pas surmonter tous les obstacles” (Bergson, *Œuvres: EC* 710). Bergson combines Schelling’s understanding of the mutual interdependence of the finite and the infinite, with Lamarck’s view of force, which is necessarily delimited by the physical matter it encounters even as it transforms it. Variations and diversity in nature result precisely from this resistance, and since the latter also precludes completion and perfection, it creates the need for new evolutionary paths and, in turn, the potential for ongoing growth.

Occasionally, having encountered an obstacle, this impetus may take a wrong turn and cause destruction rather than creation, but that is an inevitable part of the vital flux.

We can trace this idea back to Schelling's brief discussion of old animistic theories. Schelling criticizes the (traditional) vitalistic notion of a "Life-force," pointing out that "however prevalent this expression may be," it is actually "a completely self-contradictory concept," for a force must be limited by another opposing it lest it contribute to the body's self-combustion or annihilation (Schelling, *Ideas* 37). In Chapter 6 of the *Ideas*, Schelling discusses ancient sun worship, that is, the celebration of Nature in the symbol of fire. Light and heat, he says, have long been conceived of as the animating forces of the universe and have become, in effect, associated with "vital force"; however, when given free reign, light and heat "would destroy everything," because they are "limitless," so that "Nature is obliged...to restore the equilibrium" in temperate zones where heat might predominate. In fact, that is where inert or dead matter needs to function as a necessary delimiting force (Schelling, *Ideas* 131-2).

Similarly, in Schelling's philosophical fragment *Clara, or, On Nature's Connection to the Spirit World* (1810?), the titular heroine admits that, while nature is "an essentially creative force...concerned only with creation," occasionally, when it is not "free," it may have the opposite effect:

if it came up against a resistant material that let itself be formed only up to a certain point and that therefore limited the force's pleasure in creating, the force would abandon or even intentionally destroy this material just to carry on enjoying its pleasure in creating, even if it also knew that with the

next creation it would come up against the same point again. (Schelling, *Clara* 23)

Thus, anticipating what Bergson would say about the “vital impetus,” Schelling urges us to espouse even nature’s negative moves, reminding us that destruction is inevitable given external “restriction or limitation.”

The Schellingian principle of reciprocity also applies to Bergson’s understanding of the relationship between intelligence and instinct. These faculties “s’opposent et se complètent” (are “opposite and complementary”), as are animal and vegetable life, as well as the opposing forces in Schelling’s dynamic dualism. “Ni l’un ni l’autre ne se rencontrent jamais à’état pur” (Bergson, *Œuvres: EC* 610).³⁴ Although not for the same reason as Hume, Bergson comes to the same conclusion, valuing instinct as a more trustworthy faculty upon which intellect has had to rely: intelligence is linked to the production of tools and artificial objects by the *Homo faber*, but this is based on the high organization provided by instinct. The latter is “molded on the very form of life” and it “proceeds...organically,” carrying on life’s work of organizing matter, so that it becomes difficult to say where instinct begins and matter ends: “il n’y a pas de ligne de démarcation tranchée entre l’instinct de l’animal et le travail organisateur de la matière vivante. On pourra dire, à volonté, que l’instinct organize les instruments dont il va se servir, ou que l’organisation se prolonge dans l’instinct qui doit utiliser l’organe” (*Œuvres: EC* 613; *Creative* 154-7). Because it *knows* matter, instinct deals with categorical propositions and is linked to action. Yet, insofar as it is unsuited to hypothetical propositions, its application is limited. As a faculty of knowing forms and relations (“if the conditions are such, such will be the conditioned”), intellect is “a frame on which an

infinity of objects may find room.” Unlike instinct, however, it is characterized by a “natural inability to comprehend life”: “*L’intelligence est caractérisée par une incomprehension naturelle de la vie*” (*Œvres: EC 635; Creative 182*). Bergson thus reframes the contrast between instinct and intelligence in terms of the Vitalist/Mechanist debate: the one operates “organiquement” (and is associated with “organization”), while the other moves “mécaniquement,” as is appropriate for empirical science (and thus “fabrication”) (Bergson, *Œvres: EC 635, 625*).

To recap, Bergson associates the genesis of intelligence with that of inert matter and, by extension, with science’s mechanistic conception of nature: “*L’intelligence ne se représente clairement que le discontinu*” and “*l’immobilité*” (*Œvres: EC 626-7*; original emphasis). The distinct individuality of bodies and particles is a function of perception, he points out, for “a body is present wherever its influence is felt”—in other words, wherever it is having an effect on us, prompting, in turn, that we react within a mechanistically defined series of causes and effects. “Our perceptions give us the plan of our eventual action on things much more than that of things themselves,” because intellect—as is science—is practical and action-oriented (Bergson, *Creative 204-7*). Because it is a guide to conduct, intellect requires, moreover, that matter be (seen as) inert, clearly outlined so as to be incorporated into causal relations, quantified in terms of expectations, and manipulated accordingly (Bergson, *Œvres: EC 628*). A view of reality in flux, of a universe that *endures*, on the other hand, opposes individuated perception in principle, and reveals the insufficiency of intelligence and science when it comes to life.

* * *

Up to this point, we have examined some of the ways in which nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinkers tried to distinguish between living beings and inorganic bodies, which were subject to the same explanations and viewed equally reductively by materialist science rooted in the philosophy of empiricism; and to establish a foundation for knowledge outside the strictures of Mechanism. Those Vitalists who, disillusioned with the authority of reason, turned to “natural instinct,” re-inscribed humans into the mechanism of nature, but made sure to redefine causation so as to include purpose, as did Lamarck and Bergson. Such identification of humans with nature posed, however, an additional problem: instinct could help distinguish between the living and the non-living, but, as an attribute evolutionarily distributed among the animal world at large, it did not help to differentiate among the animals themselves (other than on the basis of organ complexity, as we find in Lamarck). This put in question the special status of humans and the freedom of their will. Could humans be at once free and part of nature? And could they draw inspiration and energy from the instinctual animal world without being enmeshed in it and themselves reduced to simple beasts? Although seemingly paradoxical, the Vitalist answer to both had to be in the affirmative, and as in the case of knowledge, for ethical freedom an “inclusive” view of causality was necessary, and so both instinct and nature had to be “revitalized.”

Hume defined instincts in mechanistic terms. Contrary to those who described them “as something very extraordinary, and inexplicable,” he relied on common sense and claimed that animals engaged in the same kind of “experimental reasoning” as did humans, making the power of will “nothing but a species of *instinct or mechanical power*, that acts in us unknown to ourselves” (Hume, *Enquiry* 118; my emphasis).

The evolutionist Lamarck largely agreed with Hume, and although he ascribed some of the motivations of more complex animals to their will, he still conceived voluntary acts, along with instinct and habit, as part of a larger causal mechanism. He defines the will, *volonté*, as “une détermination à une action, opérée par l’intelligence de l’individu,” specifically, as the result of judgment which is, in turn, determined by a thought or idea (an impression of the outside world). The language of necessity (“résulte toujours,” “provient nécessairement,” “détermine”) inscribes the will into the framework of causality; the explanation of how “the inner feeling” operates (receiving an “émotion” and sending “le fluide nerveux” toward the muscles to be moved) is given in physicalist terms (Lamarck, *Philosophie* 330-1, 333).³⁵ Lacking a special organ for intelligence, which Lamarck calls the “hypocéphale,” animals possess no will of their own; some of them are prompted to action by causes in the environment, while in others “le sentiment intérieur,” itself moved by sensations, serves as “un moteur suffisant” to produce movement; there is no deliberation or judgment (*Philosophie* 331-6). There are, in effect, two types of “volonté”: caused directly by a sensation or the result of a determination by judgment (*Philosophie* 335). Even those animals that have intelligence, however, rely for the most part not on judgment-conditioned “volonté”—which is thus prone to error—but on “instinct” and “habitude” which help them avoid mistakes, “ne se tromp[er] jamais”: “Il suit de là que leurs actes de *volonté* sont des déterminations qui les font toujours satisfaire sans erreur aux besoins qui les émeuvent.” For this reason, Lamarck maintains that animal instinct is a torch brighter than human reason: “On a dit, d’après cela, que l’instinct pour les animaux étoit un flambeau qui les éclairoit mieux que notre raison,” anticipating his later assertion that reason is no such burning torch, neither “une faculté”

nor “un flambeau” (*Philosophie* 340-1, 441). Though less free to decide than we are, and more or less equal with respect to intelligence, animals are also largely free from error, whereas our diverse judgments, “erronés” or lacking in “justesse,” risk producing equally diverse and disordered action (*Philosophie* 344). Lamarck’s view of animals echoes that of Thomas Aquinas, who noted that because of their orderly and predictable behavior, animals are more mechanical than human beings, who are capable of rational decision-making (Price 23).³⁶ By bypassing the judgment component of the will, Lamarck offers a potential solution to reason’s epistemological uncertainty at the same time as he provides a stable motivation linking animals with nature. The human will, however, does not fare so well.

Like Lamarck, Bergson considers the degree of choice in humans as that which distinguishes them from animals, who are nearly incapable of agency; yet, unlike his predecessor, Bergson has more faith in human freedom. In animals, “les mécanismes moteurs que le cerveau arrive à monter, ou, en d’autres termes, les habitudes que sa volonté contracte, n’ont d’autre objet et d’autre effet que d’accomplir les mouvements dessinés dans ces habitudes, enmagasinés dans ces mécanismes”; hence, animal “invention” is little more than a re-invention of the same routine insofar as it breaks automatism in order to create a new kind of automatism. In humans, on the other hand, “l’habitude...peut tenir en échec d’autres habitudes motrices et, par là, en domptant l’automatisme, mettre en liberté la conscience”; although it may be “enchained” during the process of deliberation, conscience ultimately liberates itself: “la conscience, qui eût été entraînée et noyée dans l’accomplissement de l’acte, se ressaisit et se libère,” and

therefore consciousness is, in Arthur Mitchell's translation, "synonymous with invention and with freedom" (Bergson, *Œuvres: EC* 651; *Creative* 287-8).

At the same time, the link between humans and the instinctual world of nature can never be entirely severed. Intuition, a higher form of instinct (and one that, as we recall, precedes intellect in Schelling's definition) works together with intelligence, relying on a productive reciprocity—or, as Bergson also calls it, "sympathie"—between the two antagonistic but also complementary "directions" in the "spectacle de l'évolution":

"l'intuition, je veux dire l'instinct devenu désintéressé, conscient de lui-même, capable de réfléchir sur son objet et de l'élargir indéfiniment" (Bergson, *Œuvres: EC* 652, 645).³⁷

While it may receive a push ("secousse") from intelligence to rise, it is, fundamentally, instinctual, and thus introduces us to "the proper domain of life":

par la communication sympathique qu'elle établira entre nous et le reste des vivants, par la dilatation qu'elle obtiendra de notre conscience, [l'intuition] nous introduira dans le domaine propre de la vie, qui est compénétration réciproque, création indéfiniment continuée. Mais si, par là, elle dépasse l'intelligence, c'est de l'intelligence que sera venue la secousse qui l'aura fait monter au point où est. (Bergson, *Œuvres: EC* 646)

Without the intellect, intuition would not be able to detach itself from the object in which it has only practical interest ("elle serait restée, sous forme d'instinct, rivée à l'objet spécial qui l'intéresse pratiquement"), so, just as in the case of instinct, intelligence must *complement* its action (*Œuvres: EC* 646).

The above quotations from Bergson stress the paradoxical state of human freedom within an evolutionary paradigm, in which humans and animals are linked through

instinct. Rereading them, we realize that the difference between the species is, in fact, itself a species of the larger problem of determinism, grounded, as is the epistemological dimension of the Vitalist/Mechanist debate, in the question of causation. Predicated on causation, philosophical determinism implied by the mechanistic model opposes freedom, transforming humans into individual cogs of Nature's complex machine. In vitalistic terms, this is too restrictive, too arbitrary, in a word—too mechanical. Hume undermines the legitimacy of the will's determination by pointing out that, as when dealing with physical things, this causation is illusory. Schelling, who cannot accept Kant's soft determinist position because it is predicated on a dogmatic positing of two worlds, rejects causality in the *Ideas* while, in the *Philosophy of Art*, he sees necessity as dissolved in freedom in the indifference that he calls "organism"; in both works, Schelling counteracts Hume's skepticism by asserting the Identity of Mind and Nature. And for Croce, who believes all reality is Spirit, this is not a problem at all.

When Hume investigates the idea of "necessary connexion" in the context of volition, his conclusion about the exercise of human will (in his words, the relationship between motion and volition) echoes his broader conclusion about causation: that the will can exert power over the limbs, for example, is a matter of common practice, but the nature of that impetus (the movement of muscles which follows a volition in the mind and produces a change in another organ) is unknown to us. "We learn the influence of our will from experience alone," but we do not know "the manner, in which this operation is performed [or] the power by which it is produced" (Hume, *Enquiry* 71-3).

In addition, according to Hume, both natural and moral causes involve the same physical necessity; in other words, motion follows volition no differently than any physical effect does the material force which initiates it:

being once convinced that we know nothing farther of causation of any kind than merely the *constant conjunction* of objects, and the consequent *inference* of the mind from one to another, and finding that these two circumstances are universally allowed to have place in voluntary actions; we may be more easily led to own the same necessity common to all causes. (Hume, *Enquiry* 100)

Hence, just as “by a *customary transition*,” causes and effects in the external world appear to the mind to be “*constantly conjoined* together,” so are motive and action—even if we do not “*feel*...such connexion.” Yet, both are unknowable. Hume contradicts those philosophers who “ascrib[e] necessity to the determinations of the will” (*Enquiry* 100-1), and though short of dismissing its power altogether, makes us seriously doubt it.

Kant, who was not ready to yield to Hume’s skepticism, offered a solution to the paradox of the human will and universal causation in the so-called “Third Antimony” in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783). “*Thesis*,” Kant states: “There are in the world causes through freedom. *Antithesis*: There is no freedom, but all is nature” (75). Each of the prepositions in this antimony can be demonstrated “by equally clear, evident, and irresistible proofs”; but because such concepts cannot be discovered by experience to be true or fictitious, reason is “divided against itself, a state at which the skeptic rejoices, but which must make the critical philosopher pause and feel ill at ease” (Kant 75). Kant’s solution is to posit a duality of worlds, where the spatiotemporal is

bound while the *noumenal* remains free: “Nature and freedom therefore can without contradiction be attributed to the very same thing, but in different relations—on one side as an appearance, on the other as a thing in itself” (Kant 78-9).

To Schelling neither of these approaches seemed cogent. We have reviewed the problems he found with Hume’s skepticism and the dualism of the Kantians. In one of his first publications, Schelling described the same logical contradiction as did Kant, with the unity of subject and object forcing reason to accept two “antagonistic” (and mutually exclusive) views: the principle of causation is offered at once by the self that is free but capable of originating causation, any by the world, which operates through cause and effect.³⁸ Because both possibilities are not only conceivable but equally potent, reason “falls into disagreement with itself”; this is, according to Schelling, one of the symptoms of the crisis of philosophy (Wirth 139).

In the *Ideas*, Schelling suggests that we shift our focus away from the causal mechanism in favor of a more dynamic interaction between forces overseen by a higher principle of organization. Living beings exist for themselves in his system, and are neither causes nor effects of something or somebody else. For Hume, what complicates matters is that the exact nature of the union between body and soul is “mysterious”; and the mind has even less “command over the body” than it has “over itself,” since we have more trouble controlling our passions than we do our thoughts, especially if some sense organ is defective (*Enquiry* 71, 74-5). In contrast, the mind/body problem is not an issue for Schelling, whose conception of freedom is tied with purposiveness and *freedom from mechanism*, as we have noted earlier. Neither their relationship nor their individual nature matters as much as the idea itself: “*Mind*, considered as the principle of life, is

called *soul*... We do not ask how in general a connection is possible between soul and body... but rather—what one can understand and must answer—how the idea of such a connection has risen *in us*.” Schelling counters Hume’s skepticism with an assertion of certainty: “because I am immediately aware of my own being, the inference to a soul in me, even if the conclusion should be false, at least rests on *one* indubitable premise, that *I am, live, imagine, will*” (*Ideas* 38-9).

In the *Philosophy of Art*, Schelling combines Kant’s two worlds in his totalizing system, and, through the theory of the three *Potenzen*, transforms the dualism into absolute identity and “allness” that is God. His philosophy of identity encompasses the philosophy of nature, spirit, and art, and within this system, the necessity of nature, which is itself a potency, is balanced with the freedom of spirit, that is, the next potency, with art’s becoming the crowning “indifference” in this tripartite movement. When discussing beauty, for instance, Schelling notes the correspondence between necessity and freedom, and emphasizes the interpenetration of the real and the ideal:

...we say a figure is beautiful in whose design nature appears to have played with the greatest freedom and the most sublime presence of mind, yet always within the forms or boundaries of the strictest necessity and adherence to law... Accordingly, art is an absolute synthesis or mutual interpenetration of freedom and necessity. (Schelling, *Philosophy* 30)

Like Schelling, Croce rejects the “double order” of the philosophical dualists, though he takes issue not with Kant’s two worlds, but with the nature philosophies of the Renaissance and of the Romantic age. Such views, he argues, pose epistemological and ethical difficulty, because they “took as their starting point the concept of that which is

‘other’ than the spirit, intrinsic otherness, the absolute unconscious,” thereby asserting a “fundamental dualism”; they approached nature, accordingly, using “metaphor and imaginuous analogy.” These views did not, however, explain how an “other,” especially if “absolutely unconscious,” could even be imagined, let alone known (Croce 756). Croce evokes the paradoxical relationship between necessity (“material, mechanical, deterministic nature”) and freedom (“the liberty of the spirit”) in order to criticize those philosophers who begin with this fundamental assumption of otherness:

La nature: voilà l’ennemie: that material, mechanical, deterministic nature which stands in opposition to the ends, the ideals, the liberty of the spirit, that Schopenhauerian Will, acknowledged as nature, source of pain and evil which, notwithstanding all that Schopenhauer may say, we cannot extinguish in ourselves by a renunciation of the will which would be itself an act of will, nor by ascetic practices which are themselves an endless series of volitions. (Croce 760)

He solves the problem of the will by insisting that there is no non-spirit and that all there is, is spirit that is willful, even when it is choosing to denounce its own will. Croce also reframes the question raised by Hume and Schelling by conceiving the will not as mediating between a transcendent soul and a finite body, which introduces the issue of causation, but as a unified “spiritual utility” practiced by a “moral conscience” (763).

On the whole, the anti-mechanistic critique voiced by Schelling, Bergson, Gentile, and others posed a cogent theoretical challenge to Mechanism. To preserve freedom, nineteenth-century thinkers who emerged from this tradition either had to reject or “revitalize” causality. Some, like Schelling, did the former, and included freedom from

mechanism in the very definition of life. Others, like Lamarck and Bergson, suggested that, paradoxically, humans could be free when acting on instinct, which was not free, provided that nature had been conceived dynamically.

* * *

Having looked at the arguments of several prominent thinkers in the Vitalist tradition, we can safely say that it was possible to accept Hume's premises yet draw from them radically different conclusions. Running the risk of oversimplification, let us summarize Hume's stance once more: (1) since matter is heterogeneous and in flux, and (2) causality is something imposed upon the world by the mind but ultimately unverifiable, then (3) the universe is closed off to reason and, in that sense, unknowable. Vitalists accepted (1) and (2), but not (3): matter is full of energy and can be molded by vital forces, and while the universe is closed off to rational inquiry, it reveals itself in brief glimpses to our intuition. Schelling preserved the possibility of certainty and redefined the analogy between the self and the world by substituting it with the identity between Mind and Nature. Although, from an empiricist standpoint, this system might seem dogmatic, its objective validity is less relevant to the current study than the impact it had on the nineteenth-century Vitalists, who might have been skeptical of the extent of power Schelling ascribed to the Mind, but saw in his system an antidote to far more dangerous all-encompassing skepticism. The hero of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* read Schelling, as did the novel's author. Croce generally concurred, but also reminded us that the other, mechanical mode of thinking was still important to understanding our surroundings. And because these and other Vitalist philosophers operated within a

similarly holistic, “inclusive” paradigm to match their “inclusive” view of nature and humanity, they avoided the pitfalls of Hume’s restrictive materialism.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, we will see how Tolstoy, Meredith, Butler, and Shaw drew on the dynamism of nature and the privileging of instincts that we find in Lamarck and Schelling. But before we move on to the next chapter, in which we will explore how these ideas informed the growing rift between poetry and science, let us look briefly at the status of Vitalism in contemporary philosophy of science.

* * *

American philosopher Daniel C. Dennett reduces Vitalism to a bogus claim that “there is some big, mysterious extra ingredient in all living things.” Vitalists, he writes, “hav[e] been misled by an illusion,” and the displacement of their views is “that happy success story” which should inspire others to debunk *myths*, like “the erstwhile mystery of what *life* is” (Dennett 178). Although Vitalism and Neo-Vitalism, as it came to be known in the twentieth century, had an important and relatively long run in the sciences, today the movement seems to be all but obsolete.³⁹ The title of Dennett’s 2005 book in which he takes up Vitalism, *Sweet Dreams: Philosophical Obstacles to a Science of Consciousness*, reflects his belief that to get past theoretical blocks to “science,” we need to wake up from “dreams” of this kind, however “sweet” they may be. More broadly, it reflects the dominance of chemistry and neuroscience over the domain of consciousness, and the displacement of qualitative psychological speculation by quantitative observations based on hard empirical data.

However, Dennett misrepresents Vitalism on two counts: by dressing up the Vitalist claim in quasi-supernatural terms (“the erstwhile mystery”), and by suggesting

that it has been completely displaced by mechanistic views. As we have seen in the previous pages, the Vitalist Lamarck, who associated life with a “special” force, and argued that matter had to be supple to allow this force to permeate and shape it, also stressed the role of the environment in shaping organisms, thereby laying the foundation for modern zoology and botany. His *Philosophie zoologique* is, according to one scholar, “the most advanced philosophical position taken up by men of science in the pre-Darwinian era” (Elliot, Intro to *Zoological* xxii). Lamarck’s favoring of the mutability of species (as opposed to the theory of special creation which dominated science at the turn of the century) was, in fact, ahead of his time, and influenced the work of many nineteenth-century British and continental naturalists, such as Lyell, who agreed with Lamarck’s evolutionary theory because, on its terms, change could be described without resorting to “the First Cause,” with every new species, in other words, initiated by some divine agency. The most famous of Lyell’s disciples, Charles Darwin, had to grapple with Lamarck’s ideas, as well.

What is more, the Neo-Lamarckian belief that a living organism adapts to the environment thanks to its own “effort” (and not, as Darwin argued, due to some evolutionary advantage acquired randomly) is echoed in recent research findings in experimental biology. Announced by Stanislaw Karpinski and published by the Society for Experimental Biology, these indicate that *Arabidopsis* plants have evolved “nervous systems,” containing so-called bundle sheath cells, which carry “electro-chemical signals” and act much like animal “nerves,” transmitting information about light intensity to different parts of the organism even in the dark. It has been confirmed that the plants’ response to chemical signals had helped them adapt to and survive environmental

stresses, and the fact that these light-induced reactions continued in the dark led the scientists to conclude that the plants “‘remembered’ the information encoded in light”; moreover, plants “used information encrypted in the light to immunise themselves against seasonal pathogens.” Botanist Christine Foyer said that this sort of reaction “requires an appraisal of the situation and an appropriate response—that [is] a form of intelligence” (Gill; no pag.).⁴⁰ Although terms such as “memory” or “think” are placed in quotation marks and meant figuratively when describing plants, the underlying message about intelligent “nervous” activity is quite unambiguous, and it requires that we use a model other than the strictly mechanistic one.

A contemporary of Lamarck, the pathological anatomist Xavier Bichat (1771-1802) asserted in his *General Anatomy (Anatomie générale, 1801)* “the irreducibility of the living to the mechanical or chemical”: in Michel Foucault’s formulation, life, for Bichat, “is not a set of characteristics that are distinguished from the inorganic, but the background against which the opposition between the organism and the non-living may be perceived, situated, and laden with all the positive values of conflict. Life is not the form of the organism, but the organism is the visible form of life in its resistance to that which does not live and which opposes it” (Foucault, *Clinic* 154). Similarly, for the prominent eighteenth-century French naturalist Comte de Buffon (1707-1788), degeneration (the process by which individuals “diverged from their specific types”) was evidence of the specificity of life: a purely physical body cannot deviate from its type; hence, death was linked to life in a fundamental way and, though technically, the negation of life, it came to manifest and confirm its positivity (Foucault, *Clinic* 145, 157).

A glance at the November 1918 edition of *The Philosophical Review*, an issue in which Vitalism figures prominently, would further reveal that the Vitalist biologists were concerned less with Dennett's bogus causes than they were with the level of predictability that a mechanistic approach to life would entail. In one article in this issue, R. F. Alfred Hoernlé maintains that the topic "has been one of the chief meeting-points of experimental research on the one side and philosophical speculation on the other," and names "Aristotle, Bacon, Galileo, Descartes, Newton, Leibniz, Hume, Kant" among its theorists (629). Arguing neither for pure Vitalism nor pure Mechanism, "but mechanism *and* teleology," Hoernlé strikes what appears to be a Vitalist compromise: the phenomena of life cannot be fully explained by physico-chemical processes, he says, and need to be supplemented with, though not substituted by, teleological concepts, such as means to ends (629-30). He preserves purposiveness without falling into the sort of witchcraft Dennett has in mind. In another article on this subject, H. S. Jennings argues that conscious states have no equivalents in the non-living and cannot be reduced to mere epiphenomena; consequently, life cannot be reduced to physics or subsumed by "experimental determinism," which would make it entirely predictable.

Dennett's second objection, that Vitalism has been displaced, does not hold up either. Whatever the status of scientific Vitalism, the Vitalist/Mechanist controversy has not disappeared from recent scholarly debate. In an article published in 2000, Paul S. Agutter, P. Colm Malone, and Denys N. Wheatley take issue with mechanistic materialism, the claim that "all phenomena of animal and plant physiology could be explained wholly in terms of physics" (mechanics, optics, thermodynamics, and the studies of electricity and magnetism) (76). The authors admit that there remains, in

biology, “the temptation of reductionism,” and trace it back to the ambitious eighteenth-century project to create “a complete ‘physics of biology’,” which had failed by 1900 when chemistry came to dominate the life sciences. While the authors may not explicitly evoke nineteenth-century notions of “vital property” and “vital force,” they side with the Vitalists, confirming that the claim of mechanistic materialism (“that physicochemical data can and should be interpreted in precisely the same way irrespective of whether the system is living or non-living”) remains a “dream,” albeit a “seductive” one:

“Physicochemical data can be obtained from living systems, but the whole corpus of modern cell and molecular biology makes it clear that such data can seldom, if ever, be interpreted in the same way as in non-living systems” (Agutter et al. 104).

Hence, both of Dennett’s charges against Vitalism—that it is a mysticism, rather than a serious philosophical and scientific position, and that it has been displaced by more properly empirical research into the nature of life—do not hold up upon scrutiny. Far from a sweet dream or a theoretical obstacle, it continues to fuel scholarly debate.

¹ Published in Vol.1 of Wagner’s *Dictionary of Physiology* (Braunschweig, 1842).

² Lyell’s *Principles* had generated such a lively debate that by the time the third volume came out in 1833, the first two were in a second edition; the third edition of the entire opus appeared a year later, and within a decade, a revised sixth edition was published (Rudwick liv).

³ Reill borrows the term “languages of nature” from the title of Ludmilla Jordanova’s 1986 book, where she explains, “Languages of nature are made and not pre-given, and they are made, furthermore, according to different rules, assumptions and aesthetic preferences, for distinct purposes by various constituencies according to their context.” These “revea[l] their [authors’] epistemology, for example, through the authorities evoked, the images of knowledge employed and the value given to the different senses” (Jordanova, *Languages* 27).

⁴ One of the reasons for this, Reill points out, is that the static language of seventeenth-century Mechanism could now be used as “support for the status quo—for political

absolutism, religious orthodoxy and established social hierarchies” (5). In addition to Hume, this new language of nature was, in varying degrees, shaping up in the works of Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, Marie-Jean-Antoine Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, Denis Diderot, and Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis.

⁵ I adopt the term “epistemological modesty” from Reill, taking it to mean greater caution when making assertions about what we know; on the spectrum of knowledge, it lies somewhere between the more “arrogant”—that is to say, potentially dogmatic—approach associated with clarity and certainty, and the complete uncertainty implied by philosophical skepticism. Although “modesty” may have an ethical connotation (e.g., of humility), I use it simply to differentiate between the different levels of knowing assumed by different groups.

⁶ They were, moreover, intrigued by origins and fascinated by different emanations of the *Ur*: “mythology, ancient languages, original folk tales, Vedic religion, ancient Greek philosophy, the Middle Ages, and, for some, Roman Catholicism” (Reill 217). The *Naturphilosophen* also tried to legitimize their pursuits by rooting themselves in ancient and medieval philosophy; they “turned to past philosophers to authorize their project of mathematizing and dematerializing the universe”: Pythagoras, Plato, Plotinus, Leibniz, and sometimes Paracelsus and the Kabbala; most of these philosophers, Reill adds, “with the possible exception of Leibniz,” were, moreover, “proclaimed enemies of late Enlightenment natural philosophy” (202-4).

⁷ The rift between humans and Nature is a step necessary to create a higher, more complex unity combining the reciprocal forces of reflection and action: “[m]ere reflection... is a spiritual sickness,” because it dominates and “kills [a person’s] highest being, his spiritual life, which issues only from... Identity.” Reflection forces us to distance ourselves from Nature in order to examine it objectively; action, on the other hand, requires that thought be suspended so that we can have an immediate impact on the world, with which we feel we are one and the same.

⁸ “[Hume’s] explanation turns in a circle, for the very thing that had to be explained was *why things have hitherto followed one another in this order* (which Hume does not deny). Was this sequence perhaps something in the things outside us? But apart from our ideas there is no succession. Or, if it was merely the succession of our ideas, then a reason for the persistence of this succession must also be given. What exists independent of me I am unable to explain; but for what goes on only *in me* the reason must be found also in me. Hume can say: It is so, and that satisfies me. But this is not to philosophize (Schelling, *Ideas* 26-7).

⁹ Schelling admits that the question “whether Nature and experience be possible” is asked neither by scientists (those “absorbed in research into Nature”) nor by ordinary people (those “absorbed... in the sheer enjoyment of her abundance”), who accept the connection as a given.

¹⁰ He finds unsatisfactory, for example, the Swiss physicist Georges-Louis Le Sage's (1724-1803) explanation of gravitational attraction in terms of an ether composed of *particules ultramondaines*; and the view that a heated body expands because of the vibration of particles because he sees this as a mechanical account (228).

¹¹ Schelling derived this notion of opposite forces operating within matter from the German Idealist logician Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), whose dialectic of self and not-self he had found more convincing than Kant's transcendental account (in the *Critique of Reason*) and, particularly, the latter's dogmatic postulation of things-in-themselves and the lack of explanation as to how these things-in-themselves could cause representations (Schelling, *Ideas* 25-7).

In the second edition of the *Ideas*, Schelling no longer relied on the Fichtean dialectic and developed his own philosophy of identity: out of an absolute original unity (the Parmedian/Neo-Platonic homogenous, undifferentiated, "absolute itself"), he now argued, arose a duality, as a "self-division of the undivided absoluteness into subject and object"; consequently, these opposites were brought to unity with their difference in tact (Stern xx-xxi; Schelling, *Ideas* 47).

¹² Take the equilibrium of "vital forces" in air, for instance: air is produced by the vegetable kingdom, and mephitic gas (CO₂) is released by animals upon exhalation; the polarity here is between life-giving oxygen [*Lebensluft*] and damaging nitrogen, or azotic air [*Asotische Luft*] (Stern, Introduction xiii-iv; Schelling, *Ideas* 88).

¹³ Spinoza was the first to see this unity of "thought and extension simply as modifications of the same principle," and to notice how close the real was connected to the ideal (Schelling, *Ideas* 15, 27). But Spinoza's positing of the infinite outside us seemed too limiting; hence, Schelling incorporated the ideal and infinite into the real and finite, thereby also combining absolute identity with the possibility of diversity.

¹⁴ Schelling substituted "Mind" for "Spirit" in the Second edition of the *Ideas*, without much difference in meaning. In the Second edition we read: "But now beyond and above Nature, in the ordinary notion of it, nothing higher is acknowledged than mind." In the First, the same sentence read: "Now we know nothing higher, for which forces as such could exist, than Spirit; for only Spirit can represent to itself forces and equilibrium or conflict of forces" (Schelling, *Ideas* 38, 38n).

¹⁵ "Like all sound political conceptions, Fascism is action and it is thought."

¹⁶ "The Fascist State, as a higher and more powerful expression of personality, is force, but a *spiritual* one...It is no mere *mechanical device* for defining the sphere within which the individual may duly exercise his supposed rights. The Fascist State is an inwardly accepted standard and rule of conduct, a discipline of the whole person" (my emphasis).

¹⁷ Reill criticizes *Naturphilosophie* for bringing philosophy back to the standards of the Classical period, what Foucault calls *mathesis*; he finds with it the same faults as with German Idealism, such as an overreliance on reason and a tendency toward dogmatism. Being less “epistemologically modest” than the Enlightenment vitalists, the *Naturphilosophen* preferred identity to analogy (rapport, cooperation, reciprocity) in what Reill sees as their “arrogant” and unreserved pursuit of certainty. These philosophers “launched a full-scale attack upon any form of mechanism,” but, in effect, “sacrificed epistemological modesty at the altar of certainty, raising reflective introspection to the status of universal truths of nature, spirit, and humanity” (Reill 200-4).

¹⁸ “Reason is not a faculty; still less is it a torch or entity of any kind; but it is a special condition of the individual’s intellectual faculties”; “altered by experience, [it] gradually improves and controls the judgments, according as the individual exercises his intellect” (Lamarck, *Zoological* 401-2).

¹⁹ According to Hugh Elliot, “Lamarck was a follower of Locke and the empirical school. He believed that all ideas were acquired, and that there were no such things as innate ideas” (Intro lxxxvi).

²⁰ “...to enquire as to what life really consists of, and what are the conditions necessary for the production of this natural phenomenon and its power of dwelling in a body” (Lamarck, *Zoological* 2).

²¹ Lamarck defines *Use-Inheritance* as follows: “l’emploi soutenu d’un organe concourt à son développement, le fortifie, et l’agrandit même; tandis qu’un défaut d’emploi, devenu habituel à l’égard d’un organe, nuit à ses développemens, le détériore, le réduit graduellement, et finit par le faire disparaître” (“...the continued use of any organ leads to its development, strengthens it and even enlarges it, while permanent disuse of any organ is injurious to its development, causes it to deteriorate and ultimately disappear” / “modify cellular tissues in which they move, open passages in them, form various canals, and finally create different organs”).

Differentiation is, in turn, the process by which fluids “modifient le tissu cellulaire dans lequel ils se meuvent, s’y ouvrent des passages, y forment des canaux divers, enfin, y créent différens organs” (Lamarck, *Philosophie* v; *Zoological* 2).

²² “...nature varies her means when necessary in order to attain the same end” / “Very imperfect animals” therefore “live only by the help of excitations [or “force,” in the *Preliminary Discourse*, 11] which they receive from the exterior” (Lamarck, *Zoological* 5-6).

²³ “...le pouvoir des changemens de *circonstances*, pour donner aux animaux de nouveaux besoins, et les amener à de nouvelles actions; celui des nouvelles *actions* répétées pour entraîner les nouvelles *habitudes* et les nouveaux *penchans*; enfin, celui de l’emploi plus ou moins fréquent de tel ou tel organe pour modifier cet organe, soit en le fortifiant, le

développant et l'étendant, soit en l'affoiblissant, l'amaigrissant, l'atténuant et le faisant même disparaître" (Lamarck, *Philosophie* 74).

²⁴ "...that feeling of existence which is possessed only by animals which enjoy the faculty of feeling," which can, moreover, "be aroused by physical and moral [psychological] needs, and which becomes the source whence movements and actions derive their means of execution" (Lamarck, *Zoological* 3-5).

²⁵ "[It is] a very obscure but real inner feeling that has been called the feeling of existence," and also, when subject to "thought and attention," the ego (Lamarck, *Zoological* 334).

²⁶ He echoes the Romantics' mystical register, e.g.: "We must strive to see in order to see, and no longer to see in order to act. Then the Absolute is revealed very near us and, in a certain measure, in us. It is of psychological and not of mathematical or logical essence. It lives with us" (Bergson, *Creative* 324).

²⁷ According to de Gennaro, "The influence is clear even though the point of departure was different for each thinker: In Bergson the idea of the practicality of science is based on the criterion of the intellect as a mediate but not immediate knowledge; in Croce the concept of science as something economic is founded on the distinction of practical and theoretical activity" (13).

²⁸ "La mémoire... n'est pas une faculté de classer des souvenirs dans un tiroir ou de les inscrire sur un registre. Il n'y a pas de registre, pas de tiroir, il n'y a pas même pas ici, à proprement parler, une faculté, car une faculté s'exerce par intermittences, quand elle veut ou quand elle peut, tandis que l'amoncellement du passé sur le passé se poursuit sans trêve" (Bergson, *Œuvres* 498).

²⁹ Bergson actually has in mind the "radical mechanism" of the English biologist Thomas Huxley's (1825–1895) theory of evolution.

³⁰ "The essence of mechanical explanation is to regard the future and the past as calculable functions of the present, and thus to claim that all is given" (Bergson, *Creative* 43).

³¹ Bergson writes: "l'individualité comporte une infinité de degrés et que nulle part, pas même chez l'homme, elle n'est réalisée pleinement... les propriétés vitales ne sont jamais entièrement réalisées, mais toujours en voie de réalisation" (*Œuvres* 505).

³² It "implies that things and beings merely realize a program previously arranged" (Bergson, *Creative* 45).

³³ "[T]he group must not be defined by the possession of certain characters, but by its tendency to emphasize them" (Bergson, *Creative* 118-9).

³⁴ “Neither is ever found in a pure state” (Bergson, *Creative* 149).

³⁵ The “inner feeling” may be stirred by two kinds of causes and produce two respective kinds of emotions: (1) “moral emotions” originate in “some intellectual operation,” such as judgment, and “determin[e] the will to act”; and (2) “physical emotions,” demanded by the needs and irrespective of intelligence, originate in “some sensation or impression, which causes a need to be felt or a propensity to be followed, independently of the will” (Lamarck 338-41).

³⁶ This is expressed in *Summa Theologica* Qu.13, Art.2, Reply obj.3, Part II.

³⁷ Intuition which “has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely” (*Creative* 195).

³⁸ See Schelling’s *Philosophical Letters of Dogmatism and Criticism* (1797), and Jason M. Wirth’s discussion of “A Monstrous Absolute” (139ff).

³⁹ We would find the same sentiment in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, where the definition is limited to biology: “Vitalism has lost prestige as the chemical and physical nature of more and more vital phenomena have been shown.

⁴⁰ See also: Foyer, Christine H., and Graham Noctor’s “Leaves in the Dark See the Light” (*Science* 284.5414 (Jan 1999) 599-601); Bechtold, Ulrike, et al., “Impact of Chloroplastic and Extracellular-Sourced ROS on High Light-Responsive Gene Expression in *Arabidopsis*” (*Journal of Experimental Botany* 59.2 (Feb 2008) 121-33).

CHAPTER 2

“The Mother of All”: The Role of the Earth in Vitalist Poetry

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
 The earth, and every common sight,
 To me did seem
 Apparell'd in celestial light,
 The glory and the freshness of a dream.
 It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
 Turn wheresoe'er I may,
 By night or day,
 The things which I have seen I now can see no more...

William Wordsworth, “Ode. Intimations of Immortality”

...die Muttersprache des menschlichen Geschlechtes...

Johann Georg Hamann¹

From Johann Wolfgang Goethe to George Meredith, nineteenth-century poets and artists have been drawn to the Living Earth.² The discovery of the Mosquensis, the only medieval manuscript of *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* in 1777, in Moscow, and the publication of R. H. Hole's English verse translation of the *Hymn to Ceres* in 1795 may have contributed to this fascination (Richardson 65, 87). Scholars and critics, including but not limited to Walter Pater (“The Myth of Demeter and Persephone,” 1876) and James George Frazer (*The Golden Bough*, 1922), have also joined this discussion. Nor has the subject been absent from current Victorian studies: in the past ten or so years,

Margot K. Louis and Andrew D. Radford have written about the role of Demeter, the Corn-Mother, and her daughter Persephone in the literary and cultural imagination.

In this chapter on Vitalist poetry, I set out to demonstrate that the myth articulated most comprehensively in *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* shares major themes with and is meant to address many of the same concerns as Vitalism. I take the abundance of earth imagery as the expression of the century's need to make science poetic and poetry scientific (and "philosophical," as Wordsworth puts it, following Aristotle), so as to help bridge the epistemological gap between the two domains, a gap that impacted the Earth's ontological status transforming Gaia—"the Mother of All," γῆ πάντων μήτηρ, to quote from Hesiod's *Works and Days* (1.563)—into what Max Horkheimer labels "dead matter—a heap of things" (361). It is also, then, a reflection of the desire for wholeness, combining "the physical" with "the moral" and a faceless nature with the face of a caring mother, thus forging a far better mirror for human psychology.

Demeter, the Greek goddess who embodies the impersonal force of vitality springing from the earth, symbolizes the union of two vectors: the empirical and objective (nature, science, agriculture) with the psychological and subjective (our awareness of the human condition). This binary is not a neat critical trick; dualistic thinking of this kind is found in Wordsworth's juxtaposing of the Poet with the Man of Science, in Pater's outlining of the two approaches to nature, and in Karl Kerényi's reconstruction of the spectacle at Eleusis, during which "something was *seen*...that was objective and subjective at once." In the course of the century, with science becoming essentially identified with empiricism, the moral or human vector, along with its various aspects (religious, spiritual, mythological), was being expunged from the burgeoning

domain of geology (due to the work of Lyell, as we saw in Chapter 1). It was further brought under the purview of Positivism, according to which our connection to the earth was to be based primarily on the scientist's regular observation and drawing of inferences, not on any unquantifiable instinctual or affective bond forged by the poet; hence, as early as 1830, the year which witnessed the publication of the first installment of Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, the possibility of reciprocity between the Poet and the Man of Science, posited in Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, might have still appealed to the poet, but would have provoked much skepticism in his counterpart.

The cognitive potential of sight is an important element in this paradigmatic shift and a figure to which both Wordsworth and Meredith appeal: the latter reminds us of our ability to read "Earth's Secret" (in the sonnet of the same title), that is, the hidden mysteries which are, paradoxically, written in "raised letters for the blind" and "open" for all to see; the former, in "Intimations of Immortality," laments the Philosophical Poet's failure to "see" this secret: though he was "Nature's Priest" as a "Youth," he can never fully reconnect with his inner "Child of Joy," who is the "best philosopher," because the "things which I have seen I now can see no more." The revelatory, rather than the empirical, potential of sight—what Kerényi's calls "wordless knowledge"—brings out the Vitalist suspicion of language, connecting vitalistic thinking to the ineffable domain of religious thought; and it is an important way in which the Vitalists, as the Romantics, tried to "revitalize" contemporary science—and, alternatively, re-vindicate, contemporary poetry—by adding to the sensory/empirical a non-sensory aspect, that of insight into the transcendent. One such truth, the nature of origins and endings, a core issue for the

Vitalist/Mechanist debate that finds symbolic embodiment in Persephone's journey, reveals the deeper concerns of an age during which life itself became contested territory.

Before we can turn to *The Homeric Hymn* and examine the ideas which made Demeter so integral to nineteenth-century poetry, we must examine the historical background for the Vitalist/Mechanist controversy, a discussion which should concretize, as well as justify, the somewhat general claim above: that in the course of the century science and poetry came to clash over life.

* * *

“Then, what is life?”—the question with which the Romantic rebel P. B. Shelley ends his poem *The Triumph of Life* (1822)—is “one of the most intensely argued and notorious subjects in science” (Ruston 2). The eponymous hero of his wife's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) asks, similarly, “Whence... did the principle of life proceed?” (Shelley 48). Nicholas Roe underscores the importance of “the vitality debate”: it “surged from science into literature,” Roe writes, “and for a brief period in the 1790s it seemed that science, the poet's imagination, and political and religious liberty were mutually cooperative and progressive” (qtd. in Ruston 2). It is, moreover, this “bold question” and “one which has ever been considered a mystery,” to quote *Frankenstein* again, that came to unite science, religion, and art, ushering in a fascinating philosophical and theoretical discussion about the origins of the world, its current and future state, as well as our involvement in this process—a discussion the echoes of which still reverberate in current debates about ethics, the extent of scientific interference in individual lives, and the role of art and religion in reshaping our post-industrial reality.

In the course of the nineteenth century, the origins and nature of life—that which remained a sacred mystery for millennia, fueling mythological accounts such as *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*—was exposed to the eye of the microscope, just as Galileo had exposed the moons of Jupiter to his lens. As philosopher of science Ludmilla Jordanova writes in *Languages of Nature* (1986), even before 1800, “[m]any eighteenth-century savants [had already] put forward ideas about what the basic organic properties were, and these were hotly debated” (Jordanova 41-2). Nature could no longer be reduced to “a few simple, all-encompassing laws,” as it had been during the first half of the Enlightenment; it came to be apprehended as “complex” and “in continuous movement, in which old forms of existence are replaced by new ones” (Reill 6). After 1800, advances in experimental science, which came to be dominated by the philosophy of empiricism, along with the use of the microscope, dissection, travel, and accurate descriptions of plants, established life as “a specific phenomenon of nature requiring attention” (Jordanova 41-2).

In the cosmic domain, claiming that the original generative processes were subject to the same patterns of observation and inference as those ongoing in the organic world, scientists could now recreate what used to be hidden in between the lines of Genesis 1 and 2. In his *Principles*, Lyell argued against the Mosaic account of “the Beginning,” taking issue with the time span over which certain seismic and geological changes had to have occurred. When he described “the powers of vitality...modifying the surface of the earth and the material constituents of its crust,” he was referring to the observable processes of nature, not the supernatural influence of a Divine Creator (Lyell, *Principles II* 1).

At the same time, comparative embryologists (such as the German biologist Ernst Haeckel in the second half of the century³) were starting to challenge the biblical view of species formation, as well as the Chain of Being and other static hierarchies of the previous centuries,⁴ proposing new, more complex, dynamic theories of evolution and extinction. In the domain of the body, moreover, the mystery of life was exposed due to advances in the study of death and disease. Although scientists might have “felt they were *rediscovering* pathological anatomy from beyond a shadowy zone” even after a half a century of dissecting corpses, by 1800 the corpse had already become “part of the medical field, and this was unchallenged by religion and morality.” That which eventually developed into “the technique of the corpse” gave rise to the somewhat morbid notion that “[k]nowledge spins where once larva was formed” (Foucault, *Clinic* 124-6, 140-1; original emphasis). By observing the body as it decayed, pathological anatomists could reconstruct how it had been formed; death came to be seen as physically present throughout an organism’s existence, and so life could be described empirically based on the marks left by opposing de- and regenerative processes on live tissue.

One literary emblem of the Romantic debate about vitality is Frankenstein’s Creature. A modern Faustus in search of a panacea to alleviate human suffering, Victor Frankenstein turned to physiology and anatomy, and discovered the “principle of life” while digging up corpses and examining the “minutiae of causation, as exemplified in the change from life to death” (Shelley 48). (The reference to “causation” is not incidental, and it points to Mary Shelley’s familiarity with the Vitalist/Mechanist controversy.) Modern science and, specifically, the study of electricity—which, as Schelling muses noting the interest among the physicists of his day, “might...perhaps be *life-force*” (*Ideas*

4)—enabled him to become, virtually, God: the latter intrigued him when, as a child, he saw “a stream of fire” during a thunderstorm; the former he pursued at the University under the tutelage of Dr. Waldman, the chemist with various laboratory machines (Shelley 35-6). And yet the fact that Shelley concealed the details of Frankenstein’s discovery in the break between Chapters 3 and 4 suggests that life had to remain beyond the causal strictures of the modern experimental method, and that Frankenstein’s reluctance to reveal this mystery is a precaution against the misuse of creative power as well as a further confirmation of its inaccessibility to the mere mortal.⁵

Shelley’s monster exemplifies the early nineteenth-century fascination with—as well as its fear of—discovering and mechanically reconstructing the origins of life. (Waldman is both a robotics genius and a wild “one of the wood.”) The Creature’s not unproblematic entry into the literary world is meant to encourage us to think about the equally “unpardonable intrusion” of science into the domain of life, which provoked a dynamic debate about vitality and, at least in the beginning, brought scientists in dialogue and competition with theologians, philosophers, poets, and artists.

* * *

In the writings of William Wordsworth and Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), we still recognize a lively spirit of competition between science and poetry that would be absent by the time Darwin’s grandson published his views on evolution. Whereas there was “no radical differentiation” in mid- to late Enlightenment “between the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and the humanistic ones (*Geisteswissenschaften*),” and for Enlightenment thinkers, “nature served as the basic model informing all human activities” (Reill 2-3), after 1800, the “bold question” of life forced philosophers to

redefine both terms in this analogy. If, prior to this reconsideration, science and poetry had still engaged in friendly rivalry, by the end they were clearly at odds. Lyell saw the Earth as a material being, and his meticulous purging of anything mythological from geological history further exacerbated the rift.

At the start of the century, the Earth not only figured prominently in poetry and in science, but also brought the two disciplines together. As Noah Heringman has recently argued, “Rocks are ubiquitous in Romantic poetry”: around 1800, poetry and natural philosophy shared not only a common interest in rocks (he calls this the “Romance of the Earth”), but also a common vocabulary to talk about the geological history of the earth before the formation of geology proper, and even before Erasmus Darwin, among others, created the literature, as well as the audience, for what we might call “popular science.” The visionary poet William Blake borrowed the primeval catastrophe of solar volcanoes from Darwin and incorporated it into his *Book of Urizen*. In *The Temple of Nature*, “subtitled tellingly” *A Poem with Philosophical Notes* (1802), as well as in *The Economy of Vegetation*, Darwin himself expressed scientific ideas in verse even as he “invoked the authority of ‘modern geology’” (Heringman 193-227).

A spirit of friendly rivalry informs Wordsworth’s 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, where he famously characterizes the two domains, that of the Poet and of the Man of Science, as competing with one another. What distinguishes the Poet from “a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer, or a natural philosopher” is that he addresses others in the most unaffected, genuine way, as human beings (in Wordsworth’s dated terms, “as a Man”). Although both the Poet and the Man of Science study nature in pursuit of the truth, it is the former who has immediate access to such knowledge: poetry is, after all,

“the image of man and nature” and, quoting Aristotle, “the most philosophic of all writing” whose “object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative” (Wordsworth, *Preface* 15). Unlike the Man of Science, who seeks individual objective truths remotely, gradually, and painstakingly, the Poet’s very humanity gives him immediate and spontaneous access, and as his readers, we can also grasp poetic truths more easily than those acquired empirically through science:

[The Poet] considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature. And thus the Poet, prompted by this feeling of pleasure, which accompanies him through the whole course of his studies, converses with general nature, with affections akin to those, which, through labour and length of time, the Man of Science has raised up in himself, by conversing with those particular parts of nature which are the objects of his studies...Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science. (Wordsworth, *Preface* 16)

The latter notion, that poetry inspires “all Science,” is not only a clear statement of the relationship between the two disciplines prior to the rift, but also a notion we find in Schelling (that theoretical physics should inspire mythology),⁶ on whose philosophy Wordsworth draws and about whom he would have spoken with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a dedicated student of German philosophy.

The desire for reciprocity also motivates the Wordsworthian Poet to explore and communicate the discoveries made by his counterpart: side by side with the progressing

Scientist, the Poet is ready to “carr[y] sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself,” and through his art, to make even the “remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist...familiar to us, and the relations under which they are contemplated by the followers of these respective sciences...manifestly and palpably material” (Wordsworth, *Preface* 17). Wordsworth concludes on a hopeful note, with science enlivened by the Poet who goes on, in turn, to relate such truths to the people:

If the time should ever come when what is now called science, thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man. (Wordsworth, *Preface* 17)

We can see this ideal of a “philosophical poetry” as a mode of cognition realized in Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven” (1798). The poem is ostensibly about our difficulty to comprehend what lies beyond. Conceiving it, Wordsworth meant to explore “the perplexity and obscurity which in childhood attend our notion of death, or rather our utter inability to admit that notion,” as he explains in the *Preface* (8). The Poet describes the eight-year-old whom he meets as “a simple Child” who “feels its life in every limb”; an embodiment of sheer vitality, untutored, and unaffected by the passing fashions of the city (“She had a rustic, woodland air,/And she was wildly clad”), she should, he reasons, know nothing “of death.” When asked about her siblings, she replies with the refrain that also makes up the poem’s title (“Seven are we”), but proceeds to indicate that, in actuality, the other six children are dead. Her stubborn use of the present tense (“Seven are we,” as opposed to “We *were* seven,” but are no more) is baffling to a man who has

lost touch with the Earth and come to observe life empirically. Yet, however confused she might seem to him at first, it is he who fails to understand; the “little Maid” conveys the deeper truth that in the cycle of life, death is not the end but another beginning.

In Wordsworth we find not only Vitalist motifs, but also a precursor to Vitalist language. The poet rejected the discourse of mechanical convention in favor of the “common language” of the people, and, particularly in “We Are Seven,” disposed of language itself in favor of symbol. In the other “experimental” poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, where the ineffable may not be so clearly evoked, Wordsworth also makes a point of employing “the very language of men,” even at the risk of its sounding too prosaic to his critics, versed in more traditional, stylized, and “manly” eighteenth-century poesy. The ordinary (“natural” or “common”) language he adopted has few “personifications of abstract ideas,” and is free of figures used “as a mechanical device of style, or as a family language which Writers in metre seem to lay claim to by prescription,” since these oppose the vital flow of human passions (Wordsworth, *Preface* 10).

In the poem’s last few lines, language itself proves futile and must be “throw[n]...away,” as were the “words” which kept falling on the Maid’s deaf ears. It is her everlasting present that stays with us as we contemplate the poem’s meaning:

“But they are dead; those two are dead!
 Their spirits are in heaven!”
 ‘Twas throwing words away; for still
 The little Maid would have her will,
 And said, “Nay, we are seven!”

The child is not a personified abstraction of living nature, and the short poem lacks the complex machinery that would make it an allegory. As later Vitalist texts, the portrayal of the Earth as both the origin of life and our resting place, in juxtaposition with the more traditional and, in this case, *adult* “heaven,” symbolically evokes the opposing powers of creation and destruction associated with an Earth that is organic, alive, and irreducible to “dead matter.” Although buried, the little girl’s siblings remain— “are”—in the present consciousness, implying that the Earth, too, is in an ever-present, alive state. The “rustic” simplicity that the Poet equates with the child’s lack of sophistication is due to his reason’s dictating, following common language rules, that death be assigned to the past tense. His intuition, however, should ultimately correct this error, but the poem ends before the revelation is put into words, since these would also have to be “throw[n]... away.” The end-as-an-opening motif comes to Romantic and Vitalist texts from mysticism, and for this reason, it must be embodied symbolically, as Kerényi’s “wordless knowledge” or the German Romantic symbol: sacred truths are ineffable and thus resist being translated into human language; their visual embodiment must be, as the saying goes, worth a thousand words, and yet at once more economical and elegant.

The instinct that draws the Wordsworthian Poet to the Earth, despite his tragic awareness that a true union between the two is no longer possible, must have been the reason why Pater, in his essay on Wordsworth (1874; rpt. 1889), singled him out as one who “sense[d] a life in natural objects, which in most poetry is but a rhetorical artifice,” but in Wordsworth’s case is “the assertion of what for him is almost literal fact.” Pater inscribes the poet into the longstanding tradition of animism, “wherein all outward objects alike, including even the works of men’s hands, were believed to be endowed

with animation, and the world was ‘full of souls’—that mood in which the old Greek gods were first begotten, and which had many strange aftergrowths.” To Wordsworth, Pater claims, “every natural object seemed to possess more or less of a moral or spiritual life, to be capable of a companionship with man, full of expression, of inexplicable affinities and delicacies of intercourse” (*Appreciations* 45-6). This is precisely what makes Wordsworth a Vitalist poet, and insofar as he identifies it, Pater is right on the mark. But he goes on to explain this extraordinary ability—Wordsworth’s “power of seeing life” and “perception of a soul, in inanimate things”—using the language of empiricism, and ascribes it to “the impressions of eye and ear” and “in its essence, a kind of sensuousness” (*Appreciations* 46). While Pater’s explanatory move might seem plausible, it also runs against the spiritual nature of the very ability he describes.

Finally, we find in Wordsworth the search for the beautiful whole that would inform later Vitalist texts. When in the *Preface*, Wordsworth promises to “keep the Reader in the company of flesh and blood” (10), he is not evoking the materialist conception of the Earth as a body; on the contrary, he hopes to embody nature’s spiritual potential symbolically while still firmly grounding it in the real—a balance which should be familiar to us from the earlier discussion of *Naturphilosophie*. Indeed, his short poem is not only an excellent example of the “revitalized” Earth; it is also a call to bring abstract philosophy back to its physical source. The poetry of the Earth, associated with childhood and innocence, holds out the potential of regaining primeval knowledge that is inaccessible to modern science dominated by the philosophy of empiricism. Therefore, Wordsworth’s philosophical Poet must get back in touch with the “spirit of the Earth,” to use Pater’s phrase, communicated here through the Maid’s stubborn refrain.

In the same way, in the Introduction to *Clara*, Schelling tries to “restor[e] philosophy...by calling it back to earth.” More specifically, in order to bring metaphysics back from its detached state as “hyperphysics,” we must remain grounded in “what is present and real”: “Just because of that we declare that however far we may care to drive the edifice of our thoughts,” Schelling maintains, “we will still only have achieved something if the temples whose last spires disappear into an inaccessible light is, at its very deepest foundation, wholly supported by nature.” He expresses this thought also with the metaphor of an organic tree, rooted in the real but striving for the ideal: “A tree that draws strength, life, and substance into itself from the earth may hope to drive its topmost branches hanging with blossom right up to heaven” (Schelling, *Clara* 3-5). Modern philosophy needs to come back to nature, in other words, but to a nature that has not been killed by mechanistic materialism and dissociated from humanity.

In the final fragment, the dialogue’s titular heroine reminds us that “we are nature’s children,” and that the ideal is incomplete until embodied and realized:

The merely spiritual life [*das bloße Geisterleben*] doesn’t satisfy our heart. There is something in us that desires a more essential reality; our thoughts come to rest only at the final unity; united life must follow separated life...And as the artist does not find peace in thinking about his work, but only when he has represented it physically, and as anyone fired by an ideal wants to find or reveal it in a physical-visible form, the goal of all longing is likewise the very perfection of corporeality as a reflection and mirror of perfect spirituality. (Schelling, *Clara* 80)

The narrative of *Clara* follows the seasons, breaking off just before the summer, and it is no coincidence that a discussion of the realized ideal appears in the Spring fragment, the season when the ideal of the Earth is realized in newly sprouting grasses.

* * *

Lyell, however, did not share Wordsworth's optimism. Schelling could still insist that his inquiry had been "scientific," defining science in metaphysical or speculative terms; but after 1830 and, certainly, in the second half of the century, an empiricist mode seemed all but set for the study of the Earth. The ideal of "philosophical poetry" or "poetic science" that Wordsworth envisioned in his *Preface* became less realizable. If, as we recall from Chapter 1, under the premises of seventeenth-century mechanical philosophy epitomized by Galileo, "the business of science [was] to penetrate beneath the surface of matter, that is, to its primary qualities and formal relations," to obtain scientific knowledge in the nineteenth, one had to observe the phenomenal world: "Rather than reading nature as a set of mathematical formulae, nature's regularities were reconstructed from evidence culled from the human senses in an experimental situation" (Jordanova 27). This produced a shift in the meaning of "science." As Raymond Williams writes,

Originally science meant any kind of knowledge or learning, with an increasing emphasis on theoretical rather than practical knowledge, and on the ability to demonstrate the certainty of such knowledge. Gradually, science came to mean specifically knowledge of nature, that is, of the external observable world. Science was opposed to metaphysics or subjective experience, and hence the association of science with objectivity emerged. (Williams 276-80)

Hence, the fundamental rethinking of the very “idea of nature”: once a stable and permanent entity, it came to be defined by a “sense of historicity,” “rais[ing] some tricky epistemological questions” (Jordanova 28, 37).

Lyell’s *Principles* was not the first but, surely, one of the many agents responsible for what we might call “the death of the Earth,” which transformed it from a living being into a circumscribed, material entity. As we saw in Chapter 1, Lyell’s uniformitarianism was his way of solving the “tricky epistemological questio[n]” of how we could learn anything about the past; it was also the reason he criticized earlier cosmogonies, which had not produced what he deemed to be *good* geology. He claims these reflect the ancients’ failure to “compar[e] attentively the results of the destroying and reproductive operations of modern times with those of remote eras,” the very error Lyell’s theory is meant to rectify; moreover, the ancients associated exterminations of species with divine punishment to be reconciled, by the same sort of suppositions, with successive regenerations of humans “in a state of purity and innocence.”⁷ This, Lyell charges, produced limited geological knowledge: “the ancient history of the globe was to them a sealed book, and although written in characters of the most striking and imposing kind, they were unconscious even of its existence” (*Principles I* 8-10, 20). Meredith may have had this quotation in mind when, also appealing to the metaphor of reading, he wrote that the Earth secret was, in fact, “open” for all to see. This could not be farther from Lyell’s viewpoint: he examines mythological accounts at some length, but does not see mythology or poetry as a viable vehicle for knowledge, choosing to rely, instead, on causal inferences drawn from empirical observations.

* * *

In antiquity, on the other hand, the Living Earth had been a source of poetic inspiration for the Greeks and the Romans, as Gaia, Demeter, and the Lucretian Venus Genetrix, and so it is featured in various forms in different genres—from Homer to Lucretius and Pausanias.⁸ The real and the ideal, the synthesis of which was sought by Schelling and the Romantics, come together in the anthropomorphic deity who is also, at the same time, the geomorphic earth in Hesiod's *Theogony*, where Gaia or ΓΣ, the Earth's/earth's mythological personification, refers to the goddess-mother of all gods and her celestial body. The same identification is present in *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, the foundational text for the Eleusinian mysteries which, dating back to the seventh or sixth century BCE, is also one of the oldest pieces of literary evidence we have for the influence of the cult of Demeter in antiquity (Richardson 3-13). As it should become evident from the summary and discussion below, *The Hymn* encapsulates several important Vitalist themes: the vitality of the Earth manifested in creative as well as destructive power; the sanctification of creative power through its association with a female divinity; the promise of continuity as an antidote to the ills of human existence; and lastly, the privileging of the symbolic mode of cognition.

The account begins with the abduction of Persephone, Demeter's daughter, by her uncle Hades, the ruler of the underworld who wishes to make her his consort. With burning torches in hand, the enraged and disconsolate Demeter wanders the earth in search of her daughter, and is informed by the sun-god Helios of Persephone's plight. During her wanderings, the goddess, now in mortal disguise, is welcomed into the house of Keleos and Metaneira in Eleusis, and becomes a nurse to their son, Demophoön. She feeds the child with divine ambrosia during the day, and at night, places him into the

hearth in order to make him immortal; however, upon seeing her son in the midst of flames, Metaneira expels Demeter, who, prior to departing, reveals her true identity and instructs the family to build a temple to worship her. Still grieving over the loss of her daughter, Demeter takes her anger out on the mortals by denying them harvest, and it takes Zeus' divine intervention to put an end to the deadly blight. Upon regaining her daughter, Demeter, with some persuasion by the older nature goddess Rhea, agrees to restore fertility to the earth. But, since prior to her leaving Hades' abode, Persephone was tricked into eating a pomegranate seed—a moment captured in the famous painting *Proserpina* (1880) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti—she cannot be fully reunited with her mother, and must now spend one third of each year underground, ruling as the Queen of the Dead. The account closes with the establishment of the mysteries in Demeter's honor.

The Hymn gives us a glimpse at the secret Eleusinian mysteries, in which anyone who spoke Greek in classical Athens participated, whether female or male, so long as they had not been guilty of shedding blood (Kerényi 138). Specifically, the text shares with the mysteries three important characteristics: the symbolism of light and darkness, associated with the torch procession and, in the mythic account, with Demeter's wanderings in search of her stolen daughter; the birth of a divine child (*Κοῦρος*), who may be unnamed or identified with Ploutos, Demophoön, or Triptolemos, and sometimes portrayed with a cornucopia representing the wealth of the earth—that is, its *πλοῦτος*; and finally, the ear of corn, the very embodiment of the creative powers of the Corn-Mother and her promise of rebirth (Richardson 26-7). The light/darkness contrast plays a prominent role because the final stage of initiation evidently involved seeing a great light. Combined, the “symbolism of *πλοῦτος*, light, and knowledge” appears in the final verses

of the poem (lines 480ff), indicating that the knowledge is “ultimately based on vision,” which is a mystical rather than strictly philosophical concept (Richardson 28). In

Gregory Nagy’s translation,

Olbios [ὄλβιος: happy or blessed] among earth-bound mortals is he who has seen [ὄπωπεν] these things.

But whoever is uninitiated in the rites, whoever takes no part in them, will never get a share [αἶσαν] of those sorts of things [that the initiated get], once they die, down below in the dank realms of mist.

Light functions here not only to bridge but also to reassert the boundary between the mortals and their gods; it provides at once a glimpse at the divine and hence hope in an afterlife, and a confirmation that the domain of the immortals is separate and unreachable. “The mysteries,” as N.J. Richardson writes,

are contrasted with the normal state of men, needy, blind, and ignorant, unable to foresee the future or to avert the twin catastrophes of old age and death. This is the characteristic portrayal of the human lot, from Homer onwards. It is the gods who give and take away prosperity (ὄλβος, **πλοῦτος**) as they desire, and their condition of ageless immortality is contrasted with that of men. They live in pure regions where the light always shines: no cloud of darkness disturbs their vision, and when they appear to men, they appear in a blaze of glorious light. (Richardson 28-9)

Demophoön, the mortal child whom the disguised Demeter nurses, is pulled out of the purifying fire one moment too soon and thus denied immortality. Yet the boy does “become the *θρεπτός* [he who has been bred] of the divine nurse, and men will receive

the favour of the goddesses, if they will only perform the necessary sacrifices and pay them the gifts which are due.” Though there is much debate whether all the initiates were adopted as Demeter’s children and promised rebirth, or the initiation alone was the goal, meaning “admission to membership of a club (secret society),” Richardson insists that the performative element (*ἄργια, δρηζμοσυνη*) was the basis of the Mysteries: “Whatever was revealed, one is sure that it did not resemble in any way the kind of manual or guide-book to the after-life that we find in Egypt, or apparently in some later Greek cults. The important point was not so much *how ὄλβοζ*, or a better fate, was to be given, but rather *that* it was promised” (Richardson 29-30; original emphasis).

To the three leading questions laid out in the Introduction, *The Hymn* offers a multi-clause answer.⁹ Not only can we know something about the mystery of life and death, but it is the possibility that this very knowledge presents (the possibility of rebirth, spiritual or religious; Edouard Schuré, for example, envisions Eleusis as a drama of Christian redemption) that can give purpose to human life; with that purpose, finally, comes the hope that after a long life of misery, something good awaits us. This knowledge is conveyed through the act of seeing and through symbol, which, according to Schelling, is the primary means of accessing higher meaning: German communicates this “excellently with the term *Sinnbild* [sense meaning/image]” (*Philosophy* 48-9).

As established in the Introduction, higher truth cannot be apprehended by the senses alone, nor could it be supported with a rational explanation plausible enough to induce belief in the uninitiated. Mystical insight requires a certain degree of faith and takes us away from empiricism and into the domain of symbolic poetry, even religion; it can be expressed by the imagination with the help of non-verbal images, rather than

abstract concepts, capable of conveying knowledge without words in a way that reason, which operates through language, can never do. Sight is, in fact, the metaphor for accessing the mysteries of the Earth in Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality." Wordsworth identifies the evolution of the "philosophic mind" in adulthood with the loss of an instinctual connection to the Earth, the origin of all creation, and he suggests that it is only through poetry which celebrates it that we can attempt to go back, symbolically, to our roots, and learn to "find/Strength in what remains behind." Even so, the mature poet "now can see no more" that "which [he] ha[s] seen": "The earth, and every common sight.../Apparell'd in celestial light." Wordsworth's vocabulary of seeing (*seem*, *sight*, *see*) brings out the extra-linguistic, visual nature of the primordial union, yet the contrast between the "now" and the past reminds us that the Poet's sight has changed as the result of his intellectual growth: he now sees the material earth, but lacks insight into its spirit.

The reading of *The Hymn* proposed by Karl Kerényi (1897-1973), who collaborated with Carl Jung in creating a "science of mythology," captures precisely this point: the visual is the primary mode of cognition. Though, strictly speaking, not a Vitalist himself, Kerényi shares the movement's appreciation of mystical vitality. The "wordless knowledge" encapsulated in a single ear of corn shown to the initiates—the vegetative attribute of Demeter-Ceres as the Corn Mother—entails not only access to a higher truth, namely "continuity" and "infinity of supra-individual organic life," but also an existential component, since one's own individual fate is also part of this larger fate (Kerényi 153-4). At Eleusis, *Kore* was found and reunited with her mother. "In this finding something was *seen*...that was objective and subjective at once": objectively, the mother goddess was reunited with her daughter Persephone and, insofar as the two are

forms of the same mythological idea, the “Primordial Maiden,” also with *her own self*; subjectively, the initiate participating in this ceremony experienced “continuity, the continued existence of all living things” (Kerényi 142; original emphasis). The single ear of corn stands not only for the present harvest but also for any and all future nourishment; it springs from the earth and enables new specimens to emerge from its fruitful decay; the physical processes of generation and decomposition we so readily associate with it are, however, only a gateway to something larger and much more profound. The drama of Demeter’s loss, search, and reunion with her daughter, as that of Persephone’s submerging into and returning from the underworld, indicates that out of evil there may come good, and that death is not the end-all of existence: “by entering into the figure of Demeter,” Kerényi writes, “we realize the universal principle of life, which is to be pursued, robbed, raped, to *fail to understand*, to rage and grieve, but then to get everything back and be born again” (157; original emphasis).

Kerényi’s reading tends toward the same kind of wholeness that the Vitalists sought by bringing science and poetry, the objective and the subjective, together into a Schellingian union. On the other hand, to many late nineteenth-century scholars, such as the German folklorist Wilhelm Mannhardt (1831-1880), the British classicist Jane Harrison (1850-1928), or J.G. Frazer (1854-1941), who fathered modern anthropology, the myth of Demeter came to represent something much more rudimentary: they tended to emphasize its agricultural component, reflected in the correspondence of the different parts of the myth to the different stages in a farmer’s year (specifically, tying the Rape and Return of Persephone to the sowing of seeds in the fall and the growth of vegetation in the spring and summer), and saw the myth as, by and large, primitive science.

Moreover, what the practitioners of the then popular Comparative Method sought were parallels between Demeter and Kore, her daughter, and the Corn-mother and Maiden found in northern mythologies, and other corn spirits (e.g., Frazer's *Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild*). Demeter's debatable origins lent themselves to this horizontal reading across various traditions: at times she is "equivalent to the Earth, the 'Mother of All,' more often [cited] as a separate deity, the goddess of corn, and sometimes also as the corn itself" (Herodotus 7.141, Plutarch *de Is. et Osir.* 66) (Richardson 13-6).

Interpreting *The Hymn* exclusively in terms of initiation or alongside other fertility cults, however, runs the risk of missing some of its meaning, reducing the myth to an unsophisticated explanation of seasonal change; on the other hand, leaving out the agricultural component turns it into little more than an allegory of human behavior (the consequences of disobeying a goddess; the rewards for following instructions; the perils of overly zealous mothering). In addition to the agricultural, the myth has also a personal or (as Richardson labels it) an "eschatological" dimension, which is tied to the human life cycle and the life of the community (birth, initiation of young men and women, marriage, and death).¹⁰ We may think of the former as the objective scientific vector, which originated in the ancients' efforts to explain changes in the natural world, associated with the study and manipulation of nature for agricultural purposes; the latter, then, is the subjective or poetic, wherein the natural cycle is re-imagined in human terms, and meant to elicit a psychological response. An interpretation like Kerényi's successfully combines the two, thereby bringing out what would strike a Vitalist, who is interested in both dimensions, as fulfilling Demeter's potential.

* * *

What is, perhaps, one of the most famous literary discussions of Demeter by a Victorian, Pater's "The Myth of Demeter and Persephone" in his *Greek Studies* (1895),¹¹ includes a variation on the two vectors. Pater's choice to frame this discussion in terms of the two approaches to studying nature is, arguably, another example of how *The Hymn*, whose subject matter lies at the cross-section between poetry and science, encouraged thinkers to reevaluate the boundary between the two domains. In fact, despite his sympathy for what he calls the "unmechanical, spiritual, Platonic," Pater's discussion is already tainted with the legacy of Humean empiricism, and this might explain why the Victorians had to turn to the ancients, as opposed to their own contemporaries, for a better model of what Wordsworth sees as "divine vitality."

Pater opens with an overview of the century's two dominant approaches: the "more mechanical" and the "unmechanical, spiritual, Platonic"—which we may associate with Mechanism and Vitalism, respectively. Pater identifies the first of these with "modern science," according to which change in nature is explained "by the hypothesis of certain unconscious forces; and the sum of these forces, in their combined action, constitutes the scientific conception of nature." The second is "an older and more spiritual, Platonic, philosophy...*more of instinct than of the understanding*, the mental starting-point of which is not an observed sequence of outward phenomena," because that would bring us back to mechanistic empiricism, "but *some such feeling* as most of us have on the first warmer days in spring, when we seem to feel the genial processes of nature actually at work" (Pater, *Greek* 96; my emphasis). The language with which Pater describes the latter approach (*instinct, feeling*) and the temporality it presupposes ("nature actually at work") emphasize, on the one hand, the subjective element theoretically

absent from scientific observation, in which the observer and his or her object of investigation exist in a hierarchical subject/object relationship; and on the other, the in-the-moment experience of the present, which enables the observer to enter spontaneously into an energetic communion with nature. The latter is to be reached by what Pater imagines in analogical terms first, but goes on to describe in a way that recalls the Schellingian unity of spirit:

as if just below the mould, and in the hard wood of the trees, there were really circulating some spirit of life, *akin to* that which makes its energies felt within ourselves. Starting with a hundred instincts such as this, that older unmechanical, spiritual, Platonic, philosophy envisages nature rather *as the unity of a living spirit or person, revealing itself in various degrees to the kindred spirit of the observer*, than as a system of mechanical forces. (Pater, *Greek* 96; my emphasis)

Citing P. B. Shelley and Wordsworth as examples of a more “systematised” philosophy that has developed out of “that sort of poetry,” Pater evokes the Romantic identification of Mind and Nature, “a sympathy between the ways and aspects of outward nature and the moods of men” (*Greek* 96-7). Anticipating Bergson,¹² he points out that under the mechanical rubric, nature is seen as a closed system of quantifiable “unconscious forces” whose combined impact could be summed up; under the older, spiritual rubric, the system is more inclusive, open-ended, and its components are no longer “unconscious,” but, in fact, by virtue of sharing “the kindred life spirit,” they become intelligible to us.

Pater’s theory of myth formation¹³ reflects his preference for the “unmechanical,” yet, at the same time, it is also informed by an empiricist—and, to that extent, non-

Vitalist—outlook on the myth-making imagination. More specifically, by privileging knowledge that is communicated imagistically through “cosmical stories or myths,” like that of Demeter and Persephone, and thus precedes “metaphysical conceptions,” Pater aligns himself with the Vitalists and their language of symbol. His notion of myth, however, is in better company with Hume or Frazer, for the type of insight the “sensibly realised images” convey relegates mythology to the domain of primitive science, a mode of understanding the external world, rather than the mystery of what lies beneath its surface (Pater, *Greek* 97). To put this differently, while Pater follows the Romantic tradition when he acknowledges the “instinctive” and “mystical” origins of myth and locates them in the “popular imagination,” his approach is fundamentally modern and in line with the so-called naturalist school, represented, among others, by F. Max Müller:¹⁴ what the poets refine in the second phase of myth formation is not the “vague instinctive product” of a people’s apprehension of higher truth, but that of “the phenomena of the natural world.” Myth arises from what he calls a “confused conception” of seasonal change (“that order of summer and winter, of which it had no scientific, or systematic explanation”) for which science would later supply explanations—in other words, a pre-rational recognition of “living agencies, corresponding to those ascertained forces, of which our colder modern science tells the number and the names” (Pater, *Greek* 92).

A few pages later, Pater describes the early phases of the myth of Demeter as “the peculiar creation of country-people of a *high impressibility*, dreaming over their work in spring or autumn, half consciously touched by a sense of its sacredness, and a sort of mystery about it” (Pater, *Greek* 103-4; my emphasis). But *impressions*, a term that figures prominently in Hume’s epistemology, presupposes a passivity on the part of the

observer, who reacts rather than actively initiates.¹⁵ In his view of myth Pater agrees with Hume, who conceives it in a materialist fashion, that is, as the primitive people's psychological reaction to their environment. Because their capacities were so "narrow," what informed their mythmaking were "the ordinary affections of human life": namely, "the anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst for revenge, the appetite for food and other necessities." "No wonder, then," Hume concludes in his *Natural History of Religion*, "that mankind, being placed in such an absolute ignorance of causes, and being at the same time so anxious concerning their future fortune, should immediately acknowledge a dependence on invisible powers, possessed of sentiment and intelligence" (rpt. in Feldman and Richardson 161-2). Viewed as such, myth is little more than fanciful superstition. The verdict on myth conditioned by Hume's "relentless empirical introspection" is, to quote Burton Feldman, quite pessimistic: it is not our ancestors' spiritual search for higher truth, but their lowly fears that inspire mythopoeia and poetry (Feldman and Richardson 162, 157).

Since Pater is a critic and an artist, we might expect him to be drawn toward rather than suspicious of the mythic Earth; however, by assigning the "unmechanical" approach temporal precedence but conceptual inferiority (it is a "confused conception"), he joins the larger rationalist/Positivist discourse on progress, in which science, not poetry or mythology, is posited as the superior stage. In his surprisingly unsympathetic introduction to the 1921 Loeb edition of Apollodorus' *Library*, Frazer, also a proponent of such discourse, defines myths as "mistaken explanations of phenomena, whether of human life or of external nature," which "originate in that instinctive curiosity concerning the causes of things"; in contrast to the explanations provided by philosophy and science,

these are “always false, for were they true they would cease to be myths” (Frazer xxvii).¹⁶ The latter are to be treated, accordingly, not as fictional but as false. Schelling rejected this kind of “popular historical-psychological explanations of mythology” (as did Croce), and maintained that it is not, as Frazer might argue, “merely an expedient prompted by the poverty of conceptual designations in general or by simple lack of knowledge of causal relationships.” Myths thus cannot be read exclusively as science or as history: “Only as a type or model—as it were, as the archetypal world itself—does mythology possess universal reality for all time” (Schelling, *Philosophy* 50).

Because he associates the creation of myth with a “country-people of a high impressibility,” and sees it as an imperfect premonition of “which our colder modern science tells the number and the names,” Pater’s discussion of *The Hymn* ultimately fails as a model for the Vitalists, its valuable insights notwithstanding. The logical extreme to this would be the positivistic approach to literature promoted in France around the same time by Émile Zola, who hoped to transform literature into a perfect empirical mirror for reality. Zola was influenced by the work of Claude Bernard, one of the founders of experimental medicine, who had intended to move medicine away from the less rigorous descriptive domain and into that of hard science by applying to it the experimental method. Bernard argued that the internal environment of living beings had constant physico-chemical properties like the external world around them; hence, a scientist could analyze the mechanism of human passions as accurately as that of the human body. His attempt to validate medicine is an example of the way Positivism extended beyond its original natural domain. Starting in the eighteenth century as “the science of man,” and evolving in the nineteenth into “moral and social sciences,” it “embodied a method that

could, potentially, be applied to anything.” Its historical significance comes from “its being both a symptom and a cause of scientific change,” as well as with its presenting “an important test case for the universal applicability of the scientific method”: for Positivism was “anti-theoretical” due to its distrust of metaphysics, yet, because it upheld “science as the major tool for social progress,” it also “generated optimism about the progressive growth of reliable, objective knowledge” (Jordanova, *Languages* 30-1).

Following Bernard, Zola applied the scientific method to what he called “the experimental novel” (*Le roman experimental*; 1893), and set out to prove that literature, like science and now medicine, could yield objective knowledge. However, neither the scientist nor the Naturalist could “dig down into the soul” of the matter, to quote J.-K. Huysmans’ critique of this method, even if he did hold on to “the documentary veracity, the precision of detail”: what was needed was a “spiritual naturalism” (*Là-bas* 10).

* * *

Having summarized and discussed the main themes of *The Hymn*, as well as examined several important critical texts, we may now begin to interrogate why Demeter’s story gathered such interest. It became a popular subject of art and literature around the same time that nature and the Earth, already the loci of philosophical debate, were being transformed into empirical entities, dynamic and fluctuating, but stripped of their spirit. I would like to reiterate, accordingly, that the fascination with the Living Earth in the century’s literary and cultural imagination originates in the attempt to come to terms with the paradigmatic changes following Hume’s skeptical critique (the curtailing of the authority of reason and the empiricist challenge to the creative power of the imagination, now limited to manipulating empirically-derived images). The coming

together of the objective (naturalist or agricultural) with the subjective (psychological, moral, or “eschatological”) dimensions in the conception of Demeter, as well as in the readings of *The Hymn*, offered a hopeful alternative to the rift between, broadly speaking, “the physical” (science) and “the moral” (poetry, religion, and art). The privileging of “wordless knowledge” over that generated by the no longer infallible reason, moreover, could help restore the revelatory capacity to the act of seeing, which had been challenged by the sensory preoccupation of experimental science.

It becomes evident why Demeter struck such a powerful chord if we accept that the source of life and the precarious nature of human existence are the central themes of *The Hymn*, symbolized by Demeter’s power to grant as well as deny fertility, and to offer as well as withhold immortality (Demophoön, Triptolemos), which points, in turn, to her control over this life as well as the next. As we have seen above, the roots of biological Vitalism can be traced back to these same questions.

Additionally, the focus on the mythic Earth and Demeter, one of the paths taken by the “symbolic language” of Vitalism, may also be thought of as a special case of the argument about the Victorians’ indebtedness to and development of early German Romantic theory, as presented in the Introduction. In the critical and philosophical writings of Friedrich Schlegel and Schelling we find, in addition to the Romantic call for a “new mythology” both inherit from Herder,¹⁷ a suggestion that it be sought in the domain of speculative physics. Schlegel and Schelling laid the theoretical groundwork for the nineteenth-century Vitalists. By appealing to the creative powers of the Earth and art, they hoped to bring the spirit—and the possibility of knowledge and purpose—back

into science. By going back to nature, *physis*, and redefining its physics, Wordsworth and other nineteenth-century poets were, in fact, realizing their suggestion.

In his famous *Dialogue on Poetry* (1799-1800), Schlegel criticized modern poetry for “lack[ing] a focal point, such as mythology was for the ancients,” and urged “[t]he modern poet [to] create all these things from within himself...like a new creation out of nothing” (*Dialogue* 81). Schelling disagreed with Schlegel in detail but not in spirit: the latter believed in the power of the individual poet to create a “new mythology,” whereas the former thought that it could emerge only through collective effort, with individuals adding their respective parts to the whole. To create these mythological contributions, artists could employ “virtually any material or content, thus also from that of a higher physics,” a new kind of philosophy of nature “developed from the idealistic principle.” In fact, Schelling believed that “we [we]re already holding the symbols ready” for the gods of physics to embody (*Philosophy* 75-7). What gave this even greater urgency was that, by creating the new symbolism of the Earth, poets could follow “the more noble impulse to investigate nature [which was] actually that deeply imprinted instinct in the feelings of the later world to summon that lost life back into nature.” This “instinct” is so vital that it is present even in “the lowly activity of empirical observation” which is “totally blind” (Schelling, *Philosophy* 66).

Similarly, having suggested that the “new mythology” might originate in idealism, “that great phenomenon of our age” (*Dialogue* 82), Schlegel draws on an organic analogy between human generative powers and those of the Earth, evoking the vital link between humans and nature, as well as between poetry and physics, at the same time as he emphasizes the explosive force of creation:

Just as the core of the earth adorned itself with formations and growths, just as life sprang forth of itself from the deep and everything was filled with beings merrily multiplying; even so, poetry bursts forth spontaneously from the invisible primordial power of mankind when the warming ray of divine sun shines on it and fertilizes it. (Schlegel, *Dialogue* 54)

Schlegel keeps coming back to physics—or, more precisely, some version of a future physics—as “the real source of his mythology” because, like poetry, it concerns itself with generative power: “One begins at the point where one notices the first traces of life. And now that is in physics.” In addition to being concerned with the origins of life, he prefers theoretical physics because it works organically in a way that he hopes poetry will, too: forming from individual purposeful acts, or hypotheses, one meaningful whole, a theory. As poetry which comprises all of universal creation, physics radiates outward and evolves into other life sciences, tending toward a Schellingian totalization of knowledge: “It is in fact wonderful how physics—as soon as it is concerned not with technical purposes but with general results—without knowing it gets into cosmogony, astrology, theosophy, or whatever you wish to call it, in short, into a mystic discipline of the whole” (Schlegel, *Dialogue* 90). Ludovico, one of the speakers in Schlegel’s *Dialogue*, says he “cannot conclude without urging once more the study of physics,” for it is physics “from whose dynamic paradoxes the most sacred revelations of nature are now bursting forth in all directions” (88). Another speaker (Lothario) adds that the “new mythology” may be forged from a combination of Greek mythology and religion, so long as both draw strength from theoretical physics (*Dialogue* 91, 117).

* * *

Just as Lyell was eliminating any traces of Gaia (Demeter's grandmother) from the burgeoning science of geology, Victorian and Edwardian authors set out to restore her authority, in order to vindicate poetry which, to quote J.G. Hamann, is the "the mother tongue of the human race." In Chapter 1, we have explored the ways in which Vitalist philosophers tried to redefine science by resisting Mechanism; in the remainder of this chapter, through a close reading of Meredith's poems, I hope to show that the potential solution to the rift between science and poetry, as well as the origins of a new "*mythos*" (Schlegel's term for a new mythology capable of restoring order to a broken world) lay in the century's imaginative revisiting and repossessing of the Living Earth.

Written some seventy or eighty years after Schelling and Wordsworth, Meredith's *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth* (1883) was meant to bring back the older view of nature and the earth by appealing to the symbolism of Demeter. The very title of this collection contrasts the prevailing pessimism of the modern age. The collection was positively received at the time of its publication. Despite the obscurity of Meredith's language, a difficulty which most reviewers recognized, essayist, critic, and scholar Mark Pattison (1813-1884) assured his readers that their struggle would be well rewarded: "Your rich reward will not only be in the power of understanding, but in a quickening joy, the 'joy of earth' showered upon you without stint" (rev. in *Academy* xxiv, 21 Jul 1883: 251).¹⁸ At least two reviewers drew a distinction between Meredith's lyrics and "the pessimistic tone and despairing notes of the modern school" (Pattison 251): "A deeply pessimistic note has been the chief characteristic of much of the poetry that has appeared lately in England, and in most other countries," an unsigned reviewer

commented, but added that, despite the occasional “touches of sadness,” “it is clear that Mr Meredith is one of those poets who ask no more of the world than it is capable of giving, and who find in it inexhaustible sources of happiness.” Comparing him to Goethe, the latter reviewer went on to underscore Meredith’s ability to appreciate “the forms, colours, voices, and processes of nature” and bring out the simple pleasures of life despite a “love of ‘culture’,” since “one of the functions of the poet is to reveal the meanings that may lie hidden in familiar things” (Unsigned rev., *St. James’s Gazette* vi, 25 Jun 1883: 241-2). Since he showed “the true poet as above all things a student of nature,” Meredith was also, and not surprisingly, compared to Wordsworth, who found in the most common things the most valuable and uncommon insights: “Mr Meredith restores an old aim of the poet, now in some danger of being forgotten, that of celebrating the good which man has in that he simply lives and shares in the seasons” (Unsigned rev., *Pall Mall Gazette* xxxviii, 29 Jun 1883: 246-7). The ability to celebrate nature, the mark of a philosophical poet and also that of a Vitalist, was all the more striking (and necessary) in an intellectual environment in which, as I have argued repeatedly, the Earth was being treated as “dead matter.”

Meredith’s contemporary reviewers singled out “The Day of the Daughter of Hades” as one of the choicest in the collection, the “chief poem in the book, and to our mind the finest” (*Pall Mall* 246), its “elements of deep pathos” being counterbalanced, “with splendid effect [with] the influences which may give worth to human life” (*St. James’s* 244). Twentieth-century critics have also explored, at some length, the spiritual connection between the girl, Skiágeneia, and the earth (Jack Lindsay, Norman Kelvin, and John Von V. Rodenback). And while, as Pattison noted in reference to “The Woods

of Westermain,” Meredith’s poems “teac[h]” without “inculcat[ing] doctrine” and thus allow us to choose whether to see the earth as “either a dust-filled tomb or radiant with the blush of morning” (251), it is rather clear that Meredith had the latter reading—and reader—in mind. It is the “revitalized” Earth, in other words, that his lyrics summon.

In the opening stanza of “The Day of the Daughter of Hades,” the poet indicates that his model reader—one to whom this “marvellous tale” of the encounter between the mortal singer Callistes and Hades’ daughter will “come” most easily—“has looked upon Earth/Deeper than flower and fruit,” rather than simply observing it, as an empiricist would; in addition, he implies that this reader should be attuned to the “touch” of nature, more subtle yet also more compelling than “a hail/From the markets that hum,” the market here representative not only of commerce (and, by extension, of commercial materialism) but also of the (industrial) city, with all of its unnaturalness:

He who has looked upon Earth...
 Unto him shall the marvellous tale
 Of Callistes more humanly come
 With the touch on his breast than a hail
 From the markets that hum. (Meredith, *Poems* 30)

During their encounter, the girl’s singing rivals that of the young man. Although “but a Song of Days” detailing “the husbandman’s toil and strife” and, in its subject matter, a seemingly routine agricultural catalogue, it is, at the same time, a song “[o]f the glory of Light” and “the rapture of Breath,” which celebrates the fertility of the Earth (“of furrow and seed”) through an appreciation of its (and *hers*, since Skiágeneia is also Demeter’s granddaughter, who is, in turn, granddaughter to Gaia) reproductive potential.

But the mythic Earth is enlivened not only by its generative but also by its destructive forces. Skiágeneia mentions, too, the “burial, birth of the grain,” and so she evokes, through the alliteration, the inseparability of life, death, and rebirth embodied in the Eleusinian symbol of extra-biological continuity (Meredith, *Poems* 50-1). Fittingly, the last lines of the poem directly preceding this one, entitled “A Ballad of Past Meridian,” feature the Vitalist motif of the circularity of life and death: “[o]f Death, of Life, those inwound notes are mine” (*Poems* 29): “inwound,” a word Meredith must have chosen quite carefully, communicates life’s proximity to death, with which it is *wound* up, but it also puns on the *wound* involved in Demeter’s loss of Persephone, and now, in the next generation, in Callistes’ loss of Persephone’s daughter to the same “terrible Charioteer,” Skiágeneia’s father, the god of the underworld (*Poems* 58). Combining the agricultural with the eschatological, this rich epithet brings to mind, finally, the *wound* of the buried grain, from the decay and death of which new life can spring.

Yet, it is the sonnet “Earth’s Secret” that articulates Meredith’s Vitalist philosophy more directly than “The Day of the Daughter of Hades” or “The Woods of Westerman.”¹⁹ Its enticing title notwithstanding, the poet never reveals the “Earth’s Secret.” He has no need to do so: it is “open[ly]” found “in fields,” accessible in the “plainest” language to children and shared by “bird[s] and beast[s],” and, moreover, so “open” that a single “page” can sufficiently represent the whole. It is so ubiquitous, in fact, that even in the “turbid cities,” “where the troubled passions [alliteratively] toss the mind,” we can still intuit the power of the fertile Earth; even there, it is not “bare.” What this “secret” is is, of course, ineffable, yet communicable through sight, as the language of writing and reading (“spell,” “raised letters for the blind,” and the synecdochical

“page” standing for The Book of Nature) seems to suggest. But it also demands more than ordinary sight, since even the blind are capable of deciphering it, so long as there exists (“lives”) a “[c]lose interthreading” of nature and humans. The latter phrase evokes the imagery of reading, as well: an unusual adjective that draws our attention more effectively than its near synonym *interweaving* might, “interthreading” comprises the kind of rich texture (from the Latin *texere*, meaning to weave, to plait, to build, to compose) that we associate with literary *texts* and can, as intuitive readers attentive to poetry, unthread in order to decipher.

If there be any “teach[ing]” in this poem, it is this: an intimate connection with the Earth is vital, for it provides “vision and solidity,” states the acquiring of which is a considerable “gain.” By 1871, Meredith “determined to make poetry the vehicle for his theory of man and nature,” a philosophical system which enabled him to eschew some of the issues of faith and doubt troubling his contemporary after the publication of the *Origin of Species* (Carolyn Williams 57). The loss of this “interthreading[ness]” is, on the other hand, fundamentally destabilizing; it challenges our mode of seeing and experiencing the world (our “vision”) in its stable ontological state (its “solidity”), threatening to reduce it to a chaotic and ungraspable illusion. To counteract it, the sonnet’s concluding lines suggest, we must celebrate the Earth as our *alma mater*, trusting that it would address our physical and spiritual needs, and nurse our spirit at the same time as it nurses our body, with her milk having more than the merely alimentary connotation, but, as in Augustine’s account of his early infancy, becoming our vehicle for spiritual enlightenment: “For Earth, that gives the milk, the spirit gives.”

Based on the close readings above, to label Meredith's works in the 1880s simply as "Darwinian poetry" (Lionel Stevenson) is misleading. Like many other Victorians, Meredith was fascinated by the publication of Darwin's ideas on evolution (a point we will take up in Chapter 4), and stressed the necessity of reconnecting the human world to the natural. But he did not present nature in the same mechanistic terms as Darwin, showed less ambivalence about the "unmechanical" than Pater, and therefore shares more with his predecessor Wordsworth than with his own contemporaries who, like Tennyson, lamented rather than rejoiced about a merciless "Nature, red in tooth and claw."

* * *

Whether expressed in a call for modern science to strive for the ideal, or for modern philosophy to be grounded in the real, in Wordsworth's poem, Schelling's novel, or Meredith's lyrics, the longing for the maternal Earth as the place of origin and ultimate return, and a state still accessible to children (especially, though not exclusively, to females who carry on life's creative work), is a nineteenth-century motif too significant to be passed over lightly. The Living Earth came to embody the three aforementioned concerns (also, answers to the questions posed in the Introduction): namely, the possibility of non-empirical knowledge, purpose beyond mechanism, and hope. "We Are Seven" features just one of the numerous forms taken by Demeter. Filled with Wordsworth's "divine vitality," or as "Sacred Goddess, Mother Earth" in the words of Shelley, this rich symbol was meant to counteract skepticism and Positivism, which entailed a reductive view of a predictable nature. Through the cyclical end-as-beginning motif, furthermore, and unlike much of modern poetry that was permeated by pessimism, as Meredith's reviewers aptly note, Vitalist poetry gave hope to an alienated humanity.

On final judgment, Vitalist poetry was not just a reversion to the Greek past; the new complex view of nature, dynamic and attuned to advances in evolutionary thinking, could not find a better embodiment than in Demeter, the nature goddess who combines the antagonistic forces of creation and destruction. Yet, her cruelty could be appeased, and through dedication and work, her supplicants could hope for a better life, not a soulless perpetuity among the larvae and dead rocks of Darwin's soulless universe.

¹ Hamann's definition of poetry: "the mother tongue of the human race" (qtd. in Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schubak, "The Work of Experience," *Schelling Now*: 70).

² A few of these include: Goethe's *Proserpina. A Monodrama* (1776); Schiller's *Klage der Ceres* (1796) and *Das Eleusische Fest* (1798), both of which were translated by Zhukovsky, as *Zhaloba Tserery* (1831) and *Elevzinskii Prazdnik* (1833); Jean Ingelow's "Persephone" (1862) in *Poems* (1863); Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" (1862); Algernon Swinburne's "The Garden of Proserpine" and "Hymn to Persephone" in *Poems and Ballads* (1866); Dora Greenwell's "The Garden of Proserpine" in *Carmina Crucis* (1869) and "Demeter and Cora" in *Camera Obscura* (1876); Lewis Morris' *The Epic of Hades* (1876-1877); George Meredith's "The Day of the Daughter of Hades" in *Poems and Lyrics on the Joy of Earth* (1883); Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 1880 painting *Proserpina* and the eponymous poem.

³ The German scientists Haeckel and Oscar Schmidt were pro-Darwinian and anti-Socialist; they came to see Darwin's theory of descent as leading to inequality, which was "inherent," rather than "the socialist dream of a society based upon absolute equality" (Morrison 126-7). Also see Enrico Ferri's *Socialism and Modern Science* (trans. by Robert Rives LaMonte; International Library Publishing Co., 1900).

⁴ Primarily, the Great Chain of Being in Pope's *Essay on Man* (1732-34), but also David Hartley's descriptions of moral growth in mechanistic terms in *Observations on Man* (1749).

⁵ Although Shelley was thinking of Prometheus and not Demeter, as indicated in the novel's subtitle, she must have been aware of the common mythic pattern also evoked by the episode with Demophoön.

⁶ Schelling believes that working collectively, artists can employ "virtually any material or content, thus also from that of a higher [speculative] physics," to form a new kind of philosophy of nature "developed from the idealistic principle." Schelling is sure, in fact, that "we are already holding the symbols ready" for the gods of physics to embody (*Philosophy* 75-7; §42).

⁷ Namely: floods and volcanic eruptions, which would have had a tremendous impact upon early civilizations, fueling “the exuberant imagination of eastern writers [who then] augment them into general cataclysms and conflagrations.”

⁸ Among these: Homer’s *Iliad* (Demeter as a fertility goddess) and *Odyssey* 11 (Persephone in Hades); Hesiod’s *Theogony*; Sophocles’ *Triptolemos*, fragment 837; Callimachus’ Hymn; Theokritus’ *Shepherd’s Journey*; Euripides’ *Helena* (Chorus identifies Demeter with Rhea Cybele); Claudian’s *Rape of Proserpine*; Ovid’s *Fasti* and *Metamorphoses*; Lucretius’ opening to *De rerum natura*; and Pausanias (dark Demeter) and Pliny (speaking of Praxiteles’ statues).

⁹ These questions are: (1) Can we know anything about our own “nature” and that of the Earth/World, and if so, by what means? (2a) Can we (and the Earth) be free, or are we subject to universal determinism? (2b) Can we (and the Earth) have purpose, or are we subject to universal randomness? (3) If life has no telos, and there is no afterlife, can there be any hope, or must we accept a perpetual existence as little more than worm food indistinguishable from a thoroughly materialized Earth, as “dead matter—a heap of things”?

¹⁰ Richardson thinks that the “eschatological” stage, which succeeded the more primitive agricultural stage, helped the ancients see the significance of the “simple agricultural ritual [to] sanctify the growth of the crops” through “analogical extension” (14).

¹¹ Originally prepared as two lectures to be delivered in 1875 at the Birmingham and Midland Institute in 1875, and published in the *Fortnightly Review* in Jan. and Feb. 1876.

¹² See Chapter 1: Bergson opposes “organization” to “manufacture,” with the latter corresponding to the modern mechanistic conception of nature which is amenable to similar *summation* (*Creative* 107).

¹³ During the first phase, which he labels “instinctive, or mystical,” Pater says that “certain primitive impressions of the phenomena of the natural world” are orally transmitted, “with details changing as [the unwritten legend] passes from place to place.” This is followed by a “conscious, poetical or literary, phase, in which the poets become the depositories of the vague instinctive product of the popular imagination,” which they revise “with a purely literary interest.” Finally, in its third “ethical phase,” the “poetical narrative” of the myth is rewritten so as to exemplify “moral or spiritual conditions”: “the persons and the incidents...are realised as abstract symbols” (Pater, *Greek* 91).

¹⁴ Pater also tips his hat to the then popular comparative method—which, like the other burgeoning comparative disciplines (embryology, linguistics) promoted the finding of similar structures and patterns across temporal and cultural differences. The ancient Greeks, Pater says, “thought of Demeter as the old Germans thought of Hertha, or the later Greeks of Pan, as the Egyptians thought of Isis, the land of the Nile, made green by the streams of Osiris, for whose coming Isis longs, as Demeter for Persephone” (Pater,

Greek 97). Furthermore, rather like Frazer, Pater concludes this essay by drawing a comparison between the Eleusinian mysteries and the drama of Christian redemption: “death, resurrection, rejuvenescence” (Pater, *Greek* 95).

¹⁵ Hume thought the imagination could not be trusted because it yielded “monstrous” images as easily as “natural” ones. He also challenged the power of human thought in general, since it “is not even restrained within the limits of nature and reality,” and its flight is checked by nothing except that which “implies an absolute contradiction” (*Enquiry* 16-7).

Even Lamarck was of no help when it came to the imagination. His notions are Lockian—that is to say, empiricist. The zoologist agreed with Hume’s warning against the dangers of an unbridled imagination, particularly in the domain of science. The imagination, he writes, is located within “l’organe de l’intelligence,” and is no different from other sensation-derived faculties. Echoing Hume, Lamarck describes the imagination as working with empirically acquired ideas, employing simpler ideas to create more complex ones “par la voie des sensations”; its materials are derivative: “ses matériaux ont toujours été les modèles des idées déjà acquises, ou les contrastes de ces idées” (Lamarck, *Philosophie* 413). Although he acknowledges the importance of the imagination for literary creation (“Que seroit la littérature sans l’imagination!”), Lamarck also insists that it must be feared when it comes to science (“elle est à redouter dans les sciences”), where it would lead to error if not checked by reason (*Philosophie* 415-6).

¹⁶ If many, if not all, prefatory pieces tend to celebrate the winning points of a work they introduce, Frazer aims for the opposite effect. He describes the *Library* as “the dull compilation of a commonplace man, who relates without one touch of imagination or one spark of enthusiasm the long series of fables and legends which inspired the immortal productions of Greek poetry and the splendid creations of Greek art” (xxxiii).

¹⁷ Herder, although he may have been an empiricist when it came to history, suggested that by studying myth, we could “approach the ancients in spirit rather than through imitation,” and this would create the possibility, albeit a difficult one, of “creating a whole new mythology ourselves” (qtd. in Feldman and Richardson 231).

¹⁸ All reviews of Meredith’s works quoted from *George Meredith: Critical Heritage*.

¹⁹ The sonnet is worth quoting in its entirety:

Not solitarily in fields we find
Earth’s secret open, though one page is there;
Her plainest, such as children spell, and share
With bird and beast; raised letters for the blind.
Not where the troubled passions toss the mind,
In turbid cities, can the key be bare.
It hangs for those who hither thither fare,
Close interthreading nature with our kind.
They, hearing History speak, of what men were,
And have become, are wise. The gain is great

In vision and solidity; it lives.
Yet at a thought of life apart from her,
Solidity and vision lose their state,
For Earth, that gives the milk, the spirit gives. (Meredith, *Poems* 160)

CHAPTER 3

The Soil, the Scythe, and the Spirit of the Earth: The Quest in *Anna Karenina*

The old magician stands before me alien to all, a solitary traveller through all the deserts
of thought in search of all-embracing truth which he has not found.

Maxim Gorky

In order to define the character of [a person's] relationship to religion, we need to clarify
fully what she understands by both kinds of religion: not just that which prepares us for
death, but also that which is necessary for our moral life, as air is for our physical life.

Lev Tolstoy, "O znachenii hristiankoi religii"

Whether embodied in the mythic Corn-Mother or suggested by a vegetative
metaphor, the Living Earth offered spiritual meaning beyond the deadly empirical and
mechanistic, and enabled the Vitalists to discuss matters of the will and individual
creativity in terms other than materialist—as strictly determined patterns of behavior or,
alternatively, as random movements of molecules. For Walt Whitman, it is grass that
stems from the fertile earth and serves as an intermediary between the natural world and
the human. Grass provides a means for the poet to "merge," that is, to achieve mystical
oneness with the kosmos, the ecstasy of transcending his body by experiencing it
sensually (31). In the famous fifth chant of "Song of Myself," Whitman writes:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy and knowl-
edge that pass all the art and argument of the earth;
And I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own,

And that all the men ever born are also my brothers...and the
 women my sisters...

And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields... (Whitman 29)

This bringing together of the ideal with the real into a Schellingian dynamic union—for, as the poet reminds us in the Preface to the *Leaves of Grass* (1855), “The spirit receives from the body just as much as it gives to the body”—is necessary for Whitman’s vision of human (national, gender, racial) equality and justice. For this, language itself becomes a symbol: “the grand American expression” is, he insists, not only the idiom of political resistance and common sense but also “the medium that shall well nigh express the inexpressible” (Whitman 19, 23). The latter approximates Schlegel’s definition of myth in his *Dialogue on Poetry* (1799-1800) as the expression of ineffable truth. It is no coincidence that in the passage which opens with Whitman’s asking the child “What is the grass?,” one of the replies is “a uniform hieroglyphic [that] means, Sprouting,” a way of conceiving the formless generative energy as that emanating from the grass which “is itself a child...the produced babe of the vegetation” (Whitman 29). This grass is a synecdoche for all of nature: a finite leaf that stands for nature’s infinitude.

Tolstoy opens his last novel, *Resurrection* (*Voskreseniye*, 1899)—written eighteen years after *Anna Karenina* and his denunciation of *belles lettres* as a distraction from social and religious activism—with a description of vernal nature that lives on despite rampant urbanization and human efforts to stifle it. Grass is ubiquitous and becomes, as Whitman’s leaves, a symbol of undying vegetative power: “coming to life, it grew and turned green everywhere, where it had not been scraped clean, not only on boulevard lawns but also between cobblestones” (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye XI: R 7*).¹ More so than

promoting environmental awareness, however, it is Tolstoy's moral objective here to criticize society for taking itself too seriously, and instead of seeing the significance of the spring morning or the "beauty of the world created by God," focusing on how to oppress one another. This image of vegetation is presented in biting contrast to the prison in which the novel's heroine, the wronged but unrelenting Katiusha Maslova, is confined: a contained, unnatural, dead space. In the end, Dmitry Nekhlyudov, Maslova's seducer, begins his "completely new life...because from that point on, everything that happened to him had entirely different meaning" (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye XI: R 470*).² He finds the right path to "rebirth" only when he realizes that he had placed too much faith in societal trappings and not enough in himself. The closing chapter of *Resurrection* serves also as an opening; evoking a cyclical view of nature, Tolstoy reminds us that death and life are organically connected.

While Whitman imagines the leaves of grass, body and spirit, as a means of "merging" with the kosmos and of losing oneself in pantheistic ecstasy, for Tolstoy and, specifically, for Konstantin Levin, the hero of *Anna Karenina*, the freshly plowed earth becomes a symbol of living life, the only possible paradigm that enables both the author and the character to act and live morally—drawing on the simple existence of peasants and children who do not think but only *live*. Just as in the myth of Demeter, life-bearing potential is, indeed, crucial. Tolstoy appeals to the pagan cult of the moist Mother Earth; the hero yearns to move closer to the soil—"like a scythe"—because only there the possibility of real knowledge arises (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye IX: R 390*).

In this chapter, we will see that Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is best understood as an expression of religious and existential crises experienced by its protagonist Levin, whose

name clearly echoes Tolstoy's own Christian name, Lev, and whose quest mirrors that of the author. The autobiographical dimension is obvious. The thirteen-year gap in Tolstoy's lifelong diary-keeping, from 1865 to 1878, was also the period during which he wrote *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*—novels that are virtually “surrogate diaries” (Christian, Introduction to *Tolstoy's Diaries* vii). More broadly, these crises reflect the nineteenth century's crises of faith (religion) and epistemology (the philosophy of empiricism). What the scythe and the freshly plowed earth symbolically provide for Levin is, in my view, what the philosophy of Vitalism provides for Tolstoy and his contemporaries—a fertile vegetative potential to combat deadening materialist science, paralyzing skepticism, and overall intellectual sterility.

* * *

In *Philosophy After Darwin* (1977), John Herman Randall connects the crises of the nineteenth century with the question of “the Good Life”; more specifically, he associates it with maxims of morality set down by a higher spiritual or cosmic authority, which had been a concern for the Stoics, as well, and resurfaced in the twelfth century with the reintroduction of Aristotelian philosophy in the West. Religious and epistemological crises are not new but a kind of recapitulation of the human “need for a cosmic sanction,” Randall claims, and goes on to blame Idealist philosophers for leading thinkers away from “the real problem” of what a moral life is and how to achieve it, to “the very secondary problem, Is there a ‘Divine Force’ in the universe.” To this, he goes on, the century gave three answers: “(1) There is a God, and everything will be all right; (2) There is no God, and everything is all wrong; (3) There is no God, but ‘Evolution’ is just as good, and therefore everything will be all right.” Idealism got human values so

tangled up with a theistic worldview that faith in life itself was made dependent on faith in God, without whom, accordingly, life was not worth living. To restore their faith in life, “men had to deify some natural force, like ‘evolution’,” which was ultimately adopted as “a new substitute religious faith,” and was also “a new Romantic faith” rooted in the writings of Herder, Goethe, Schelling, and Hegel, and later imposed on biologists by Buffon and others (Randall 7-9, 13). So long as humans had mechanistic or rational determinism, for which there were precedents among the Church theologians, and so long as God was theoretically behind behavior, humans were “still cosmically important,” and while reason was still behind action, and one acted based on his or her own “nature,” “determinism was still a promise” (Randall 20). But the naturalist tradition that culminated in the publication of Darwin’s books placed humanity’s descent firmly in the materialist hands of a faceless nature, to which no one could turn for spiritual guidance.

Vitalism was the century’s response to a waning faith in metaphysics, and an antidote to the waxing dominance of empiricism. Negating order, purpose, and the possibility of certainty, post-Humean skepticism rendered the Earth foreign to the human mind: “nature” was now random and largely illegible. Similarly, “human nature” was now explained more and more in terms of heredity and environment, leaving little room for free moral action, or seen purely in terms of utility, reducing the meaning of an individual life to little more than the hunt for resources in a bloody battle where only the evolutionarily fit survive. Hence, the “new Romantic faith” which Randall associates with Schelling and Buffon (and, as a materialist, sees as a move backwards rather than an important new transformation) became, in fact, the only ethical alternative for many thinkers, of whom Tolstoy is a choice example.

In the case of the eponymous hero of Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (*Smert' Ivana Ilyicha*, 1886), we can see a clear application of the century's crises. The experience of physical pain compels Ivan Ilyich to embark on a journey of self-inquiry, during which we learn that science fails to answer his questions, religion is too much of a sham, and only the spiritual encounter with his own mortality provides some solace.³ Indeed, the proximity of death forces him to reevaluate his otherwise meaningless existence consisting of the court, his materialist money-grabbing colleagues who mourn his death by calculating their chances of climbing the social ladder, and an unsympathetic wife who finds his illness a burden (if he died, "there would be no income"); only the card game of whist provides him with "the one pleasure which...out[shines] all the others in his life" (Tolstoy, *Death* 64, 61). The sole question that matters to Ivan Ilyich throughout the novella is whether his situation is "serious or not"; however, the doctor—who is suggestively compared to a lawyer dealing with patients as with men on trial, that is to say, in a cold, detached manner—finds the question not just unanswerable but "neumestnyi," meaning "inappropriate" (lit. "not suited to the circumstances"); it is, moreover, at once a "prazdnyi vopros," a "pointless" or "vapid" question, and one that does not lend itself to debate, and so all we can do is weigh the alternatives.⁴ The doctor focuses, instead, on his patient's caecum, an individual organ to which the latter's individuality is thereby reduced, and this conclusion is "of no consequence" to him, as thousands of Ivan Ilyich's convictions have been to him at his court. The question is repeated again, and similarly rebuked: "I have already told you what I consider necessary and suitable," says the doctor. "Anything further will be revealed by the analysis" (Tolstoy, *Death* 65-6). Here, as in his characterization of Levin, Tolstoy criticizes

materialist science the same way that Driesch does in his history of Vitalism (Chapter 1), noting that the mechanics of the body's movement or internal processes cannot "explain everything" (Driesch 110).

Just as science, religion fails him. Ivan Ilyich's self-pity and distress force him to consider faith as a source of relief, hoping that the "wonder-working icons" he had heard about would lead to a cure; yet, he dismisses this momentary wavering in favor of "the doctor's orders" to "stop thinking about it" (Tolstoy, *Death* 69).

In the moving sixth chapter, however, physical discomfort yields to a more profound fear of dying; the ineffable characteristic of death is registered here by the absence of the word "smert" (death), designated throughout by the feminine third-person pronoun *ona*.⁵ Konstantin Leontiev, the Russian historical Vitalist and Tolstoy's friend and critic, must have had this ineffable yet distinct characteristic in mind when he described the anticipatory rational insight that feeling provides in the case of dying. In his discussion of *The Death*, he points out that simply saying someone "died" ("umer i tolko") is scientifically precise because we have no rational basis for asserting that the soul is immortal or that, after death, it loses all feeling. To address the issue, Leontiev says, we must then turn to philosophy: "*Not knowing* hard science in this case *clears the field* not only for heartfelt beliefs, but also for philosophical *preferences*."⁶ Feelings ("chuvstva") and philosophical speculations are thus privileged, while reason (as elsewhere associated with hard science) must work in tandem with feeling to form a final judgment. The mind, Leontiev concludes, has "a *reasonable* right [*razumnoye pravo*] to follow the direction of feeling, which is, not infrequently, but a truthful *premonition* of a future *reasonable* truth" (*Analiz* 51; original emphasis throughout).⁷

In an effort to grasp the “idea” that he was dying, with the feeling of despair already set in, Ivan Ilyich recalls a famous Aristotelian syllogism: “Caius is a man, [and all] men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal.” When applied to Caius, this abstract “reasoning [is] perfectly sound,” but when transferred to a living being, it loses all meaning: “[Ivan Ilyich] was not Caius, not an abstract man; he has always been a creature quite, quite distinct from all the others” (Tolstoy, *Death* 79). This echoes the venomous protest of Dostoevsky’s “underground man” against the hard determinism of rationalist mathematics embodied in the deadly $2+2=4$. Indeed, it is the real, terrifying shadow of death, not some abstract logical musings, which makes living a good life so urgent. Ivan Ilyich fails to reform, however; he is as unsympathetic a hero by the end as he was at the beginning, but it is not so with Levin.

* * *

Like Ivan Ilyich, Levin finds science limiting and inhumane, and although the latter starts questioning his background much earlier in the narrative, it is not until the second half of the novel that he receives some semblance of an answer. He learns not through theory but through the combined impact of his brother Nikolay’s death (which parallels that of Nikolay Tolstoy in 1860) and the love of his wife Kitty, along with the birth of their son Mitya. At the end of the only chapter in the novel that bears a title, Levin “feels the need to live and to love.” This chapter christened “Smert” (“Death”) becomes not just an end but also a beginning:

The sight of his brother inspired in Levin that same *feeling* of dread before the mysteriousness but, at the same time, close proximity and inevitability of death, which had taken over him that fall evening when his brother

visited him. Now this *feeling* was even stronger than before; even less than before did he *feel* capable of understanding the meaning of death, and even more dreadful did its inevitability seem to him; but now, thanks to his wife, this *feeling* did not drive him to the edge of desperation; death notwithstanding, he *felt* the need to live and to love. He *felt* that love had saved him from despair and that, under the threat of despair, this love turned purer and grew in strength. (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye IX: AK 82*)⁸

Leontiev argues that an author's style, rhythm, and choice of words and devices express, sometimes against the author's will ("nevol'nom vybore"), that which is "unconscious and profound" ("bezsoznatelnoye i glubokoye"). Style, he argues, is "*the most visible, external expression of the most internal, sacred life of the spirit*" (Leontiev, *Analiz 102-3*).⁹ When describing Levin's state after Nikolay's death, Tolstoy repeatedly employs the noun and verb for "feeling" ("chuvstvo," "chuvstoval"), rather than some form of rational "knowing" or judgment, in order to express this particular kind of knowledge: that, despite the frightening inevitability of death, and due to the closeness of his wife, he could now love life. This may very well be Leontiev's "truthful *premonition* of a future *reasonable* truth"; although non-verbal and therefore absent even from Levin's internal monologue, this insight saves the hero from despair. It is at this point, too, that Levin learns of Kitty's pregnancy, and so "one unsolved mystery" leads to another, "just as unsolved," but one that inspires, in contrast, "love and life" (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye IX: AK 82-84*).¹⁰ Levin himself draws the parallel between Nikolay's death and Kitty's labor pangs as she is about to give birth. Equally as important, he describes this in non-rational terms, remarking that his soul at that point "flew to great heights,

which it did not comprehend, and whither the mind [rassudok] could not reach”—“ne pospeval”—that is, literally, kept falling behind (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye IX: AK* 308).

This constitutes Levin’s first intuition that life is in flux, and death is its natural transition. The confluence of life and death is a Vitalist notion that is beautifully embodied in the grain of wheat in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, as we saw in Chapter 2: in order for new life to spring from it, the acorn must be buried in the earth, decay, and die. The feeling evoked by his brother’s death may also remind us of the two kinds of religion Tolstoy described in a little known philosophical piece, “The Meaning of Christian Religion” (“O znachenii hristiankoi religii,” 1875-6), part of which is quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The religion of death merely prepares us for our passing, Tolstoy implies, whereas that of life enables us to act morally and is just as crucial “as air is to our physical life” (*Polnoye 17* 353-6).

Later on, however, Levin cannot bring himself to that same state, when he sincerely prayed for the first time; he finds himself in “a tormenting disagreement with himself” (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye IX: AK* 389).¹¹ It is this torment that reflects the hero’s, as well as the author’s, intellectual and spiritual growth. As so many of his contemporaries in the second half of the nineteenth century, Levin searches for a stable foundation upon which to build his moral life—a spiritual foundation, that is, outside of institutionalized religion. Before he can find this new vitality in his child, the peasants who work the land with their bare hands, as well as the simple and the good whose innocence has not yet been compromised by corrupt societal institutions, he turns to empirical science and then to metaphysics—only to become disenchanted with both.

Levin is a “estestvennik,” or natural scientist, by training, so we would naturally expect him to seek answers in science. The narrator tells us, however, that he never associated scientific deductions concerning the origins of human beings as animals, their reflexes and behavior, which he had read about in the journals, with those questions about the meaning of life and death which had been on his mind more and more frequently. When, in the opening chapters of *Anna Karenina*, he arrives at his half-brother Sergei Koznyshev’s house in Moscow, he walks in on a discussion of a “fashionable topic”: Koznyshev and the Professor argue whether there is a boundary between psychological and physiological occurrences in human activities, associating scientific questions with spiritual (“zadushevnyimi”) ones—a discussion framed, incidentally, in terms reminiscent of the Vitalist/Mechanist debate. This very encounter is predicated on Koznyshev’s remark that the Professor had surrendered to the materialists, claiming that our consciousness of being was a compound of sense perceptions (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye VIII: AK 32-3*). The latter provokes Levin’s pivotal interjection about the continuity of human existence: following through with the Professor’s argument, one would have to conclude that once there are no more sense perceptions, and the body is dead, we are no more. The professor confirms that an (empirical) inquiry into our state after death offers nothing conclusive since, he claims, “We have no data” (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye VIII: AK 33-4*).¹²

Levin finds this debate utterly frustrating because it never goes far enough: the two men digress, dissimulate, and hide behind speculations, authorities, and clever banter in order to avoid speaking openly about profound issues of being. Although from age twenty to thirty four, Levin’s beliefs were being gradually replaced with notions of the conservation of energy and the indestructibility of matter, he never failed to see the

limitations of such knowledge: the latter “[notions] were fine for rational inquiries; but for those of life—they gave nothing” (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye IX: AK 388*).¹³ His brother Nikolay’s inability to believe in anything other than a bottle of iodine, that is, the materialist approach to healing, further invalidates science in the eyes of the hero: Konstantin sees such lack of faith not as innate but rather as brought about “by modern scientific explanations of the world” (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye IX: AK 75-6*).¹⁴

A major section of Tolstoy’s *My Confession (Isповed’)*, 1884) is devoted to the same kind of questioning and doubts as he describes Levin experiencing in *Anna Karenina*. The vital question to which Tolstoy sought an answer was whether life’s meaning was negated by the inevitability of death. He confirmed that science gave an answer but neglected the question, while metaphysics addressed it but gave no answer. The experimental scientist claims that observing patterns of behavior and physiological functions gives one wisdom, while the “polunauki,” or the “semi-sciences” (juridical, social, and historical—which we might call the social sciences), pretend to solve the problem of an individual life at the general level of humanity. Both, however, fail to address the *why*, life’s *telos* (Tolstoy, *Polnoye 23 17-8*). Tolstoy is equally frustrated with metaphysics although he confesses to having been at first taken with the notion that life is futile and death superior, as found in the teachings of Socrates, Solomon, Schopenhauer, and Buddha, who deny life or insist on its transitory nature. He concludes that the rational negation of life must conceal a self-contradiction: “Life is everything. Reason is the fruit of life, and this same reason denies life itself. I felt that something was amiss here” (Tolstoy, *Polnoye 23 29*).¹⁵ The choice of “plod,” the noun that could be translated as “fruit” or “fetus,” is a telling one: connected to the Russian verb

“oplodotvorit” (“to fertilize”) and the related adjective “plodorodnaya” (“fertile”), it allows Tolstoy to contrast the reproductive power of life even more acutely with the negating potential of philosophical/nihilist reason. Nor, Tolstoy adds, does the perpetuity of life forms and humanity itself make sense if life be such an evil. All in all, rational philosophy provides the right framework, but no answer, so that Tolstoy is compelled to reject even Schopenhauer, his favorite philosopher.¹⁶

Similarly, Levin was disillusioned even with those philosophers who tried to explain “life in non-materialist terms” (Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Schelling, and Schopenhauer), because they had all failed to answer one of the most important questions: what happens to the body after death. He was able to follow their definitions of “spirit,” “will,” and “substance”; however, the artificial construction of these metaphysical arguments collapsed since it had been based on mere semantics, and not on something higher than reason (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye IX: AK 390*).

Parallel to the movement of Tolstoy’s thought in his *Confession*, as well as in the case of Ivan Ilyich, Levin does turn to religion for answers, and he is, initially, impressed with the theological writings of Aleksei S. Khomiakov, the Russian philosopher, theologian, and member of the Slavophile movement among nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia, which glorified distinctly Russian traditions and Orthodoxy. After Levin realizes that Catholicism and Orthodoxy deny each other, however, he becomes dissatisfied with both (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye IX: AK 390*). In fact, Levin is described early on as a “chelove[k] neveruyusch[iy],” “someone who himself did not believe but respected the beliefs of others,” and when confessed, admits to “doubting everything...even the existence of God” (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye IX: AK 8*).

Levin's inability to espouse faith is related, to be sure, to Tolstoy's own distrust of organized religion. At one point, Levin's wife Kitty observes that it is better that he remain a nonbeliever than follow a sham Christianity à la Madame Stal, who seems pious but, in fact, merely goes through the motions (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye IX: AK* 387). As Nicholas Rzhevsky observes, Tolstoy's hardly uncomplicated relationship "demonstrates the effects of a native religious tradition, but...also shows the secularization of such cultural material and its transformation into a personal literary vision far removed from accepted Orthodox dogmas" (*Russian Literature* 117-8). The Russian Symbolist theoretician Dmitry Merezhkovsky described Tolstoy's soul as that "of a born pagan," while George Steiner qualified Tolstoy's version of Christianity as "anarchic": the "Tolstoyan credo," which had been formulated in March 1855 and informed his works after 1880, is a reinterpretation of the religion of Christ to bring about "God's kingdom" on earth in the present, rather than pursuing bliss in some distant future (Steiner 47, 244). In *My Confession*, Tolstoy criticizes the Scripture for containing both falsehoods and truths; he rejects miracles, mysteries, and rites, and cannot come to terms with every religion's individual claim to truth, since truth to him is universal. Never, however, except perhaps in his tumultuous youth, did he reject faith altogether. He always kept searching (Tolstoy, *Polnoye* 23 51-7). In the same essay where he defines religion, Tolstoy maintains that although beliefs ("verovaniya") could be false, faith ("vera") is always true. Throughout, he takes the Bible in a non-traditional, heterodox, personalized sense—and, like Shaw, he rejects the institution of the Church as well as its interpretation and employment of Scripture, but not the truth of God's word itself. "The old magician stands before me," Maxim Gorky, the eminent Soviet writer, said of him, "alien to all, a

solitary traveller through all the deserts of thought in search of all-embracing truth which he has not found” (qtd. in Steiner 246).

In “The Meaning of Christian Religion,” we see the same tension in Tolstoy as we do in Levin: he desperately needs religion but cannot make that leap of faith. The author catalogues all the ills associated with the decline of religion in Europe, and adds that any thinking people at the time would have to admit that they “were no longer Christians.”¹⁷ Among the symptoms of this modern malady he lists the perfunctory nature of oaths; the conflict between proponents of religion and its opponents; the collapse of the institution of marriage, its replacement with civil unions, and termination in divorce (the very problem with which *Anna Karenina* begins); and the lack of any basis for education. If formerly religion was “the foundation for learning the meaning of life and death” for everyone, now it is only such for the “uneducated masses, who are yet distinguished through their love of children as well as their true instinct for love.”¹⁸ (The last sentence captures the general idea of Corelli’s novel.) Tolstoy finds the debates concerning what should be the main basis for education in lieu of religion “foundationless” and “lacking in content.” These debates among the proponents of classical education, those of the physical sciences, or those who prefer practical skills, or even those who, having lost faith, still vote in favor of religion—are all meant “to fill up the stomach of a hungry animal”; yet, “neither classicism which works just fine as a spice added to food; nor realism, which is quite useful as a plate or bowl to serve it; nor religion without faith, which consists of little more than leftovers of formerly wholesome food—can give the hungry animal its proper nourishment” (Tolstoy, *Polnoye 17* 353-6; my trans.).¹⁹

Written contemporaneously with *Anna Karenina*, “The Definition of Religion—Faith” (“Opredeleniye religii-very,” 1875-76) also sheds light on Tolstoy’s grappling with spiritual matters. In this philosophical piece, Tolstoy writes that religion, as other metaphysical terms such as life, force, death, and desire, has two meanings: a personal (or subjective) and a common (or objective) one, the former of which is clear to every individual. He defines religion as:

the coming together into one agreeable whole of all explanations and answers to the necessary and singularly interesting questions concerning life and death, to which reason gives me a private answer, an answer which I find the most agreeable, deem the most truthful, and, hence, one in which I believe; an answer, moreover, which guides me in all of my life’s activities.

According to this definition, religion cannot contradict what is given by reason or by life, and every act of life is based solely upon a religious worldview.²⁰ (Tolstoy, *Polnoye 17* 357-8; my trans.)

This passage is key to our understanding of Tolstoy’s, as well as Levin’s, preoccupation with “questions concerning life and death,” and consequently, their arriving at the threshold of faith without which there cannot be moral action. Like Descartes, Tolstoy begins with “somneniya,” or doubts; but unlike him, he finds certainty not in a rational God but in the irrational—“nerazumnoye” (Tolstoy, *Polnoye 23* 35). Reason does not help him avoid suicide, but a complete and irrational—or, better, *superrational*—faith in and awareness of life (“soznaniye zhizni”) does. Such “life-awareness” necessitates faith which he calls, in a characteristically Vitalist fashion, “sila zhizni,” the “force of life”:

Faith is the force of life. If a man lives, then he must believe in something. If he did not believe that life had a purpose, then he would not live. If he does not see or understand how transitory finite being is, then he believes in things finite; if he understands how transitory it is, then he must believe in the infinite. One cannot live without faith. (Tolstoy, *Polnoye* 23 31-5)²¹

The moral threshold is located between religion and rational science, and it combines the best qualities of both—promoting the kind of competition among reason, instinct, and the Imagination that the Schlegels had celebrated and the Vitalists developed into their mediating logic. Only when mediated by faith and checked by feeling (or anticipated by it, in Leontiev’s rubric) can reason be trusted. This would explain why in the final pages of *Anna Karenina*, Levin concludes that reason does not reveal higher truths but, rather, introduces us to egoism: “Reason revealed the struggle for existence and the law requiring that I stifle everyone who interferes with the fulfillment of my desires” (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye IX: AK* 400).²² Yet, reason need not be rejected altogether: it is misleading when employed by nihilist philosophy with the effect of negating life; however, when working within a religious context, it comes to assert life. Neither Tolstoy nor the protagonist of *Anna Karenina* categorically rejects faith in something higher; what they both reject is blind submission to an institution that manipulates it. Tolstoy implies that reason alone is not to be trusted unless it be coupled with faith—not in God but in life itself, and that demands an awareness of and respect for others.

* * *

Tolstoy's point about the potential excesses of unchecked reason is even more obvious in *Resurrection*, the later and comparably more dogmatic novel. By organizing the plot around the heroine's trial and subsequent imprisonment, Tolstoy invites his readers to question the judicial domain predicated on the selfish and, therefore, unjustified power of humans to condemn others. While in *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy took empirical science and philosophy as critical targets, in *Resurrection* he focuses mainly on the science of judging people; and just as empirical science cannot tell us whether we survive after our bodies disintegrate, jurisprudence does not get us any closer to higher truths. The epigraphs to the novel, from Matthew 18:21 and 7:3, John 8:7, and Luke 6:40,²³ as well as Nekhliudov's appeal to biblical maxims in the last few pages, drive this message home. The Scriptures are meant to remind the reader of the humility necessary to survive peacefully with others, for the law of egoism, based on self-preservation by any means possible, is morally untenable. To love another is, according to the egoist's stance, irrational or unreasonable ("nerazumno"), and yet that is the only way to prevent one ego from strangling another.

Nekhliudov has to sacrifice his comfortable well-being, give up his estate, and follow to Siberia the young woman whom he seduced in a state of "mad egoism" ("sumashedshego egoizma"), because he had given free rein to his "animal" ("zhivotnyi") ego at the expense of suppressing his altruistic spirit ("duhovnyi chelovek") who seeks only that which also brings good to others. At first, even this seemingly selfless journey is motivated by self-interest: he "thought only of himself—whether he be judged and how gravely, if it is ever made known that he had his way with her, but not about what she felt and what would happen to her" (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye XI: R 71*).²⁴

The stark contrast between the selfish, materialistic egoist and Tolstoy's selfless ideal is laid out in the novel's opening chapters; it is curiously gendered and pivots on the figure of a woman. We learn that Nehliudov's departure from his aunts' residence, where he had spent his childhood and adolescence, meant not only his abandoning of the peasant girl Katiusha, with whom he had fallen in love, but also his leaving his former self, "an honest, daring young man ready to sacrifice himself for a good cause," and turning, three years later, into "a perverted, refined egoist, who indulges only in his own pleasures" (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye XI: R 54*).²⁵ Back then, the narrator says, the world seemed to him "a mystery [tainoi], which he joyfully set out to solve"; he longed for communion with nature and with the thinkers of the past, through philosophy and poetry; woman appeared to him "a mysterious [tainstevennym] and pretty creature" and intrigued him with this very "mysteriousness" ("tainstvennost'yu"); money was irrelevant, and the land could be given to the peasants without any worry for personal material upkeep. Now, on the other hand, everything was "simple and straightforward, and defined by the circumstances surrounding it"; Nehliudov now relied on human institutions and socializing with his cohort; the role of women other than relatives and the wives of his friends was clearly delimited to that of "the best instrument [orudii] of the already experienced pleasure"; he had to engage his mother in unpleasant conversations regarding his monetary position. All in all, if "[t]hen he deemed his spiritual being to be his true I: now he deemed himself a healthy, vigorous, animal I" (*Sobraniye XI: R 54*). This duality is again alluded to several pages later when his "spiritual [duhovnyi] self," who does good only when it is good onto others as well, has to fight the "bestial self," ("zhivotnyi chelovek"), "in a period of egoistic madness, evoked in him by Petersburg

and military life” (*Sobraniye XI: R 60*).²⁶ The zenith of Nehliudov’s love falls on Easter Sunday, but later that day he witnesses not spiritual rebirth but “something black and dreadful,” “chto-to chiornoye i strashnoye” (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye XI: R 70*), the fatal intercourse with Katiusha which ultimately ruins her life.

We learn more about Nehliudov when he is compared to his double, Vladimir Simonson. As it becomes evident in the third part of *Resurrection*, it is for the latter’s sake that Katiusha reforms, realizing that Nehliudov’s decision to marry her is driven by self-interest rather than selflessness, and is meant as a sacrifice to prevent *him* from falling into greater misery. Simonson, whose name evokes that of Peter prior to his conversion, is a righteous pagan whose spirit is not bound by institutionalized Christianity. Noble by birth, he insisted that his manor be given to the people, and was ridiculed and arrested for preaching what was just. Simonson prefers to walk with the lower-class criminals, whereas Nehliudov—his youthful flirtation with granting land to his peasants notwithstanding²⁷—simply cannot bring himself to mingle with flees.

Simonson comes closer to Tolstoy’s ideal of the “duhovnyi” (spiritual) man, and that is precisely why he is a better match for Katiusha, for whom he has purely platonic love in contradistinction to Nehliudov’s physical infatuation. According to Simonson’s “religious” worldview, things we might deem dead, inanimate, or inorganic are really part of a larger living whole, an organic body: “everything in the world is alive, and there is nothing dead”; the phagocytes in our blood are evidence of this dynamic relationship: single individuals [holostye liudi], like phagocytes or small particles in a much greater whole, are meant to work collectively towards the greater good of the community, helping the weaker parts improve (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye XI: R 391*). Simonson, a

vegetarian, opposes killing animals and humans. This organicist view of life, with an emphasis on the dynamic interaction of parts within a whole, may even strike us as being Vitalist, as is his intellectual openness: critical of but receptive to other people's ideas, he checked what others said, judged it rationally, and acted on his judgments, using his reason to solve moral as well as practical questions (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye XI: R 390-1*).²⁸

But, despite the destructive force of his egoistic reason, it is Nehliudov who is Tolstoy's protagonist, not Simonson, who could be taken to represent an unshakeable but also moribund and sterile intellectualism.²⁹ In favor of serving the whole of humanity spiritually, Simonson condemns reproduction as the lowest function of animals—thus denying the power of fertility which, as we saw in the case of Levin and Kitty's child, promotes spiritual growth and completeness. Demeter is also a mother.

* * *

In addition to its dangerous potential to justify egoism, reason can lead to intellectual paralysis, a perpetual reevaluation of an individual's understanding of life that, in effect, might prevent her from living it. For someone particularly skeptical of theory, action would only be possible when all metaphysical speculation ceased; instincts, not reason, would become the motivating force, an idea that would ring true to a Vitalist. But a healthy dose of skepticism is, surely, useful to an individual's growth and formation, provided that it lead to something certain and not turn into a life of perpetual questioning. Here we notice another rendition of the balancing act of mediation typical of Vitalist texts: following some fashionable view blindly amounts to surrendering to deadening determinism; remaining in doubt or adapting theories on whim, however, runs the risk of falling into a purposeless, random universe; but, at the same time, committing to a rigid

theoretical framework, however meaningful, threatens to limit the flow of life. What makes Nehliudov and Levin truly Tolstoyan heroes is—however counterintuitive it may seem—their failure to commit to any one theoretical apparatus. The uncommitted end up more successful, for by adopting the mode of questioning, they avoid falling into dogma. The “new period” in Nehliudov’s life, mentioned in the last sentence of the novel, is left undefined—or, defined, at best, as an inclination that is felt but not yet rationalized.

As Tolstoy underscores time and again in *Resurrection* and makes evident in Levin’s frustration with the debate between the professor and Koznyshev, abstract thought can be debilitating, and fashionable theories tend to conceal ignorance and hypocrisy. One of Katiusha’s judges by the name of Skovorodnikov³⁰ is the senator with the final vote on her case; he is also a “materialist” and a “Darwinist,” who “considered any manifestation of distracted morality or, even worse, religiosity [religioznosti] not just contemptibly mad [prezrennym bezumiyem] but also personally insulting” (*Sobraniye XI: R 293*).³¹ Skovorodnikov is disgusted by Nehliudov’s proposal to wed the prisoner, for whose moral downfall the hero is indirectly responsible, and so he denies her appeal. Maslova’s other accusers are equally blind due to their theoretical biases, citing as their evidence the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso’s (1835-1909) latest advances in characterology, or the study of physical attributes as representative of internal deviations; various theories from inheritance; the hypnotism of the French expert in female mental illness Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893); and the psychological inquiries of the British Henry Maudsley (1835–1918) (*Sobraniye XI: R 80-2*). The objection that the defendant’s parents are unknown and, hence, she cannot be judged on her genetic predispositions, is the least in a score of more profound problems associated with their inflexible thinking.

Seen in this light, it is understandable why in his analysis of Tolstoy's novels, Leontiev would describe Levin as one of the "vechnye 'iskateli'," "perpetual 'seekers'," who never find anything certain or concrete. The critic juxtaposes the species of "Levins" to someone like Vronsky, who "do[es] not change opinions and viewpoints almost every day," and is, rather, one of the "determined, brave, decisive, and even *physically* strong people" (*Analiz* 3, 5; original emphasis).³² The reader might identify the headstrong, charismatic, courageous Vronsky more readily as the novel's protagonist. In comparison, Levin, with his endless doubts, and Kitty, who keeps falling under the spell of every person whom she meets, from Vronsky to Anna and Madame Stal, seem rather colorless and almost forgettable. But, as we recall from Lamarck, the forces of life prefer more malleable, supple matter: Levin is the embodiment of theoretical openness, which first makes him indecisive and incapable of Vronsky's heroic feats, but then leads him naturally toward the ennobling labor of the land, as he chooses a long life as an unknown farmer to that of instant immortality by death in battle, as does his foil.

Indeed, the very same qualities Kitty's mother Princess Scherbatskaya dislikes in Levin when he starts courting her daughter, and which render him Vronsky's foil, are also the qualities that make him a more suitable candidate: namely, his strange speculations, social awkwardness, "wild" [dikaya] life in the country, among farm animals and peasant men, and his unusual tentativeness when asking Kitty to marry him. Levin has neither the riches nor the military prospects of his rival and is initially rejected by Kitty. Yet, Tolstoy must have intended the ironic pun when creating his headstrong, decisive Byronic hero: that Vronsky is *wrong* for Kitty becomes evident when he abandons her for Anna, another strong, willful character. (There is something

extraordinary about Anna's energy, as we will discuss shortly, that helps us forget that she is "a fallen woman" and fall in love with her, even if temporarily, as do the three main characters: Vronsky, Kitty, and Levin.)

Another explanation as to why Levin tends to seek perpetually rather than commit has to do with his distrust of reason and, subsequently, reliance on instinct. But this instinct must not be conceived in evolutionary or, more precisely, Darwinian terms, because then we would run into the same problem as with egoism; it must be conceived, rather, as a Romantic or Vitalist longing to merge with nature and the Earth.

It is only when he stops questioning, thinking, and rereading metaphysical texts, and lets himself experience life that Levin is finally able to act: "While Levin kept thinking about what he is and what he lives for, he found no answer and got discouraged; but when he stopped asking, he as though knew at once what he was and what he lived for, because he firmly and definitively acted and lived" (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye IX: AK 391-2*).³³ He then finds himself drawn to the earth instinctively—and, hence, against his individual will, for only therein can he discover purpose and the possibility of real knowledge: "Now, as though against his will, he was cutting more and more deeply into the earth, *like a scythe*, so that he could no longer get out without turning the furrow away" (*Sobraniye IX: AK 392*; my emphasis).³⁴ This is not an accidental simile: it occurs less than a page after Levin contemplated hanging or shooting himself (*Sobraniye IX: AK 391*). Levin cannot move away; as the scythe with which he is compared, he functions best when in touch with the grass. Neither scientific nor religious dogma can give him peace; it is only by working the earth that he stops feeling restless.

Tolstoy offers here a potential solution to the two major crises of the century. One simply *knows* how to act, he suggests, as do the *muzhiki*, the peasant men who work the Earth. Life itself gives Levin this answer (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye IX: AK 400*).³⁵ The hero starts to believe, without understanding what his new faith is, and his life acquires meaning: it is no longer “meaningless, as it had been, but had an undoubtable meaning of goodness, with which he is capable of endowing it” (*Sobraniye IX: AK 421*).³⁶ This is the only way to “live in the ways of God, the ways of the Spirit”—“zhit’ dlia boga, dlia dushi,” an insight that he gathers from the *muzhiki*, not from all the philosophy he peruses in his quest for certainty (*Sobraniye IX: AK 399*). Additionally, Levin realizes that looking at his own body, or that of a blade of grass, or that of a tiny insect as developing through an exchange of matter, according to the laws of physics, chemistry, or physiology, would not address his deepest concerns nor reveal the meaning of life, “smysl zhizni.” He comprehends the grass and the insect in their “infinitude” (“beskonechnom”) and recognizes “a force” (“silu”), which “gave him life in the past, and now also gives him life” (*Sobraniye IX: AK 399*). This echoes the author’s lament about the loss of religion as a basis for education, something which was and still is accessible to the uneducated; Levin appears to have dipped into that lost well.

The view that the way of the good, as well as the key to life’s mystery, is that of the simple peasant and the child informs Tolstoy’s lifelong search for truth. In his *Confession*, he notes that peasants live without ever contemplating life’s purpose or knowing how inorganic substances function; however, to deny their wisdom seems silly (“bessmyslitza”: *Polnoye 23 31*). He concludes, therefore, that the overeducated elite

must be in the wrong. Isaiah Berlin observes that, according to Tolstoy, the “damned” servants of vainglorious bureaucracies have lost

the capacity with which all men are born—to see the truth, the immutable, eternal truth, which only charlatans and sophists represent as varying in different circumstances and times and places—the truth which is visible fully only to the innocent eye of those whose hearts have not been corrupted—children, peasants, those not blinded by vanity and pride, the simple, the good. (Berlin 30)

That true knowledge and life reside in the countryside, the abode of the *muzhiki* who are physically close to the Earth, and in children, who are symbolically close to life’s origins, is, moreover, the subject of Tolstoy’s *narodnye legendy*, “folk legends.” In “The Grain” (“Zerno s kurinoye yaitzo,” 1886) and “The Vision at Sea” (“Tri startza,” 1884), Tolstoy criticizes modern institutions for having lost touch with ancient wisdom. In the first tale, the Tsar summons his simple folk to find out more about a mysterious grain of corn discovered at his palace (this is, of course, the Corn Mother’s attribute). The generative power of the Earth is evident in the vitality of the oldest peasant, who is by far the healthiest among the three generations summoned to solve this mystery, and who is old enough to recall the time when people “live[d] by their labor alone,”³⁷ and felt no need to commit the sacrilegious sale of bread or partake in the commercialization of Earth’s products (Tolstoy, *Polnoye 25 64-6; Works 45*). In the other tale, an Archbishop meets three *startza*, or “ancient” men, on an island and tries to teach them *slovu Bozhiyu*, “the whole of Lord’s Prayer.” Reciting something by rote cannot, however, constitute true faith, and so the old men quickly forget everything they were taught, while the

Archbishop is forced to admit that their way, not that of the modern church, is the truer and more lasting: “It is not for me to teach you,” he concedes. “Pray you rather for us sinners” (*Polnoye* 25 100-2; *Works* 75-7).³⁸

Similarly, Nehliudov learns to forgive (recalling the epigraph from Matthew 18:5, where Jesus tells Peter to forgive) with the help of a somewhat eccentric old prisoner who is the incarnation of earthly wisdom: the latter bears no name other than “Man,” has neither a father nor a mother other than God and the Earth, refuses alms in any form other than bread, the fruit of the Earth; and upholds a pantheistic, original unity of spirit by claiming that while “there be many faiths, the spirit is one” (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye XI: R* 443). Tolstoy thus fuses the myth of the Living Earth with early Christian virtue, implying that the spiritual and the divine, not the abstract human-made law, ought to guide our behavior toward others.

Based on the foregoing, we should not interpret the simile of the scythe, the instrument of the vital *muzhiki*, or Levin’s contemplation of “the blade of grass” and the “force” in *Anna Karenina* either in materialist terms or in strictly religious ones. It would be anachronistic, of course, to call this “force” Bergson’s *élan vital* or the Shavian Life as Godhead, but it is more akin to those than to strict Orthodoxy. Tolstoy adapts a Vitalist mode which, though rooted in verisimilitude, requires that his novel be read not only on the literal (materialist) level but also on the symbolic (spiritual) one. Tolstoy appeals to the pagan cult of the Mother Earth as a way to address the two major crises of the century, and he does so by revitalizing the Earth, restoring purpose, and giving Levin the kind of certainty that neither science nor metaphysics provides.

Once we accept this premise, the rest of the novel falls into place. Levin is intimately connected with the soil: he lives in the country with the cattle and *muzhiki*; both his activities and his studies are tied to agriculture. He writes a treatise arguing that, in addition to climate and soil, the character of the individual worker must be considered an important factor in farm management. Cutting the grass with a scythe is his method of relaxation; under the guidance of the old peasant Tit, Levin's so-called field "uncle" who sharpens his scythe, the hero struggles to catch up with the peasants, who are at first suspicious of their master's interest and skeptical of his capabilities, but soon learn to accept him nearly as their own despite the obvious class difference (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye VIII: AK 275-7*). He loves gathering the hay as it touches "something living in him," and this "at once joyful and hard work leaves no time to think" (*Sobraniye VIII: AK 268, 276*). That is, accordingly, the best way of putting Levin's restless mind to peace and giving him that much desired certainty.

In 1908, Aleksandr Blok wrote about the people's "will to live" when contrasting the vital people, the quintessentially Russian *narod*, with the Westernized decadent intelligentsia. He found in this "will" the reason "why even the unbeliever runs to the people to seek in it the life-force" (Blok 363). When Levin is contrasted with Koznyshev, we learn of his attitude toward the *narod*: he can neither love it nor hate it, because he lives with and among the peasant folk. For his brother, however, the country is not a place to live or work, as it is for Levin, but one to which he flees to escape the hustle and bustle of the city; in Koznyshev's view, the *narod* is to be loved and defended, polemically, against the upper classes (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye VIII: AK 264-5*). Yet, the latter entails an intellectual distance which Levin does not share.

Furthermore, the episodes in the novel involving fertility also demonstrate the importance of Levin's proximity to the Earth, to peasants, and to children. While he observes the peasant Ivan Parmionov gathering the hay with his young wife, Levin envies their robust, healthy love as well as their existence, which he now finds neither as dreary nor as lonely as his own. Lying on a haystack, surrounded by the gifts of the Earth, he yearns for a life of simple labor, questions his earlier decision to remain single, and even considers marrying a *krestianka*, a peasant girl (*Sobraniye VIII: AK 304-7*). When a cow named Pava gives birth to a calf, Levin is so overjoyed that he imagines his (future) wife saying, as they greet their guests at the manor, that the couple helped rear Pava's daughter "as though she were [their] child" (*Sobraniye VIII: AK 109-11*).³⁹ While visiting Kitty's older sister (Dolly) in the country, he is described as frequently having a child-like, joyful disposition, especially when around children (*Sobraniye VIII: AK 298*).

In the Vitalist language of fertility, as in the Romantic idiom, the countryside represents life while the city, which corrupts and fuels the pursuit of self-interest, stands essentially for death. This language, comprised of various associations with the familiar dichotomy between the morally tainted urban milieu and the idyll of rustic life, could be used to understand the novel's principal characters on a deeper level. While Levin carries the potential for life, since he is in favor of maintaining an agrarian state and opposed to the urban milieu with its pretentious socialites, Vronsky and Anna, who epitomize the city, come to embody the way of death. At one point, the socially awkward Levin admits that the city—Moscow—turned him mad ("oshalel"); the debates, the drinking, and the food all made his life there "bestzeln[aya], bestolkov[aya]"—in a word, "meaningless" (*Sobraniye IX: AK 298*). The very place of Anna and Vronsky's

acquaintance, the railroad station, is one of the century's emblems for industrialization as well as the prerequisite for urbanization (it is also tied in with the century's crisis of the environment). In Dickens' *Dombey and Son* (1848), it is quite unambiguously identified with "Death," and, like other types of technology, has evoked an ambivalent and immensely complex reaction in the century's (and specifically Victorian) literary imagination (Herbert Sussman, Colin Manlove). Levin opposes the development of industry, transportation infrastructure, and factories at the expense of the agrarian sector, which might work for Europe but is as "premature for Russia," where it is politically and not economically motivated, "as the premature development of an organ is to an animal" (*Sobraniye IX: AK 59*).⁴⁰ This choice of an organic simile could be taken as the mark of a "estestvennik," but also subtly underscores the unnaturalness of industrial *grafting*.

As we recall from the dichotomy between the spiritual ("dukhovnyi") and the animal ("zhivotnyi") self laid out in *Resurrection*, simple, rustic life, land, and the celebration of femininity are juxtaposed with urban commercialism, society, and the exploitation of women. This is evident in Levin's preference for the fertile Kitty over the "energetic," passionate, but ultimately death-bearing Anna—who is denied custody over her son Seryozha and, having nearly died in labor, ultimately gives up Annie, the little girl she has with Vronsky. Whereas Kitty bears Levin a healthy son at the end of the novel, Anna leaves both of her children motherless orphans. The fact that Vronsky, although a painter himself, cannot finish Anna's portrait and has to commission one from another artist, Mikhailov, is a significant clue, as well; he may be capable of taking a ball by a storm, but is also ultimately sterile. Despite his charm, he can never marry the fertile Kitty, whose selflessness and readiness to care for others—most poignant when

caring for Levin's dying brother Nikolai while being ill herself—should not be taken as an essentialist stereotyping of a female, as a submissive vehicle with reproductive potential; rather, her moderation is celebrated as she is shown capable of transforming the death of one relative into the life of another, Konstantin Levin's son.

* * *

But why was Levin so moved by Anna in the first place, provoking his wife's accusation that he had fallen under her spell? The link between fertility and "energy," a word that Tolstoy uses frequently throughout the text, may shed some light onto this question: namely, why Anna, arguably the anti-heroine, seems so irresistible. Energy is a marker of willful power in the novel, and on rare occasion, it is associated with vitality; but it is not the same as fertility. This would, in fact, explain why, when describing Levin's longing toward the Earth and the cut grass, the narrator says, "*as though against his will*, [Levin] was cutting more and more deeply into the earth, like a scythe" (my emphasis). The connection is, in other words, instinctual and not willful—the former more suited to the Kitty-Levin dyad than to that of Anna-Vronsky.

The first time we encounter the epithet "energicheskii" (the archaic or literary form of the more common *energichnyi*, or "energetic"), it is applied to Levin, a "very energetic gentleman [energicheskii gospodin]," as he is walking out of the office of his friend Stepan (Stiva) Oblonsky; the latter agrees and praises the size and location of Levin's property as well as his fresh luster, "svezhes[t]" (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye VIII: AK* 29). The word, which appears also in Turgenev, Goncharov, and Dostoevsky, meant around Tolstoy's time "having energy, strong will" (Michaelson), as well as "possessing a strong personality, being full of life" (Chudinov).⁴¹ When employed by Tolstoy, it does

mean “forceful” or “willful”: a minor character (Betsy) describes Anna to her brother Oblonsky as a woman who “cannot treat her emotions lightly,” and proposes two alternatives, either to take Anna away, “acting energetically [willfully],” or give her a divorce (*Sobraniye VIII: AK 468*).⁴² Vronsky’s horse Frou-Frou is described as having “an energetic but, at the same time, tender expression”—a detail from which we can infer that Tolstoy also associated the word with something strong and tough (*Sobraniye VIII: AK 203*).⁴³

Throughout the novel, the epithet is almost exclusively used to describe Anna. Vronsky is surprised by her “energetic handshake” after he notices an “excess of something in her being...expressed at times in the sparkle of her eyes, at times in her smile,” and the same sparkle seems to illuminate her dark room; her petite hand is once again described as “energetic” a few pages later, while she visits with Stiva’s wife, and again upon her meeting Levin (Tolstoy, *Sobraniye VIII: AK 75, 73, 167, 80; IX: AK 290*). Vronsky’s acquaintance, the liberal writer Golenishchev, thinks he understands Anna, in part, due to her “kind-hearted, joyful energetic manner,” yet cannot fathom how, having left her husband and son, and having created so much misery, she could still “feel so energetically-joyful and happy” (*Sobraniye IX: AK 32*). Vronsky’s passionate pursuit of Anna is qualified as driven by “frightening energy”; his face is described at least once as “energetic,” as is his gesture of refusal when speaking about Karenin’s legal rights to his and Anna’s child (*Sobraniye VIII: AK 120; IX: AK 214*).⁴⁴ The same effect is captured by a synonymous expression: “each time she [Anna] sees him [Vronsky], there ignites in her soul that same animated feeling [ozhivleniya]” (*Sobraniye VIII: AK 144*).⁴⁵

What attracts Levin (and us) to Anna is, evidently, this very energy. This must be, in part, because Levin himself is, as his brother Koznyshev insists, “too prime-sauté by nature” (that is, inclined to act upon first impulse), adding that he wants “passionate, energetic activity or nothing at all” (*Sobraniye VIII: AK 256*).⁴⁶ A similar kind of spontaneity is evoked by the heroine herself while in conversation with Levin: “Energy,” she stresses, “is based on love,” and the latter “cannot be taken from nowhere, nor can it be ordered,” and love is, after all, inexplicable (*Sobraniye IX: AK 293*).⁴⁷

We learn, moreover, through Tolstoy’s use of ekphrasis, that Anna’s energy can be communicated through art, and her portrait can have as strong an impact as that of the actual woman. The painter Mikhailov, whom Vronsky and Anna visit in Italy, is able not only to recognize this special kind of spark but also portray it on canvas, lending life to an otherwise lifeless tableau. Mikhailov recalls the “energetic face” of a cigar merchant with a protruding chin, and he is able to transform the dead painted figure [miortvoi, vydumannoi] into a living one [zhivaya], with “every feature expressing this figure in all of its energetic force [energicheskoi sile].” The painter sees and is struck by Anna’s figure just minutes later, and stores away—literally “swallows up”—both visual impressions hoping to use them at some future time (*Sobraniye IX: AK 42-3*).⁴⁸ About two hundred and fifty pages later, Levin is struck by Mikhailov’s portrait of Anna, and the woman in it appears so beautiful and so alive that the only thing preventing her from stepping off the canvas is the fact that she is, in fact, unrealistically beautiful; when the actual Anna greets him, she seems less lustrous but still has “something new and attractive which is absent from her portrait” (*Sobraniye IX: AK 290*).⁴⁹

This ekphrasis cannot be trivial; it is the portrait that draws Levin toward Anna (*Sobraniye IX: AK 292*). The enchantment is, however, quickly checked by Kitty, who reads in Levin's eyes signs of infatuation with the "wicked woman" ("gadkuyu zhenschinu") (*Sobraniye IX: AK 297-8*). These may just be signs of jealousy on the part of a young wife; but given the appeal and the preponderance of willful "energy" in Anna's characterization, Tolstoy must be celebrating its potential at the same time as he is warning us that, should this energy be directed toward self-interest and gratification—and not, as is the case with Levin, towards a moral life—the result would be utterly destructive. This may seem both didactic and overly moralizing, and most would probably expect nothing less of Tolstoy. But the Life Force, as Shaw makes it clear, is amoral and, in order to avoid becoming too rigid and lifeless, it proceeds blindly, through trial and error; in *Clara*, Schelling also reminds us that the force of vitality can be equally creative and destructive. Tolstoy presents us with two alternative courses its path may take. When rooted in the soil, in the spiritual union of Kitty and Levin, "sila zhizni" is fertile and productive; when, on the other hand, associated with the city, with its wealth, luxury, and temptations, it turns magnetism into a veritable train wreck.

* * *

There exists an earlier rendition of a hero's intellectual and religious crisis, a parallel useful in its similarities no less than in its differences. It is not improbable for Tolstoy to have been familiar with Leontiev's novel *In the Country* (*V svojom krayu*; also translated as *In My Own Land*) written over a decade before *Anna Karenina*, between 1858 and 1863, and published a year later.⁵⁰ It is, however, equally likely that he was not, and both authors were drawing on familiar Romantic tropes, such as the flight from

civilization to nature, or the Byronic hero reminiscent of Mikhail Lermontov's Pechorin, himself a pastiche of European Romantic heroes. Like Pechorin, Tolstoy's Vronsky and Leontiev's Milkeev are dazzling, daring, and extreme. The Russian philosopher and critic Nicolas Berdyaev points out that Milkeev's "aesthetic amorality" echoes Leontiev's own ideas (a view shared by critics and corroborated by the writer's memoirs) and, what is more, "anticipate[s]...Nietzsche."⁵¹ Milkeev famously declares that beauty ("prekrasnoye") is the universal yardstick ("vernaya merka na vsyo"), that it is self-sufficient, and that its pursuit even justifies violence (Leontiev, *V svoym* 45; all translations mine).⁵²

I take the minority view, however, that the other Vassily—Vassily Rudnev, not Vassily Milkeev, is the main hero of Leontiev's early novel.⁵³ More akin to Levin in his indecisiveness, social awkwardness, and thirst for meaning, as well as his disillusionment with city life, Rudnev undergoes change; also, less like his Byronic counterpart and more like Tolstoy's other hero, he ultimately finds a firm foundation on which to build a new life. Like Levin, finally, Rudnev recognizes "zhivuyu dushu," a "living soul," in the earth and in the peasants who come into close contact with it.

It is, surely, no coincidence that in his analysis of Tolstoy's fiction, Leontiev is drawn to Levin, one of Tolstoy's "vechnye 'iskateli'" ("perpetual 'seekers'"). It is the vacillating hero who provides an author with a blank canvas on which to sketch and outline various perspectives. *In the Country* opens with Rudnev's flight from Moscow, where he spent several years studying medicine, back to the countryside, where he hoped to become a village doctor. Not unlike that of his hero, Leontiev's biological philosophy was formed while he was studying medicine in Moscow; there, too, he developed his

belief in the “iron laws” of nature and an interest in phrenology. By choosing to focus on biology rather than idealist philosophy, Leontiev was following a larger ideological current: “nineteenth-century enthusiasm for the natural sciences and positivism” (Berdyayev 105). Rudnev takes a brief detour into idealist philosophy, as did the writer himself, but ultimately arrives at a more synthetic worldview. He prefers contemplative isolation, reads Rousseau, and tries to stay away from the village socialites, among whom he meets Milkeev, whose militant aestheticism fascinates him; the atheist Bogoyavlenskiy, whose name ironically summons while the character himself dismisses the “appearance of God”; and the depraved Sardanapal, a caricature of the “Oriental” ruler. These different views, especially that of Milkeev, force Rudnev to question his original ideas, thereby ultimately shaping his outlook.

Rzhevsky points out that Rudnev’s decision to withdraw to the country reflects “the romantic cult of isolation from civilization’s woes,” and it is Milkeev who draws Rudnev out of seclusion. But Leontiev “does not let political convictions interfere with the greater struggle of his protagonist.” Milkeev’s idealism is “quickly exposed to be unrealistic and inadequate in the face of life’s crueler elements”: unable to live as the archetypal superfluous man, who is full of zeal but pathetically inept and purposeless, Milkeev decides to leave the woman he loves and fight for Garibaldi, a mission that results in a humiliating arrest (Rzhevsky, “Leontiev’s” 265-6). It is true that Milkeev embodies Leontiev’s own convictions about the inexorable power of Beauty, but that does not make his view *inexorable*. Rudnev, on the other hand, grows and matures. His initial withdrawal gives way to another quest, one of greater acceptance and adjustment,

aimed at creating “one beautiful whole,” “prekrasnoie tseloie,” of spirit and intellect. It is this quest that moves us from Romantic and into Vitalist territory.

More precisely, Rudnev’s turning away from the kind of reductive, empirical thinking his medical studies promoted, and his gradual espousing of a more complex view, which reconciles empiricism with Milkeev’s insistence on spiritual and formal diversity—suggest the sort of totalizing thinking we saw in Schelling and identify with Vitalism. The brief account of Rudnev’s childhood, at the beginning of Leontiev’s novel, reveals an intimate knowledge of suffering.⁵⁴ Evidently, the hero chose to pursue a career in medicine in order to alleviate suffering; during his university days in Moscow, he set out to explain it more systematically. “Without properly studying German thinkers, or French preachers of freedom, with an amateur [po-gimnazicheski] familiarity with history, he arrived at some relief through constant thinking.”⁵⁵ It is then that Descartes’ skepticism, his method of “forgetting” former knowledge and building a stable foundation from the ground up, inspired Rudnev. Like Descartes, he proceeded empirically, observing the suffering humanity around him, and he considered dividing modern sciences into healthy and pathological ones, but had trouble calling society “healthy” because it favored liars and seducers (Leontiev, *V svoiom* 88-90).⁵⁶ As Levin and, to a lesser extent, Nehliudov, Rudnev relied on a healthy dose of skepticism, but as the other two characters, he was ultimately dissatisfied with uncertainty and sought a firmer ground.

Despite his pessimism, Rudnev did not abandon science altogether; rather, he looked to the outside world in order to alleviate his doubts. It is no coincidence that, while on the threshold between skepticism and affirmation, Rudnev stood next to a big

window with a view of Moscow, all “miraculous” (“divnyi do volshebstva”) and multicolored. His perception of the outside world, rather than metaphysics, supplied the answer. At that very moment, he arrived at a dynamic explanation of the universe: “first, that any force strives to fulfill itself; second, that forces either harmonize or come into conflict with another, or cancel each other out.” In a characteristically Vitalist fashion, Rudnev intuited the truth, and although he was still unable to explain it, this intuition provided an antidote to his intellectual restlessness:

What force was, he did not know; what substance was, he knew not either; however, being able to trace some sort of electromagnetism through a series of winding pathways toward self-awareness, and through an even more tortuous path from self-complexity to self-denial in the spiritual world, brought him temporary solace. (Leontiev, *V svoiom* 90-1)⁵⁷

Then again, being a “perpetual seeker” like Levin, Rudnev remained restless until the very end: although this “naturfilosofskaia zep” (“Naturphilosophic chain”) and his belief in science and its “movement from simplicity to complexity” helped Rudnev justify his medical profession, he still felt “unfulfilled, suffocated, and in search of something.”⁵⁸

We can understand why Milkeev’s aestheticism, which condones suffering so long as it is refined, might appeal to Rudnev, who is looking to justify it. “Evil, if given free reign, would produce good,” Milkeev insists; that someone is deceived is not in itself evil: what matters is that there exist an able defendant and judge for the deceiver. If Cordelia demands that there be a Lady Macbeth, Milkeev argues in an oft-quoted passage, then let us have the Lady, lest we should succumb to “helplessness, apathy, and vulgarity” (Leontiev, *V svoiom* 46).⁵⁹ We can, moreover, understand why Leontiev

would make the assertions of Milkeev, his mouthpiece, so compelling; after all, he would later identify the highest stage of civilization with the Italian Renaissance, a cruel, despotic autocracy with enough opposition to stimulate the highest expression of strong, “poetical” personalities.⁶⁰ Rzhnevsky describes Leontiev’s romanticism as one “carried...to an extreme” (“Leontiev’s” 259). The writer viewed reality, Rzhnevsky says, “with the typical romantic intransigence which refuses to accept the unseemly and imperfect things of our world.” Yet, he was also “eminently modern” in that “he steadfastly refused to view life as a reflection of another hidden process of nature”; following the pessimism of Russian philosophers Alexander Herzen and Nikolay Danilevsky, Leontiev “moved away from the German idea of a vast, organic force of nature progressing to the Absolute and stopped on a biological view of things based on a sense of inevitable decay” (Rzhnevsky, “Leontiev’s” 260-1).

But Milkeev is not the main hero. Perfect adages may roll off his tongue, but it is Rudnev’s mind we see at work. That the quest, rather than a fixed set of principles is at issue in this novel is evident in many of Rudnev’s moments of introspective vacillation. By the end, Milkeev fails due to his unyielding beliefs, whereas Rudnev, who has adjusted his beliefs and undergone change, becomes a successful doctor. Rzhnevsky describes Rudnev’s new perspective as a “compromise”: the hero learns to reconcile Milkeev’s aesthetic concern “with the down to earth care for peasants and the recognition that all visions of beauty must be adjusted to the actual world” (“Leontiev’s” 266). The hospital he opens falls short of the high standards of “hospital artistry” as it lacks exemplary cleanliness; but it satisfies the needs at hand. The same goes for Liubasha, the woman whom Rudnev marries: she is neither physically nor mentally perfect, but is

otherwise perfectly agreeable. These, however, are but “shadows” which mean little to “an active man [zaniaty chelovek], warmed by faith, and surrounded by friends and grateful people in his beloved land, where even the simple change of seasons brings him joy!” (Leontiev, *V svoyom* 323-4).⁶¹ The sentimental note here (which I take to be earnest) suggests that this is more than a “compromise” by a man who has seen the limitations of idealism. Rudnev’s acceptance of the actual world is an acceptance of life in all of its complexity, and the fact that he realizes this through an encounter with his native soil, gaining strength like the Greek hero Antaeus, is yet another confirmation of the potential of the Living Earth in the nineteenth century.

It is, moreover, the interconnectedness among various aspects of organic life that Rudnev comes to recognize. The last few pages of the novel include an entry from his dissertation in which he acknowledges the importance of “studying the brain in conjunction with the instruments of feeling and mobility, with the refined and well-tuned nature of the entire organism”: that is, studying not only the brain, but also “its outward contours and the quality of movement in the human body alongside its psychological traits.” For “nature” (“natura”), Rudnev asserts, is “one of the major conditions of the variety of life in the past as well as in the present” (Leontiev, *V svoyom* 324-5).⁶² This “nature” is not limited to ubiquitous psychochemical processes; it involves an appreciation of the organism’s individuality. In this, he echoes Milkeev’s idea that “nature orders us to adore diversity and richness of form, and that our lives must follow her example, be complex and rich” (*V svoyom* 152). But Rudnev’s view is not so extreme that he would surrender his life or those of others to uphold it; he now accepts

diversity not because it may be useful in alleviating suffering, but because it would give him a broader understanding of life.

Milkeev's influence on Rudnev is obvious: he taught the hero to reconcile religion and mathematics because science, which Rudnev esteemed so highly, was "but a single ray [razdutyi ugoliok] in the darkness of eternity," which had only recently been released by the Creator into the hands of "inept mediocrity," and thus required higher evolution and "a new aristocracy of mind" so as "to create a beautiful whole [prekrasnoie tzelo] out of otherwise fragmentary and mysteriously scattered opinions."⁶³ However, Rudnev's new perspective is due "not just to Milkeev" but "to this entire complex life, which he once feared and to which he now was grateful" (Leontiev, *V svoiom* 325). He accepts the concrete and the down-to-earth, but also realizes that it is but a fragment of our "complex life"; the former comes to him intuitively through his encounter with the outside world, while the latter, the totalizing principle that goes back to Schelling, evolves through his encounter with Milkeev. The resultant unity of science and aesthetics is very much in the spirit of Vitalism. In fact, in a letter to his friend V.V. Rozanov, Leontiev wrote that biology had broader application than morality and politics, but it only helped to understand the organic world and not life in its entirety. Physics and aesthetics, on the other hand, "[could] be used for judging anything—from a mineral to a most saintly person" (qtd. in Lukashevich 85; my emphasis).

* * *

To conclude, mechanistic science and empiricism offered the wrong answers and failed to address important questions of being. Having discussed how Tolstoy's Levin, as well as the author himself, found in Vitalism a sense of certainty which did not require

that he go back to metaphysics (traditional religion or idealism), we can now turn to others who, subsequent to the skeptical critique, discovered in this philosophy a means of preserving the creative potential of life and of gaining access to higher truths beyond the senses. Their new Vitalist ontology required—and justified—an epistemology that privileged instincts over reason—a thread to be explored in Butler, Meredith, and Shaw.

¹ “...оживая, росла и зеленела везде, где только не соскребли её, не только на газонах бульваров, но и между плитами камней.” (All translations from the Russian are mine except those from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and Tolstoy’s short stories.)

² “...совсем нов[ую] жизнь...потому что всё, что случилось с ним с этих пор, получало для него совсем иное, чем прежде, значение.”

³ Although what we have in Tolstoy’s works is a non-mythic encounter with death, the purpose seems to be the same as that of the classical *katabasis*: from a handful of mythic heroes (Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Orpheus, Aeneas, Er), who had gone to the domain of the dead in hopes of bringing wisdom to the living, to *The Inferno* and *On the Road*, death has been providing an alternate paradigm and a didactic tool. Here empirical science replaces myth, and something other than Charon (faith? mediating reason?) is needed to carry the hero back across the Stygian waters into the land of the living and of hope.

⁴ “Но доктор игнорировал этот неуместный вопрос. С точки зрения доктора, вопрос этот был праздный и не подлежал обсуждению; существовало только взвешиванье вероятностей.”

⁵ In comparison, the impersonal “*It*,” italicized and set off with a capital *I* in Lynn Solotaroff’s English translation, oddly anthropomorphizes Death, making the subtle eeriness of its arrival somewhat heavy-handed.

⁶ “*Незнанием* точной науки в этом случае *очищено поле* не только для сердечных верований, но и для философских *предпочтений*” (emphasis in the original).

⁷ “*разумное* право”; “*правдивое предчувствие* будущей *разсудочной* истины” (original emphasis).

⁸ “Вид брата и близость смерти возобновили в душе Левина то чувство ужаса пред неразгаданностью и вместе близостью и неизбежностью смерти, которое охватило его в тот осенний вечер, когда приехал к нему брат. Чувство это теперь было еще сильнее, чем прежде; еще менее, чем прежде, он чувствовал себя способным понять смысл смерти, и еще ужаснее представлялась ему ее неизбежность; но теперь, благодаря близости жены, чувство это не приводило его в отчаяние: он,

несмотря на смерть, чувствовал необходимость жить и любить. Он чувствовал, что любовь спасала его от отчаяния и что любовь эта под угрозой отчаяния становилась еще сильнее и чище.”

⁹ “...*самое видное* наружное выражение *самой внутренней* сокровенной жизни” (emphasis in the original).

¹⁰ “Не успела на его глазах совершиться одна тайна смерти, оставшаяся неразгаданной, как возникла другая, столь же неразгаданная, вызывавшая к любви и жизни.”

¹¹ “Он был в мучительномразладе с самим собою.”

¹² “Не имеем данных.”

¹³ “Слова эти и связанные с ними понятия были очень хороши для умственных целей; но для жизни они ничего не давали...”

¹⁴ “...шаг за шагом современно-научные объяснения явлений мира вытеснили верования.”

¹⁵ “Жизнь есть всё. Разум есть плод жизни, и разум этот отрицает самую жизнь. Я чувствовал, что тут что-то неладно.”

¹⁶ According to the Russian historian of literature V.V. Zenkovsky, the two philosophers who had the most profound impact on Tolstoy were Rousseau and Schopenhauer (qtd. in McLaughlin 187).

¹⁷ “Рассматривая значение Христианских религий (только в) обществе мне известном т. е. в европейском (и преимущественно) русском, я пришел к заключению, к которому вероятно пришли и все мыслящие люди, что мы уже давно не Христиане.”

¹⁸ “...то что единое на потребу—объяснение смысла о значении жизни и смерти. Это объяснение давала религия и потому религия занимала и теперь занимает в массе необразованных, но обладаю[щих] любовью к детям и верным инстинктом любви, первое и главное место.”

¹⁹ “Место это теперь осталось пустым, вакантным, и мы видим те озабоченные, сложные, бессодержательные и, главное, безопорные споры о том, что должно быть главным предметом преподавания и целью воспитания... И те, [и] другие, и 3-и, и 4-е подобны людям, которые бы не имея никакой пищи, придумывали бы средства, как наполнить желудок голодного животного. Ни классицизм, (казавшийся когда-то хорошей приправой кушанья, ни реализм, весьма полезный

как посуда для кушанья, ни религия без веры, к[оторые] суть только объедки когда-то хорошей пищи, не дадут питанья голодному животному.”

²⁰ “Религия есть свод в одно согласное целое всех объяснений или ответов на те неизбежные и единственно интересные в жизни вопросы относительно жизни и смерти, на которые разум дает мне частный ответ, согласнее которого я не знаю никакого другого и в который вследствие того я верю и считаю несомненно истинным и которым руководствуюсь в каждом жизненном акте. / Религия по этому определению не только не может противуречить данным разума или жизни, но всякое знание и всякий акт жизни основывается только на религиозном воззрении” (Tolstoy, *Polnoye v 90* 357-8).

²¹ “Вера есть сила жизни. Если человек живет, то он во что-нибудь да верит. Если бы он не верил, что для чего-нибудь надо жить, то он бы не жил. Если он не видит и не понимает призрачности конечного, он верит в это конечное; если он понимает призрачность конечного, он должен верить в бесконечное. Без веры жить нельзя.”

²² “Разум открыл борьбу за существование и закон, требующий того, чтобы душить всех, мешающих удовлетворению моих желаний. Это вывод разума. А любить другого не мог открыть разум, потому что это неразумно.”

²³ “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’ (Matt. 18:21) / “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” (Matt. 7:3) / “When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her’.” (John 8:7) / “A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.” (Luke 6:40) (All quotations taken from the New International Version.)

²⁴ “В том состоянии сумасшествия эгоизма, в котором он находился, Нехлюдов думал только о себе - о том, осудят ли его и насколько, если узнают о том, как он с ней поступил, а не о том, что она испытывает и что с ней будет.”

²⁵ “Тогда он был честный, самоотверженный юноша, готовый отдать себя на всякое доброе дело,—теперь он был развращенный, утонченный эгоист, любящий только свое наслаждение. Тогда мир божий представлялся ему тайной, которую он радостно и восторженно старался разгадывать,—теперь все в этой жизни было просто и ясно и определялось теми условиями жизни, в которых он находился. Тогда нужно и важно было общение с природой и с прежде него жившими, мыслящими и чувствовавшими людьми (философия, поэзия), - теперь нужны и важны были человеческие учреждения и общение с товарищами. Тогда женщина представлялась таинственным и прелестным, именно этой таинственностью прелестным существом,—теперь значение женщины, всякой женщины, кроме своих семейных и жен друзей, было очень определенное: женщина была одним из лучших орудий испытанного уже наслаждения. Тогда не нужно было денег и

можно было не взять и третьей части того, что давала мать, можно было отказаться от имени отца и отдать его крестьянам,—теперь же недоставало тех тысячи пятисот рублей в месяц, которые давала мать, и с ней бывали уже неприятные разговоры из-за денег. Тогда своим настоящим я он считал свое духовное существо,—теперь он считал собою свое здоровое, бодрое, животное я. И вся эта страшная перемена совершилась с ним только оттого, что он перестал верить себе, а стал верить другим. Перестал же он верить себе, а стал верить другим потому, что жить, веря себе, было слишком трудно: веря себе, всякий вопрос надо решать всегда не в пользу своего животного я, ищущего легких радостей, а почти всегда против него; веря же другим, решать нечего было, все уже было решено и решено было всегда против духовного и в пользу животного я. Мало того, веря себе, он всегда подвергался осуждению людей,—веря другим, он получал одобрение людей, окружающих его.”

²⁶ “В этот период его сумасшествия эгоизма, вызванного в нем петербургской и военной жизнью.”

²⁷ As a young man, he followed Henry George and believed that everyone had equal rights to land, and private ownership was unjust; he did give up a small portion of his estate to the peasants; later on, however, when this land became his only source of income, he tried to work out a deal to rent it out.

²⁸ “Он все поверял, решал разумом, а что решал, то и делал.”

²⁹ Judging by the sharp, as well as somewhat perfunctory, contrast Tolstoy draws between him and another political prisoner, Novodvorov, we may conclude that however appealing, Simonson is still a caricature. If Simonson were of “a predominantly masculine build [sklad],” whose actions are defined by their thoughts, the omniscient narrator of *Resurrection* tells us, Novodvorov belonged to those of “a predominantly feminine build,” whose thoughts are engaged in seeing through and justifying actions originating in feeling (*Sobraniye XI: R 423*). Unlike Simonson, Novodvorov never developed critical skills and succeeded to rise through the educational establishment, lacking the moral and esthetic qualities necessary for developing any kind of doubt. “Given the narrowness and one-sidedness of his views, everything did indeed appear simple and clear, and all that was necessary, he insisted, was that we be logical.” He was respected for self-confidence, courage, and assertiveness (*Sobraniye XI: R 424*). (“Симонсон был один из тех людей, преимущественно мужского склада, у которых поступки вытекают из деятельности мысли и определяются ею. Новодворов же принадлежал к разряду людей преимущественно женского склада, у которых деятельность мысли направлена отчасти на достижение целей, поставленных чувством, отчасти же на оправдание поступков, вызванных чувством.”)

³⁰ His name, incidentally, means “frying pan,” and it speaks satirically even before the character opens his mouth only to bite on his own moustache and beard.

³¹ “Сковородников был материалист, дарвинист и считал всякие проявления отвлеченной нравственности или, еще хуже, религиозности не только презренным безумием, но личным себе оскорблением.”

³² “...которые меняют мнения и взгляды свои чуть ли не каждый день”; “...таких убеждённых, смелых, решительных и даже *физически* крепких людей.”

³³ “Когда Левин думал о том, что он такое и для чего он живет, он не находил ответа и приходил в отчаянье; но когда он переставал спрашивать себя об этом, он как будто знал, и что он такое и для чего он живет, потому что твердо и определенно действовал и жил; даже в это последнее время он гораздо тверже и определеннее жил, чем прежде.”

³⁴ “Теперь он, точно против воли, все глубже и глубже врезывался в землю, как плуг, так что уж и не мог выбраться, не отворотив борозды.”

³⁵ “Ответ мне дала сама жизнь.”

³⁶ “не только не бессмысленна, как была прежде, но имеет несомненный смысл добра, который я властен вложить в нее!”

³⁷ “Все своим хлебом кормились.”

³⁸ “Доходна до Бога и ваша молитва, старцы Божии. Не мне вас учить. Молитесь за нас грешных!”

³⁹ “Жена скажет: мы с Костей, как ребенка, выхаживали эту телку.”

⁴⁰ “...и что при нашем неправильном пользовании землей железные дороги, вызванные не экономической, но политической необходимостью, были преждевременны и, вместо содействия земледелию, которого ожидали от них, опередив земледелие и вызвав развитие промышленности и кредита, остановили его, и что потому, так же как одностороннее и преждевременное развитие органа в животном помешало бы его общему развитию, так для общего развития богатства в России кредит, пути сообщения, усиление фабричной деятельности, несомненно необходимые в Европе, где они своевременны, у нас только сделали вред, отстранив главный очередной вопрос устройства земледелия.”

⁴¹ In A.D. Michaelson’s dictionary of foreign words: “Имеющий энергию, сильную волю”; in A. N. Chudinov’s dictionary: “Обладающий сильным характером, полный жизни; сильно действующий (о лекарствах).”

⁴² “Он не понимает, что она одна из тех женщин, которые не могут шутить своими чувствами. Одно из двух: или увези он ее, энергически поступи, или дай развод.”

⁴³ “Во всей фигуре и в особенности в голове ее было определенное энергическое и вместе нежное выражение. Она была одно из тех животных, которые, кажется, не говорят только потому, что механическое устройство их рта не позволяет им этого.”

⁴⁴ “очень энергический господин”/ “энергическому пожатию” / “Как будто избыток чего-то так переполнял ее существо, что мимо ее воли выражался то в блеске взгляда, то в улыбке.” / “взяла ее руку своею энергическою маленькою рукой” / “маленькую и энергическую руку”/ “на добродушно-веселую энергическую манеру Анны” / “чувствовать себя энергически-веселую и счастливою” / “со страшной энергией” / “энергическое лицо” / “энергическим жестом отрицания.”

⁴⁵ “...в душе ее загоралось то самое чувство оживления.”

⁴⁶ “Вообще ты натура слишком *prime-sauté*, как говорят французы; ты хочешь страстной, энергической деятельности или ничего.”

⁴⁷ “Энергия основана на любви. А любовь неоткуда взять, приказать нельзя.”

⁴⁸ “Он рисовал эту новую позу, я вдруг ему вспомнилось с выдающимся подбородком энергическое лицо купца, у которого он брал сигары, и он это самое лицо, этот подбородок нарисовал человеку... Фигура вдруг из мертвой, выдуманной стала живая и такая... Фигура эта жила и была ясно и несомненно определена... Он как бы снимал с нее те покровы, из-за которых она не вся была видна; каждая новая черта только больше выказывала всю фигуру во всей ее энергической силе... Он подходил быстрым шагом к своей двери студии, и, несмотря на свое волнение, мягкое освещение фигуры Анны... поразило его.”

⁴⁹ “Она была менее блестяща в действительности, но зато в живой было и что-то такое новое привлекательное, чего не было на портрете.”

⁵⁰ *V svoiom kraiu* was hardly a bestseller when it came out. In his review in *Sovremennik*, Shchedrin called it a “novel-anthology” (“roman-khrestomatia”), and described it as “a disconnected and very awkwardly organized game of hide-and-seek, rather than a drama.” Leontiev later called this critique “mean-spirited” (“ochen’ zlaya kritika”) (*Kommentarii* in Leontiev, *V svoiom* 429; my trans.).

⁵¹ Leontiev had quite a bit in common with Nietzsche, whose existence he “ignored”: “his aesthetic passion for destiny, his cult of force and aspiration for power, his aristocratism and vital tension—his way of basing the hierarchy of values on violence. [Leontiev] is also Nietzschean in his would-be amorality, in his love for a flourishing culture, in his fear of cultural decadence, in his taste for cruelty placed at the service of the highest values, in his Renaissance attitude” (Berdyayev vii-viii).

⁵² Berdyaev sees Milkeev's aestheticism as a reflection of Leontiev's growing conservatism, anti-bourgeois sentiment, and elitist pursuit of beauty, all of which made him an anomaly among his contemporaries and left him underappreciated until the twentieth century. Leontiev's ideas fell upon deaf ears until the discovery of Nietzsche, Ibsen, and the French aesthetes (Berdyaev 28, 31).

⁵³ Critics tend to focus on Milkeev, who has the most ambitious speeches in the novel. George Ivask sees Milkeev as the "Narcissistic superhero" who is "more or less identical with Leontiev" and "who defines and preaches the rapacious aestheticism of the author in the early 1860s." Ivask mentions that "there are two central characters, both reflecting the personality of the author (according to his memoirs)," but he quickly bypasses "the humble, shy, and industrious country doctor Rudnev" to get to his "Narcissus type," on whom "[a]ll the other characters...depend completely" ("Fiction" 625-6).

⁵⁴ Rudnev recalls being tortured by his wicked peers who envied his progress as a student and never forgave his origins—he was an illegitimate son of a lowly village woman, a *muzhichka* (Leontiev II 8-9).

⁵⁵ "Не изучая правильно ни немецких мыслителей, ни французских проповедников свободы, плохо, по-гимназически знакомый с историей, он постоянными напряжениями мыслей дошел до того, что ему стало легче. Слышал он мимоходом, будто Декарт старался все забыть, что знал прежде, для того, чтобы поставить себе новые точки опоры. Руднева поразил этот способ."

⁵⁶ "От этой мысли родилась потом другая: разделить науки на нормальные и патологические. Современное общество, в котором есть бедные, честные страдальцы, подобные ему, в то самое время, когда негодяи и глупцы ездят в колясках и увлекают женщин,—такое общество он не хотел назвать здоровым..."

⁵⁷ "Он сказал себе так: положение первое: всякая сила стремится удовлетворить самой себе; второе: силы приходят в гармонию или борьбу, притупляются взаимно или идут по равнодействующей линии и т. д. Что такое сила—он не знал; что такое вещество—он не знал тоже, но, извиристо прогоняя сквозь строй вещественных явлений до самосознания какой-нибудь электромагнетизм, а самоуслаждение еще извилистее до самоотвержения сквозь мир духовный, он отдохнул на время."

⁵⁸ "И хотя и прежде, еще не оправдавши своей деятельности натурфилософской цепью, он мог лечить и лечил крестьян; хотя вся эта отвлеченная работа была для него просто личной потребностью, не удовлетворяя которой, он задыхался и все искал чего-то..."

⁵⁹ "Зла бояться! О, Боже! Да зло на просторе родит добро!...Если для того, чтобы на одном конце существовала Корделия, необходима леди Макбет, давайте ее сюда, но избавьте нас от бессилия, сна, равнодушия, пошлости и лавочной осторожности."

⁶⁰ Leontiev believed in cyclical evolution with an anti-climax and saw it in terms of a “triune” life cycle, which starts with “primeval simplicity” (“pervichnaia prostota”), evolves and individuates into the second stage of “complex flowering” (“slozhnoe tsvetenie”), and finally fuses into a mixed “re-simplification” (“vtorichnoe uproshchenie”). See Lukashevich 106-13 for a detailed outline of Leontiev’s system.

⁶¹ “Набегали иногда на его жизнь прежние и новые тени: крестьяне не слушали его предписаний, не долечившись уходили из больниц; врвался грубый муж и силой уводил с койки изнуренную жену на работу; Любаша бывала нездорова, как всякий бывает нездоров; не понимала что-нибудь такого, что для него было ясно...Но что значат эти тени для человека занятого, согретого верой и окруженного друзьями и благодарными людьми в любимом краю, где даже простая смена времен года доставляет ему наслаждение!”

⁶² “...во всяком случае, мы должны изучить внимательно так называемую "натуру», одно из главных условий разнообразия жизни в прошедшем и настоящем, то есть, должны изучить мозг, внешние контуры и характер движений человеческого тела параллельно с психологическими чертами.”

⁶³ “И самая вражда религии с математическими выводами, которая так терзала его прежде, прекращалась от мысли, что вся наша наука—только раздутый уголек во мраке бесконечности; и за этим углем, раздутым сначала могучим личным творчеством и только в последнее время доставшимся в руки бездарности, остается бездна, преданная Творцом тоже личному творчеству, но требующая высшего разбора, новой аристократии ума, чтобы из мнений отрывочных и тайно рассеянных по сердцам создать прекрасное целое. И не одному Милькееву он был обязан. Всей этой сложной жизни, которой он так боялся когда-то, он был теперь благодарен.”

CHAPTER 4

Beyond THE SCRIP: “Revitalizing” Education in Meredith and Butler

Life is like music, it must be composed by ear, feeling and instinct, not by rule.
Nevertheless one had better know the rules, for they sometimes guide in doubtful cases—
though not often.

Samuel Butler, “Life”

A child’s first inquiries concerning spiritual and transcendent things, need noble answers evolved from purest thought,—for, as the Italian proverb has it—“The ‘why’ of a child is the key of philosophy.’ Woe betide those who crush the high aspirations of innocent and hopeful youth by the deadening blow of Materialism! Worse than murderers are they, and as a greater crime than murder shall they answer for it!

Marie Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*

The method of nature is the archetype of all methods.

Claude Marcel (1793-1876)

“Is There Any Hope in Education?”—Bernard Shaw asks in the Preface to his 1921 play, *Back to Methuselah* (10). He voices a concern that reverberated throughout the 1800s and was particularly relevant to the second half of the century, triggered in 1862-1863 by the implementation of a controversial and much criticized program of *payment by results*. Matthew Arnold, who served for thirty-five years as Her Majesty’s Inspector for the Education Department, described the system of examination enacted by this Revised Code as “an inadequate means of testing the real attainments and intellectual

life of the scholars,” since the latter were not really questioned, nor taught to think independently and responsibly, but simply asked to demonstrate skills limited to “the three matters reading, writing, and arithmetic”—a method of teaching and learning described repeatedly as “mechanical” and blamed, also repeatedly, for the “decline of intellectual life, itself due chiefly to the mechanical mode of examination the Revised Code has introduced” (Arnold 93, 113-5). The teachers are partly responsible for this “decline,” Arnold and the other authors of the *Reports on Elementary Schools 1852-1882* state, commenting, for example, on “the over-mechanical character of our training school instruction” in the 1868 report on the Wesleyan Training College at Westminster (259). On one occasion, the authors refer quite unsubtly to “the *evil* of mechanical teaching” (133; my emphasis). In fact, the term “mechanical” appears about two dozen times in the *Reports*; it is contrasted with “intelligence, spirit, and inventiveness,” as well as “interest” and “pleasure,” and seen as symptomatic of a broader reliance on Mechanism:

In a country where everyone is prone to rely too much on mechanical processes, and too little on intelligence, a change in the Education Department’s regulations, which by making two-thirds of the Government grant depend upon a mechanical examination, inevitably gives a mechanical turn to the school teaching, a mechanical turn to the inspection, is and must be trying to the intellectual life of a school.

(Arnold 112-3)

The authors concede, however, that learning by rote has its place in elementary education, but it has to be balanced: “Of course a great deal of the work in elementary

schools must necessarily be of a mechanical kind. But whatever introduces any sort of creative activity to relieve the passive reception of knowledge is valuable” (Arnold 228).

Shaw comes from a tradition of thinkers who criticized public education for being dominated by utilitarian and commercial ideas—as set out by James Mill and developed by Herbert Spencer—a tradition to which Arnold, John Ruskin, Samuel Butler, and George Meredith have all contributed. The changes in Victorian pedagogy were inspired, at least in part, by critique that could justly be called Vitalist: these include an awareness of natural aptitude; a preference for the practical over the theoretical (e.g., in early language acquisition); and a distrust of “mechanical” learning, which promoted “cramming”—a word we find in texts as varied as J. S. Mill’s *Autobiography* (96) and Marie Corelli’s *The Mighty Atom* (43, 73, 148-9, 152). Traceable back to the nineteenth-century debates about education but still relevant today, these ideas indicate the ongoing relevance of the Vitalist critique of “mechanical” education.

Unlike Arnold or Ruskin who, writing some fifty years prior to Shaw’s critique and, in Arnold’s words, “[a]t a moment when popular education [was] at last becoming a question of immediate public interest” (114), looked to the public schools with hope, Shaw expressed deep pessimism about British national education: “There is no way out through our present public schools,” he replies to his own question, because due to the “inefficiency and sham of the educational side of our schools,” citizenship and political science are better left untaught, lest they be confounded with “the morality of feudalism corrupted by commercialism,” with “the military conqueror, the robber baron, and the profiteer” (hailed “as models of the illustrious and the successful”), not that of the diligent scholar or responsible politician (Shaw, *Methuselah* 10-1). In an extended simile

comparing education to medicine, Shaw criticizes the modern system for administering large “doses of poison that paralyze ordinary minds,” thereby killing their resistance to “the virus,” his metaphor for false indoctrination; on the other hand, “homeopathic education” by way of administering “an infinitesimally attenuated dose,” he insists, would provoke just enough resistance for one’s mind to develop. Butler and Voltaire had minds strong enough to decipher falsehood, and this Shaw attributes to their training in logic, mathematics, and grammar, subjects the teaching of which could help redeem the modern system. But the latter would require a fundamental rethinking on the part of the public, for while telling white lies for the sake of inspiring opposition is clearly far better than the passive inculcation of beliefs, the spirit of contrariness is, Shaw implies, too unsettling to be readily espoused, particularly given the alternative of effortlessly swallowing a prepackaged drug.

Britain’s public schools appeared, to Shaw, to have largely failed. While they did little to encourage philosophical thinking, they succeeded in creating ultimate fighting machines and “slayers,” commercial opportunists, reckless anarchists “who want liberties without duties,” and other “stupid people who cling to the *status quo* merely because they are used to it” (Shaw, *Methuselah* 12-3). Writing these lines at the end of the war meant to end all wars, Shaw was relentless in his criticism of “technical” education, which produced “romantic school patriots” who may have been “ignoramuses, dupes, snobs,” but were also geniuses at firing shots. Thinking of humans as political beings, he could not accept the fact that, in his day, “[n]either the rulers nor the ruled understand high politics” nor “even know that there is such a branch of knowledge as political science.” He saw such education as “artificial” and hoped that those whose “natural enlightenment”

recognized that would revolt. Yet, those potential reformers “are cowards because they have neither an officially accredited and established religion nor a generally recognized point of honor,” not having been taught nor able to provide this for their children, who would end up in similarly inefficient schools. More dauntingly, for the Neo-Darwinists and the Mechanists, there was “no hope whatever” of human improvement through education because they construed development as operating via “senseless accident.” But for the disciples of Creative Evolution there was hope: the philosophy whose name originates in Bergson’s title phrase, and which Shaw traced from Erasmus Darwin through Lamarck to the Neo-Lamarckian Butler, this new metabiological religion was meant to teach the modern world “a better gospel” (Shaw, *Methuselah* 13-5).

Despite the overt pessimism, from the reformist fervor underlying Shaw’s critique we can infer that British public schools, whatever their imperfections, remained, in theory, a viable vehicle for molding responsible citizens. We find confirmation of this in Meredith’s *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859), where public education is offered as an alternative to home-schooling—not the best, perhaps, but a lesser of two evils that, at the very least, placed the youths in “[their] element” and allowed them to develop the social skills and *savoir-faire* required to get along with others. The father of the novel’s eponymous hero designs for his son a seemingly invincible system meant to keep the latter away from the temptation of “the Serpent” through “all the advantages of Science,” and in defending this approach, he also employs homeopathy as an analogy for education: “I give the poison to my son in small doses,” says Sir Austin, “whereas you prescribe larges ones. You naturally contend with the homœopathist—Eh?” To the doctor’s suggestion that Richard be sent to school, the Baronet replies, “The schools are corrupt!”

(Meredith, *Ordeal* 39-40). But so is, evidently, an approach to education intended to save the pupil from any dangerous ideas by imposing others that may be, perhaps, well-intentioned but are ultimately more detrimental.

Neither Meredith nor Butler offered “a better gospel,” to use Shaw’s term, or any sort of official plan for educational reform; both chose, instead, to show the extent of misery brought upon an individual by bad education. Writing in the wake of that *annum mirabile* of the Victorian age that witnessed the publication of the *Origin of Species*, both conceived education in evolutionary terms: Butler, more than Meredith, set out to disprove Darwin, opposing senseless natural selection with a teleological view of evolution; Meredith demonstrated that dogma and science had no place in education and would be ultimately stamped out by nature. In this chapter, I look at how the Vitalist/Mechanist debate figures in the debate over education and moral improvement.

Herbert Spencer’s essays on education (pub. 1854-1859 in Britain/1860-1861 in America), which reflect the main concerns of his contemporaries, are also informed by evolutionary thinking. Deeming parental authority more important than state-sponsored public education, Spencer promoted an approach closer to that which Shaw had in mind when attacking the Neo-Darwinists, but short of complete *laissez-faire*. Gradual evolution, following natural laws independent of human acts, was Spencer’s solution, and it is largely on this point that Butler disagreed with him: conceiving evolution not as “senseless accident,” but as purposeful and amenable to “effort,” a notion Butler borrows from the Neo-Lamarckians (the term *l’effort* appears in Bergson’s discussion of the French zoologist [*Œuvres* 560]), he argued that meaningful change was possible and, moreover, could be attuned to one’s natural capabilities and instincts. Butler’s ideas on

education, as we find them in *The Way of All Flesh*, are grounded in the science he thought was more conducive to human evolution than the prevailing Darwinism of his time. It is the latter approach, Butler suggests, that could help fight dogma and encourage critical thinking, a prerogative also sought by Spencer, though in a different manner.

John Stuart Mill, with whom Spencer associated during his years as an editor of the London *Economist* (1848-1853) (Cardosco, Intro to Spencer iii-v), is also relevant to this discussion and sheds light on Meredith's novel. In his *Autobiography* (written before 1861 but published in 1873, the year of his death), J. S. Mill describes both the rewards and the failures of being the product of his father's Benthamite project, set out in "James Mill's Article on Education,"¹ which was widely circulated along with other essays, called at one point "the text-books of the young men of the Union at Cambridge" (Cavenagh 199). An approach to education more involved than that promoted by Spencer, James Mill's pedagogy came under his son's attack because, its stress on practice notwithstanding, it still proved too theoretical and did not sufficiently account for "nature." In Meredith's novel, THE PILGRIM'S SCRIP designed by Sir Austin to educate his son, and appearing in all capital letters in the original to suggest its monumentality, ruins Richard's life because it precludes free development and independent thinking; the novel ends tragically when even Richard's father grows more flexible, whereas his indoctrinated son cannot shake off his "stiffneckedness," to use Butler's term (*Note-Books* 72), until it is too late. According to Spencer, who was deeply skeptical of the Romantic belief in human perfectibility and the creation of an ideal community, a real revolution in one's education was not possible (Spencer 165). Part of the challenge of reading *Richard Feverel* is to see that Meredith did not, in fact, agree with Spencer that

humans were unreformable but, rather, meant to show how bad education and strongly held misconceptions might lead one to believe something so abysmal.

Butler shows us that it is not enough to rely, passively, on evolution in hopes that natural processes might sooner or later promote growth. To help bring up conscientious, responsible citizens—the ideal suggested in Butler’s novel even if his hero never reaches it—evolution had to be conceived in teleological terms, with purpose and meaning, which required that order exist alongside accident. But, this order could not take the form of stifling determinism, which is what Meredith sets out to expose.

* * *

The Vitalist middle ground we have examined in the scientific, poetic, and spiritual domains applies to education, as well. Refusing to give up purpose altogether but suspicious of dogma, albeit proposing didactic ideas which risked being labeled as such, the Vitalists sought a compromise between the limiting finality of Leibniz and the randomness of Darwin, to recall Bergson’s explanation (Chapter 1), so as to reinstate the instinctual connection between humans and nature, but also to redefine evolution and life in purposive terms. Reason had been tainted by its relationship, on the one hand, with the no longer invincible metaphysics and, on the other, with materialist science and mechanistic empiricism; hence, like Hume, Vitalist thinkers privileged natural instincts and a “practical” approach to nature, that is, one steeped in common sense and intuition, in opposition to “abstract” intellect. But just as espousing the theory of evolution did not require that one also accept Darwin’s survival of the fittest and the randomness it entailed, so espousing the value of the “practical” (or “commonsensical,” as Butler would say) did not also require that one commit to Utilitarianism (and the related commercial

materialism that a focus on utility implied, for instance, in Spencer). The underlying assumption was this: if instinct were not inherently egocentric, nor its function meant solely to maximize individual happiness at any cost, humans could rely on their “true” or “inner” self, a term from Butler’s novel (*The Way* 130-1), to help them act morally.

How does the aforementioned apply to pedagogy? No longer as optimistic of the power of reason and the Enlightenment ideal of human perfectibility (as, for example, Kant had been in his 1784 essay, “What Is Enlightenment?”), nineteenth-century writers such as Meredith and Butler, whose works are informed by and reflect the current debates about education, must have cared enough about human evolution to focus their novels on Victorian parenting and education. Fascinated by the discoveries in evolutionary thinking and the (still new) complex view of nature, they sought to balance out the two sides of the nature/nurture conflict. The ideas on education we find in their novels, as well as the debate at large, are analogous to the century’s debate about evolution, centering on whether education, like evolution, should be left to follow natural laws—thereby precluding any efforts at reform; or be actively interfered with by humans—in an attempt to facilitate otherwise uncontrollable changes in an individual’s upbringing (by applying an arbitrary system in the case of Meredith), and help him or her adapt to the environment by getting rid of unnecessary old habits by acquiring new ones (heeding the advice of the Butlerian “true self”).

A variety of recommendations had, in fact, been offered by the century’s educators who shared an evolutionary view of education through stages (moral, physical, and intellectual), and believed that “to consider education as a science mean[t] to study psychology.” As Terry H. Grabar has shown, the way the latter was conceived differed

significantly, however, between the supporters of Utilitarianism, who saw the child's mind as a Lockian *tabula rasa*, and those who followed Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), the influential Swiss reformer who saw education as a means of bringing together the innate or intuitive "subjective will" with the "objective will," an idea formulated by his disciple Johann Friedrich Herbart (in *The Science of Education*, trans. 1893) (Grabar 131-2).² Pestalozzi's supporters emphasized the harmony of the individual with nature, based on an innate moral sense. The question of poetry would, for example, be treated very differently by each group, with the Utilitarians seeing it either as an amusement and distraction or as harmful to reason, and the Pestalozzi school finding it key to the development of a child's mind and character (Grabar 132).

Most theorists saw the individual's moral development and his or her readiness to participate in political life as the goal of education. Of the three types of education discussed in the mid-nineteenth century, Meredith, for whom the question of how to live properly was clearly essential, chose to focus on the moral. At the same time, through Sir Austin's search for a compatible mate for Richard, we gather that physical training (Richard's body/"animal nature") was also important because meant to preserve the boy's purity (Grabar 137).

Though largely neglected by Meredith, the growth and training of one's intellect was a concern for others, such as Butler and Spencer, who, although disagreeing on important fundamentals, opposed the tyranny of the mind over the body. The young hero of *The Mighty Atom* is a victim of such discipline: the "sad little furrow on his forehead," which, we are told, is "so indicative of painful thought and study," disappears when he is outside, becoming "scarcely perceptible" and making him look "as nature meant all boys

to look, bright and happy-hearted” (Corelli 18). By having the eleven-year-old Lionel Valliscourt hang himself in his school-room, Corelli, in her highly unsubtle manner, indicts those who overemphasize a single faculty over all others. Spencer and Ruskin both argued against stifling the child with dogmatic learning, the latter having become associated with the traditional study of Greek and Latin, as opposed to more “practical” concerns relevant to one’s daily activities—“practical” meaning, for Ruskin, the “knowledge of the present state and wants of mankind” necessary for the child to navigate his or her environment successfully; while, for Spencer, the term was couched largely in the capitalist language of commodity: “the state of the money-market” and “supply and demand” (Ruskin 237; Spencer 46-52).

The extent of parental guidance and involvement in bringing out a child’s natural potential was an issue of debate, as was, more generally, the role of the family in educating the young. Basing his conclusions on the newly established evolutionary links between humans and other animals, Spencer maintained that infants were not born experts at thinking independently or abstractly, and so, as any young animals, they needed some direction, or else they risked getting badly hurt or even exterminated (54-5). Following Rousseau, who advised the teacher to interfere as little as possible with the child’s education, letting him or her rely on inner freedom (Grabar 132), others promoted a more *laissez-faire* approach despite the obvious dangers.

A Vitalist approach to education, as we find it in the novels of Meredith and Butler, and one designed to prepare the child for an ethically responsible, adult political life grew out of and reflects the debate at large. Philosophically, this approach could not be deterministic, materialist, or bound by strict empiricism—in a word, “mechanical,” or

based on an inexorable chain of mechanical causality: a mistake followed by a punishment, an achievement by a reward; nor could purpose and order be abandoned altogether in favor of the Neo-Darwinist “senseless accident.” It required that natural evolution, proceeding purposively (though not always directly or most advantageously), be complemented with some human guidance by those who were in touch with their affective and intuitive faculties—and, thus, in the Vitalist (as well as Romantic) idiom, in touch with nature itself. Sir Austin misconceived “nature” in biblical terms and, seeing Richard as an Adam tempted by many Eves, proceeded to misconstrue the kind of “practical” guidance the boy needed. For it to be Vitalist, “practical” knowledge had to be conceived along Ruskinian lines and meant to combat intellectual detachment, but without turning purely Utilitarian, as Spencer would have it, thereby suppressing life’s artistic and spiritual dimensions. While they did not agree on the specifics, through their critical representations of Victorian education, both Meredith and Butler suggested that relying on nature did not automatically require, nor did it legitimize, relying on one’s evolutionary predecessors—namely, one’s parents; Shaw would make this clear, in fact, in *Major Barbara* by having Andrew Undershaft select an heir for his arms factory, following Roman practice and thereby opposing the inexorable pull of heredity.

For the above reasons, Spencer, who saw art and culture as “ornamental” supplements to science, seeing the latter as more essential to self-preservation (Spencer 43-4), would not be welcomed by a Vitalist educationalist. Nor would the *payment by results* public-school reform of 1863, which led to the neglect of non-testable disciplines, such as art, and also produced a decline in critical thinking and intellectualism; the criticism it evoked, from Arnold and others, reflects the century’s dissatisfaction with

“mechanical” learning, that is, learning by rote, that even the Utilitarian Spencer opposed, as it did not further his objective of economic and political self-sufficiency. Importantly, the anti-mechanistic critique permeating Victorian pedagogical debates, though not strictly speaking “Vitalist,” suggests that Vitalist concerns had broader cultural relevance, well beyond the confines of an otherwise recondite philosophical movement.

* * *

Although taken by many critics (Jack Lindsay, Lionel Stevenson) to have been influenced by Spencer’s four essays *On Education*,³ Meredith’s *Richard Feverel* is a reflection of ideas “reverberating on every side in midcentury” (Grabar 131). Grabar argues that, because Meredith “is always a critic of society,” his theory (Sir Austin’s System) was not “created *ex nihilo*,” but is, in fact, “a patchwork of various ideas which for the most part were pretty generally held in mid-nineteenth century England and most forcibly expressed by Herbert Spencer.” “The Pilgrim’s Scrip” is, Grabar adds, “a deliberate ironic commentary on fashionable educational ideas, and Sir Austin’s particular brand of foolishness is grounded very firmly in the actual” (140-1). For the most part, Meredith’s contemporaries did not think of children as born morally good and argued that education should be based on constraint and control—which means that Meredith’s mockery of Sir Austin’s seemingly singular System was, ironically, a criticism aimed at the system of education at large (Grabar 133, 136).

This System could be traced back to the Utilitarianism promoted by James Mill earlier in the century. By introducing as well as dissecting it, Meredith shows that overbearing paternal control, even if meant well, tends to neglect the physical at the expense of the moral (the underlying assumption being that focusing primarily on the

evolution of higher qualities would provoke the lower nature to revolt); he suggests, also, that should the physical be artificially regulated rather than allowed to grow naturally, it too would not mature properly. Although James Mill's article hit the press the year Meredith was born (rpt. 1828), it would be surprising for the latter not to have encountered it in his reading, or at least to have become familiar with the theory's later adaptations (by Spencer, e.g.). Mill's program for his son John Stuart is akin to Sir Austin's, and the consequences of both experiments, real or fictional, prove detrimental.

James Mill identifies the purpose of education with the pursuit of happiness: "The end of Education is to render the individual, as much as possible, an instrument of happiness, first to himself, and next to other beings." It is, he adds, "the best employment of all the means which can be made use of, by man, for rendering the human mind to the greatest possible degree the cause of human happiness" (James Mill 1). Stressing the importance of a holistic approach, grounded firmly in the associationist psychology of David Hartley (1705-1757), Mill urges that we apply this standard to all types of education: both "the Physical Head" (the mind affected by the body's health as well as its surroundings) and "the Moral Head," comprised of "Domestic Education" (the family); "Technical or scholastic education" (exercises meant to improve mostly intellectual but also moral habits, or manual arts); and "Social education, or the mode in which the mind of the individual is acted upon by the nature of the political institutions under which he lives" (James Mill 4).

The same holistic approach is evident in Mill's claim that "good practice" must be grounded in "sound theory" and that the two are inseparable; from this he deduces that knowledge without practical application is "useless": "a mere magazine of remembered

facts is an useless treasure,” and what is necessary is the “union...of copiousness and energy” by means of which one not only has the material but also the ability to manipulate it (James Mill 4, 21). This proved successful in the education of his son John Stuart. The latter similarly opposes factology, a mechanical approach to memorizing facts, since too much knowledge drilled into young heads weakens more than strengthens mental capacities: juxtaposing his own education, “not [one] of cram” but intended to encourage critical thinking, J. S. Mill writes,

They are crammed with mere facts, and with the opinions or phrases of other people, and these are accepted as a substitute for the power to form opinions of their own: and thus the sons of eminent fathers, who have spared no pains in their education, so often grow up mere parroters of what they have learnt, incapable of using their minds except in the furrows traced for them. (Mill, *Autobiography* 96)

On the other hand, since it was not “a mere exercise in memory,” J. S. Mill’s education promoted the kind of “self-sufficiency” that Spencer would later promote: “Anything which could be found out by thinking I never was told, until I had exhausted my efforts to find out for myself” (*Autobiography* 96).

James Mill’s approach was not, however, entirely successful, as we learn from his son’s *Autobiography*. Specifically, J. S. Mill describes having experienced an important crisis in 1826-1827, when he realized that his carefully molded Benthamite education “had failed to create [the] feelings [of happiness] in sufficient strength to resist the dissolving influence of analysis”: “I was thus, as I said to myself, left stranded at the commencement of my voyage, with a well-equipped ship and a rudder, but no sail...”

(Mill, *Autobiography* 123). He ultimately espoused a looser philosophy, convinced that it was only by “[a]iming this at something else” that people could “find happiness by the way.” The study of poetry was not promoted by Utilitarian thinkers; yet, it was by reading Wordsworth (a two-volume edition of miscellaneous poems from 1815, including “Intimations of Immortality”) that J. S. Mill was able to develop an affective sense and to combat “the most confirmed habit of analysis.” The “power of rural beauty” and “natural scenery,” moreover, taught him to appreciate “states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty,” and these confirmed “that there was real, permanent happiness in tranquil contemplation” (*Autobiography* 126, 129-30). Still, the great crisis exposed a fundamental flaw in the system: as F. A. Cavenagh notes, despite the father’s high hopes of transforming his son through education, “nature triumphed over nurture,” and so James Mill’s construction of “a Utilitarian robot, his system”—however well designed and ably administered—“failed” (Cavenagh x).

The same could be said about nature’s triumph over Sir Austin’s System in Meredith’s novel. (This applies to Butler, as well, and is evident from the force of heredity upon Ernest’s life, though, as we will see in the second half of this chapter, this force does not preclude change.) The ironic treatment of the System was Meredith’s way of protesting against the absurdity of all Positivist systems that treated human beings like automata and “machinery,” trying to fit an evolving organic being into preset parameters. Meredith’s narrator summarizes the gist of Sir Austin’s System thus:

That a Golden Age, or something near it, might yet be established on our sphere, when fathers accepted their solemn responsibility, and studied human nature with a Scientific eye, knowing what a high science it is, to

live: and that, by hedging round the Youth from corruptness, and at the same time promoting his animal health, by helping him grow, as he would, like a Tree of Eden; by advancing him to a certain moral fortitude ere the Apple-Disease was spontaneously developed, there would be seen something approaching to a perfect Man, as the Baronet trusted to make this one Son of his, after a receipt of his own. (Meredith, *Ordeal* 11-2)

Let us unpack this loaded quotation.

The conservative gesture toward a bygone “Golden Age” may be misleading given the reference to Spencer which directly follows it.⁴ Finding it entirely absent from contemporary curricula, Spencer cannot insist enough on the importance of “the bringing up of children.” He means this both in physical and moral terms—an omission which he humorously yet damningly underscores by imagining someone saying, “This must have been the *curriculum* for their celibates” (Spencer 54-5). Too many young people grow up ignorant of what constitutes good parenting, he implies, and so the vicious cycle repeats. For this reason, his evolutionist prerogative notwithstanding, Spencer does not condone “a system of complete *laissez-faire*,” deeming this position far from “the logical outcome of [his] doctrines” and, in fact, “untenable” (112). He justifies this by appealing to the natural world, pointing out that it is “a general law of all life that the more complex the organism to be produced, the longer the period during which it is dependent on a parent organism for food and protection”; once the child is “self-sufficing,” both mentally and physically, it must be left to evolve on its own (Spencer 112-3).

The problem with “The Pilgrim’s Scrip” is not that it is a *script* but that it is *too* scripted when unnecessary and too lenient when most needed. This is but one of the

ways in which it is detached from life. The evolutionary stages Sir Austin outlines for his son's education have no real theoretical backing, and that is profoundly ironic, for despite the obsession with the "Scientific eye" (Meredith, *Feverel* 12), these stages are based on assumptions, as was also the case with contemporary educators (Grabar 133). The labeling of the stages, an added irony Grabar does not mention, highlights the incongruity between the language of organic growth ("Blossoming," "Seed Time") and the underlying scientific design, meant to transform "the young Experiment" into "a perfect Man" (Meredith, *Ordeal* 12). (A similarly ironic twist is present in *The Egoist*, where the language of natural selection is misappropriated by the titular character Willoughby Patterne who considers himself to be "the fittest" and so threatens his fiancé "with being 'fitted' into Willoughby's pattern" [Williams 66]: in other words, promising to take random natural selection into his own hands.) Also, in this succession from "Simple Boyhood to The Blossoming Season, The Magnetic Age, The Period of Probation," and ultimately "a Manhood Worthy of Paradise," Meredith juxtaposes biblical language ("Probation," "Paradise") with an otherwise non-religious scientific grounding, thereby inviting us to question the System's presumably rational—though, quite possibly, logically groundless—foundation.

This is all in addition to the fundamental problem overlooked by Sir Austin, namely, that being artificial, the System cannot assist in anyone's growth, a point Meredith ironically highlights when he describes the System as being "not yet ripe" on Richard's seventh birthday, the time of the young man's first ordeal. "In fact, [the System] grew as the boy grew" (Meredith, *Ordeal* 22), the narrator observes, using the same verb to signify two very different processes, thus exposing the incongruence

between the animate and the inanimate, which appear identical to the Mechanist; at the same time, he draws our attention to that which should be in its place, but is absent—namely, nature, the healthier counterpart to human growth in the implied analogy. After finding out about Richard's elopement and tasting his wedding cake, Adrian, the Wise Youth and Sir Austin's most loyal disciple, comments, "So dies the System!"—once again accentuating its artificiality by describing its failure in terms of an organic termination: not death but life should be the natural product of marriage (*Ordeal* 367).

Finally, the ideal of "a perfect Man" (*Ordeal* 11-2) would likely strike any evolutionary thinker as unachievable, and while the implied teleology, that is, the belief that one could be improved through proper education, would not have been in and of itself undesirable, by couching it in biblical idiom, Meredith connects it with dogmatic thinking, which further dissociates Richard from nature in two ways: by trying to suppress his instinct for sexual reproduction and by replacing both evolutionary and providential determinism with a human contrivance: "Adrian characterized the system well, in saying that Sir Austin wished to be Providence to his son" (Meredith, *Ordeal* 68). Both fail: after Richard abandons his wife for many months, allegedly due to his father's disapproval of his decision to marry, he goes on to acquire a lover; what follows is a series of unfortunate circumstances which force even Sir Austin, who laughs, quite tellingly, "in his stiff way" (*Ordeal* 40), to become more flexible and reconsider his System. Meredith reminds us of the ongoing tension once more when the shrewd old Mrs. Berry begs Richard to return to his wife on account of their son and urges him to heed to nature, not his father's "Scrip": "A father's will...that's a son's law: but he mustn't go again' the laws of his natur' to do it" (*Ordeal* 468). But the System has, by

that time, become too ingrained in Richard's constitution, and it cannot be stamped out: "Conceive the System in the flesh, and you have our Richard," Sir Austin admits after realizing his son has been utterly ruined (*Ordeal* 537).

Although Sir Austin had followers, Adrian Harley and his butler, Heavy Benson, who was an embodiment of "the Dogma," there were others who tried to warn him against the excesses of his experiment. To these, we are told, the Baronet replied pointing at his son: "Match him" (Meredith, *Ordeal* 34). The Doctor, who is meant to document Richard's development, blames the System for the boy's lack of knowledge of right and wrong; he criticizes Sir Austin's approach because it is designed to promote moral behavior "by keeping him [Richard] out of his element," an accusation that the latter counters by saying that the boy receives "all the advantages of Science" in return. To the Doctor's suggestion that he be sent to school, the Baronet exclaims: "The schools are corrupt!" (*Ordeal* 39-40). This echoes Spencer's view of human nature as imperfect and prone to evil: "Boys when left to themselves, as at a public school," Spencer cautions, "treat each other far more brutally than men do"; but even he does not rule out socializing of any kind, but merely cautions that, accordingly, "a higher morality, like a higher intelligence, must be reached by a slow growth" (206). By way of Sir Austin's extreme application of Spencer's idea Meredith undercuts both systems as well as the view of human nature on which they are predicated, and what he offers instead reveals his Vitalist inclination.

What the Doctor prescribes is that Richard be sent to a public school, so that he may socialize more naturally than under the System's "Scientific eye." However mediocre their standards, public schools seem to him a lesser evil than home-schooling.

Yet, the boys-will-be-boys dictum or, as Lord Heddon calls it, the “Wild Oats” special plea is equally ineffectual against Sir Austin’s stubborn commitment to the “Scrip”:

Heddon insists that “the best fellows were wildish once,” and they became men by eating “man’s food,” not by being carefully spoon-fed. “Feverel, it’s a dangerous experiment, that of bringing up flesh and blood in a harness,” he concludes referring to Richard’s life and health in the terms of experimental science. “No colt will bear it, or he’s a tame beast. And look you: take it on medical grounds. Early excesses the frame will recover from: late ones break the constitution” (Meredith, *Ordeal* 179). The Baronet, however, deems this advice “headless” (not *head on*, as Heddon’s name clearly implies), as well as “degenerate [and] weedy,” not realizing that “weeds,” or “wild oats,” prove more beneficial to natural evolution than meticulously crafted domesticated cultures (*Ordeal* 180). He therefore dismisses Heddon’s forceful appeal to nature and medicine.

The failure of Sir Austin’s overbearing System does not mean, however, that Meredith is promoting the absence of parental guidance; the latter, while also grounded in Spencer, insofar as he advises that children be released from their parents’ secure wing as soon as they prove self-sufficient, has terrible repercussions for Meredith’s hero. In the episode called the “Bakewell Comedy,” where Richard and his friend engage in arson, Meredith dramatizes the consequences of a *laissez-faire* approach to education which even Spencer would oppose, since too much guidance might result in dependency, but too little would likely lead to the child’s getting burnt. Although Sir Austin knows that Richard is responsible for the fire at Farmer Blaize’s, he lets the boy work it out on his own, trusting that he would rely on his sense of beneficent nature. And while Adrian and Sir Austin wait to see what this “discipline by consequences” means, it is Austin

Wentworth who steps in and asks—as Meredith clearly wants his readers to ask, as well—whether Richard will learn good or evil from this experience. We might consider such an appeal to nature and one’s inner sense of morality as Pestalozzian and conclude that, in effect, Meredith means to criticize the alternate view; however, the fact that Richard has been so shackled by “the Scrip” that he is no longer “in harmony with nature” complicates things: the intuitive approach would not necessarily apply.

By allowing the Bakewell Comedy to play out, Meredith is, rather, dramatizing the consequences of Spencer’s scientific approach, based on the premise that “in each branch of instruction we should proceed from the empirical to the rational” (Spencer 124). What Sir Austin does not realize—and what Meredith wants his readers not to miss—is that there are limits to Spencer’s dictum of “the discipline of natural consequences,” and that it is, in fact, in tension with his insistence on parental involvement: the parents’ cold treatment must be checked so as to preserve the child from imminent danger, as well as to save the bond of sympathy between them. Grabar argues that Meredith is writing a burlesque on Spencer’s 1858 essay entitled “Moral Education”—in which Spencer argues that education is hopeless not only because children are not born good, but also because their parents are equally beyond reformation—by having “Sir Austin commi[t] every error that Spencer warns against” (Grabar 139). Spencer encourages education by trial and error: rather than telling the student what to do, he suggests, we should encourage “self-development...to the fullest extent,” making sure, moreover, that the proposed course “create a pleasurable excitement in the pupils” (124, 127). This is also why he is against education by rote, as are Butler and Meredith. “Self-help,” not compulsory instruction, is more effective than

“the unintelligent, mechanical practice of copying other drawings,” to take one example to which Spencer keeps returning (146). Ideally, therefore, and despite the hand-holding that human infants might require, it is education through “self-evolution” that Spencer promotes and, what is more, an education that is “pleasurable”—the latter designed to promote learning beyond the school years (Spencer 153, 158).

Spencer’s commitment to empiricism requires that direct observation be valued above any other kind of knowledge, including that acquired from books.⁵ He claims that the introduction of generalizations before facts is counterproductive; since few young brains are prepared to deal with abstractions, “education must conform to the natural process of mental evolution”: this means, for example, the practice of language prior to the acquisition of the rules of grammar and syntax (Spencer 62, 116-10). Such training—through direct observation and trial-and-error—is rooted in empirical causality: rather than imposing a punishment, parents should let their children learn “organic[ally]” by experimenting (e.g., letting them learn on their own that boiling water can scald or a pin can lacerate their skin): “It is the peculiarity of these [organic] penalties, if we must so call them, that they are nothing more than the *unavoidable consequences* of the deeds which they follow: they are nothing more than the *inevitable reactions* entailed by the child’s actions”: “The burnt child dreads the fire.” It is not surprising for a thinker like Spencer to praise an approach through trial and error: after all, it inculcates in the learning mind the notion of causality, the cornerstone of empiricism (Spencer 185).

The closest model and ideal parent for Richard is not Sir Austin, who misapplies the Spencerian dictum, failing to provide the necessary guidance at a critical moment after imposing too much in other less pivotal situations; it is, rather, his namesake, Austin

Wentworth, who relies on his instincts and is guided by them. Speaking from the Baronet's perspective but in his own voice, the narrator indicates to us that even Sir Austin is aware of an alternate path available to Richard: of following his heart by marrying his mother's housemaid, as did Austin Wentworth, albeit at the expense of losing his inheritance; the narrator implies that the said path is better, but cuts the hypothetical short, admitting that Richard's life has already been too stifled by his father's false science. According to the "Scrip," "in that dark Ordeal we gather the worthiest around us" (*Ordeal* 30), and yet the "worthiest" example of Wentworth—who is absent precisely because he followed his heart—is dismissed, the socioeconomic stigma blinding the Feverel household to his other virtues. This provides the closest to a solution or even just a glimpse at "reform" in Richard's otherwise hopeless case. Had he chosen to follow the other Austin, Richard's adult life might not have been such a colossal disappointment.

We should note that Meredith draws on contemporary theories of education in most but one crucial detail: the identification of women with evil. The goal of education in the aforementioned description of the System is to arm Richard against the morally corruptible Eve "by advancing him to a certain moral fortitude ere the Apple-Disease was spontaneously developed." This reflects Sir Austin's misogyny, which is motivated by being abandoned by his wife, and "reflects Meredith's personal bitterness rather than any contemporary theory of education" (Grabar 134). Critics interested in Meredith's biography, like Lionel Stevenson, tend to dwell on the obvious parallel to his own ill-fated marriage (he was deserted by his wife Mary Ellen Nicolls). The latter leads Robert M. DeGraaff to locate the "trouble" with *Richard Feverel* in the "broad and far-reaching

effects [of] Meredith's misogyny," linking the formal successes of his later novels, *The Egoist* or *The Amazing Marriage*, to stronger characterization and a pro-woman attitude (DeGraaff 86-7).⁶ The same could be said of his *Essay on Comedy* (1877), in which Meredith celebrates the balance of the sexes and female independence.⁷

But, while clearly an issue at the heart of Meredith's novel, the treatment of women, who are introduced in the opening chapter as curious but misguided Eves,⁸ is balanced out by an equally critical treatment of men: Sir Austin and Adrian are hardly infallible. The System designed for Richard is mirrored by that designed for his cousin Clare. It is difficult to cast essentialist comments in a positive light; however, there is compelling evidence against the charge of misogyny in the way Meredith opposes women to science. "Science is notoriously of slow movement," the narrator comments, stressing the difference in the way the Baronet and Lady Blandish perceive the world: too preoccupied with his System, he cannot grasp the latter's "proposition" challenging it because it is "far too hasty for Sir Austin." "Women," the narrator asserts, "rapid by nature, have no idea of Science" (Meredith, *Ordeal* 518). Ironically, the System designed to protect against women is brought down by one: Richard's falling in love with the farmer's niece Lucy is the right move, and Richard feels it instinctually despite his indoctrination, but due to the strong influence of the scientific "Scrip," he cannot embrace his natural impulses. By associating women with instinct, which figures as an antidote to science in the novel—culminating in Sir Austin's admitting, under the influence of Mrs. Berry and Lucy, that "Instinct had so far beaten Science" (*Ordeal* 559)—Meredith thus celebrates instinctual femininity, not science, albeit in the characteristic nineteenth-century manner that identifies women with nature. That may

be, consequently, difficult for post-feminist critics to accept, but is, to my mind, vital for our historical understanding of Meredith's work.

Meredith's attitude to science may be helpful here; also, his thoughts on education are best understood within a larger scientific and philosophical context. As DeGraaff rightly notes, the novel's "central conflict" lies between Sir Austin's System, "The Pilgrim's Scrip," and Meredith's philosophy and, essentially, between science and nature: "On the one hand lie nature, Eden, organism, and direct, simple honesty; on the other lie science and the system, knightliness, mechanism, and action-inhibiting masks" (DeGraaff 84). Meredith was not critical of science in general, however, just of those who conceived it in purely materialist terms (as Normal Kelvin has demonstrated), as does Sir Austin. Carolyn Williams, agreeing with E. Arthur Robinson, observes this tension on the narrative level: opposing the tyranny of "fact" and the obsession with physical detail characteristic of nineteenth-century realism, Meredith relies on detail to create "a spiritual anatomy, not a physical one" (Williams 56).

In *The Egoist*, which he wrote twenty years after *Richard Feverel*, Meredith developed his critique of contemporary science the seeds of which are already present in his first novel. In the opening chapter, he sets out to undermine "the malady of sameness, our modern malady," provoked by our overreliance on Science, which did little more than "introduc[e] us to our o'er-hoary ancestry," making us not just "the same," but also the same as "animals" (*Egoist* 4; also, Wylie Sypher's Introduction to *Essay* viii-ix). Meredith goes on to offer art and, specifically, the art of comedy, not science, as the "ultimate civilizer" and thus the "remedy of [our] frightful affliction," "of pretentiousness, of inflation, of dullness, and of the vestiges of rawness and grossness to

be found among us”; he encourages us to foster “diversity in the companion throbs of [our] pulses” (*Egoist* 4-5). In this piece, as elsewhere, Meredith associates the following aspects with modern science: empiricism, with its literary equivalent in “the realistic method of a conscientious transcription of all the visible, and a repetition of all the audible” so as to replicate, rather than probe deeply into the mysteries of life (by way of “the inward mirror”); Darwin’s evolutionary theory (through the pointed simian reference); and industrialization (comparing humans, in a telling simile, to “tired pedestrians” who turn to science’s “engine-box of headlong trains” as an “antidote”) (*Egoist* 4). Although he does not explicitly refer to the Vitalist/Mechanist debate, in his critique of “raw realism” (which produces, paradoxically, unrealistic characters) Meredith anticipates Bergson’s notion of “une *mécanisation* de la vie,” and his derivation of the comic effect from “toutes opérations qui consistent à traiter la vie comme un mécanisme à répétition, avec effets réversibles et pièces interchangeables” (Meredith, *Essay* 11; Bergson, *Œuvres: Rire* 435).⁹

We recall from Chapter 2 that Meredith’s attitude to science as well as evolution, its nineteenth-century hobby-horse, was shaped by Darwin’s work, but it was neither unironic nor unambiguously receptive. This is crucial; yet, many critics who explore this issue do not clarify it sufficiently. For example, Williams’ insistence that Meredith looked at evolution in Darwinian terms (or, as she qualifies, in those of Spencer given the coinage of the phrase “survival of the fittest”) seems to suggest too close an association between the two writers, and her use of “Darwinism” and “evolutionism” more or less interchangeably helps to solidify this otherwise problematic bond (Williams 62).¹⁰ Meredith’s belief that the development of spirit is a logical step in human evolution

subsequent to that of the body, coupled with the expectation that humans will realize this necessity, take charge of, and contribute to their own evolution, indicates that he is thinking not in Darwinian terms, but rather in those of Lamarck, and is, to that extent, akin to Butler.

Richard Feverel is, on the whole, a reaction to empiricism, which took over nineteenth-century science and with which Meredith disagreed; more specifically, it is a reaction to Spencer, whose theory of education is thoroughly immersed in it. For Spencer, the two principles behind education—that the rearing of children is an important discipline, but that the child must be encouraged to become self-sufficient through his or her exercise of reason—are in tension with one another. He hopes to avoid the two extremes by balancing uninvolved *laissez-faire*, which may be detrimental to the child's health, with the involved dogmatic prescription that goes against nature. But while this may resemble, in its form and logic, the middle ground sought by the Vitalists, and demonstrates the kind of thinking that had initially impressed Bergson, Spencer's ultimate commitment to empiricism makes his pedagogy untenable for those writers who were interested in science and nature, but conceived them in non-materialist terms.

In "What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?" an essay which was published after Meredith's novel (Grabar 130), but is still relevant since it was a response to current theories on education, Spencer makes it clear that to be "worth" "most," knowledge must have practical application: "How to live?" is, accordingly, "the essential question," and the function of education is "[t]o prepare us for complete living," by which he means learning to treat the body and the mind properly, manage affairs, sustain a family, and act as a citizen, all in order "to utilize all those sources of happiness which nature supplies"

(Spencer 30-1, 62). Applying Utilitarian principles, he condemns “the ornamental” which “overrides the useful” in modern education, pointing out, for example, that Latin is not nearly as “useful” as is physiology (Spencer 72-4).¹¹ “While anxious that their sons should be well up in the superstitions of two thousand years ago,” he objects, “[parents] care not that they should be taught anything about the structure of their own bodies—nay, would even disapprove such instruction” (Spencer 43-4).

Spencer’s emphasis on the “useful” is rooted in his evolutionary thinking, evident in his appeal to the processes of “indirect self-preservation” as the yardstick for knowledge. But it also reveals his commercial and materialist interests: because most people are engaged in commercial activities, he suggests, their education should be tailored to such production, emphasizing “an adequate knowledge of their physical, chemical, or vital properties,” in a word “Science” (Spencer 43-4). Under the latter definition Spencer includes those divisions of mathematics that deal with space and number (geometry); physics (electricity, magnetism); chemistry; “the science of life,” or biology, including agriculture and physiology, and finally, “the Science of Society,” which he identifies primarily with the capitalist enterprise of “the production, exchange, and distribution of commodities” (Spencer 46-52).

Meredith would disagree with Spencer’s (and, generally, the Utilitarian) celebration of science and commercially constructed “useful[ness]”; he would see human growth as part of a larger spiritual paradigm, not merely the production of commodities. *Richard Feverel* stops short of that vision, however, as does the titular character’s own evolution. Unable to get his father’s System out of his own, the hero ends up unprepared as an individual, as a father, and as a citizen. It is from this negative model that Meredith

urges us to infer what could be done to prevent Richard's tragedy. He suggests that a system of any kind, whether it be individually designed and carefully administered, or indiscriminately imposed on masses (Shaw's charge), will fail because it denies the instinctual connection of the individual to the natural world by substituting for it a false ideology, which would further preclude him or her from connecting with the political and social spheres. During his crisis, J. S. Mill realizes that he is incapable of experiencing happiness, having been trained in cold intellectual analysis too well; for Meredith's Richard, crisis strikes when he cannot act morally or listen to his (physical) nature, the two aspects his father so carefully attempted to mastermind. Yet, from Meredith's portrayal of Richard's arson, we must infer that letting the child get burnt, following Spencer's education by trial and error, is ultimately just as problematic and ineffectual.

* * *

In contrast to Spencer, who opposed educational reform because he conceived moral and physical changes in terms of natural processes not to be meddled with, Samuel Butler supported a more active engagement in education, an approach informed by his teleological understanding of evolution. Throughout his writings, he suggests that some positive reinforcement, though short of a system, is not only helpful, but also necessary to bring out the child's natural aptitude which formal—and, particularly, religious—schooling threatens to suppress.

But before we can examine what Butler has to say about evolutionary education in *The Way of All Flesh*, we must look at his conception of evolution itself. Butler's "science"—his epistemology and conception of mind and matter—is meant to provide the theoretical background for his views on Victorian parenting and education. Butler

sees “the mental” and “the material” as fundamentally the same and “action”—as the process by which one transforms into the other; this helps him explain how heredity works (as a sort of “memory” carried from one generation to another), and how through effort (an idea he adapts from the Neo-Lamarckians), its material environment motivates the organism to produce changes in structure, thereby translating a physical need into a psychological one in order to create the necessary adjustment.

Butler builds his evolutionary theory from the ground up. He begins, specifically, with “Newland’s law (sometimes called Mendelejeff’s law) that there is only one substance, and that the characteristics of vibrations going on within it at any given time will determine whether it will appear to us as (say) hydrogen, or sodium, or chicken doing this, or chicken doing the other” (“Vibrations” [1885] in *Note-Books* 66). While we may perceive inorganic and organic life forms differently, the vibrations in and of themselves are not fundamentally different, and it is in action, rather than perception, that the two modes of existence coalesce: “Action is the process whereby thought, which is mental, is materialized and whereby substance, which is material, is mentalized.” Admitting that he “do[es] not know what thought is,” except that it “involves bodily change, i.e. action,” and that the opposite is true, meaning that “every action involves thought,” Butler deduces that “action is the material symbol of certain states of mind,” one that “translates the thought into a corresponding bodily change” (*Note-Books* 67-8).

By arguing that “Mind” and “Matter” are inconceivable separate from one other, Butler avoids Descartes’ deadly dualism which risks rendering the mind passive: “we cannot imagine an energy, or working power,” he maintains, “without matter through which is manifests itself,” nor can we “imagine matter without thinking of it as capable of

some kind of working power”; the soul is “energy” we feel “working in us,” that is, in our body, and we know it precisely through its effects (“Mind and Matter” in *Note-Books* 76). Formulating an epistemological view reminiscent of Schelling’s Identity Theory, Butler challenges the notion of static matter, or a universal substance at rest, and asserts that “Mind” is “a function of matter,” and “Matter” is, accordingly, “a function of mind,” for otherwise, we would not be able to know anything about either of them (*Note-Books* 67). He explains this in the following way: matter has to be dynamic or else it is nothing, for we cannot perceive it without motion; hence, even if something appears not to be moving, it is only because our ability to perceive is not nearly precise enough to register changes of that kind. From this we can infer that, sooner or later, “the division between organic and inorganic will go and will take with it division between mind and matter” (Butler, *Note-Books* 74-5, 78).

The so-called “Book of the Machines”¹² in his first novel, the utopian travelogue *Erewhon, Or Over the Range* (1872; rev. 1901), reflects Butler’s conception of mind and matter, evolutionary thinking, and his Vitalist reinterpretation of science—working *with* rather than *against* evolutionary theories of his day, among which Darwin’s had become the most dominant. The conflict between the “machinists” and the “anti-machinists” is his way of engaging with the debate about life between the Vitalists and the Mechanists. These chapters (XXI-XXIII) were seen by the novel’s reviewers as satire on the *Origin of Species*, though Butler himself protested the charges in a letter to Darwin, who was a family friend. That Butler was perfectly aware of the implications is hard to doubt, however, since he wrote in his *Memoirs*, some thirty years after *Erewhon*’s publication,

that “Charles Darwin smelt danger from afar...He knew very well that the machine chapters in *Erewhon* would not end there” (Butler, *Erewhon* 186-7; n1).

The Book of the Machines is presented as a flawed English translation of a Erewhonian treatise which led to the utopian society’s civil war between the “machinists” and the “anti-machinists,” the latter of whom, being extreme Luddites, established their victory not only by treating their opponents with “unparalleled severity” but also by placing in museums all the machines they did not otherwise destroy (*Erewhon* 179). The “anti-machinists” foresaw the machines’ enormous evolutionary potential, as well as danger, arguing that these would almost immediately develop “mechanical consciousness” and learn to eat, communicate, and reproduce; this would be all the more troubling since the pace at which “organized machines” are already evolving is much faster than that of living beings; it might not take them, in other words, “twenty million years” to make analogous strides to those bridging a barely conscious mollusk with a highly conscious human.¹³

This most unusual scenario is given as a foundation for the rest of the argument: stretching to its logical limits the Mechanists’ claim that all human actions are “mechanical,” and so, according to Butler’s logic, “unconscious,” he proposes that “the difference between the life of a man and that of a machine is one rather of degree than of kind, though differences in kind are not wanting” (*Erewhon* 200). The Venus Flytrap, for instance, distinguishes between flowers and insects, its organic food, in a way that dismantles our common assumption that non-human “mechanisms” lack consciousness: “Curious! that so unconscious a thing should have such a keen eye to its own interest,”

exclaims the Erewhonian author whose treatise the narrator is, presumably, translating, adding a revealing epiplexis:

If this is unconsciousness, where is the use of consciousness? Shall we say that the plant does not know what it is doing merely because it has no eyes, or ears, or brains? If we say that it acts mechanically, and mechanically only, shall we not be forced to admit that sundry other and apparently very deliberate actions are also mechanical?" (*Erewhon* 183-4).

With the un/mechanical binary destabilized, Butler can go on to frame action traditionally considered "unconscious" in terms of motivation (and vice versa) in order, ultimately, to undercut Darwin's mechanistic premise of random mutation in favor of neo-Lamarckian effort. If those chemical actions that seem to us "unconscious" are in fact "conscious," then "those things which we deem most purely spiritual," may in fact be little more than "disturbances of equilibrium in an infinite series of levers," and would elicit purely "mechanical" questions, such as: "what kind of levers [they are] made of" and "[h]ow much of such and such will it take to weigh them down so as to make him do so and so" (Butler, *Erewhon* 185). We could interpret this as Butler's warning against "classifying men by their horse-power" (*Erewhon* 204), an example of Mechanist (or, as Butler's narrator would say, "machinist") language that places humans in a single evolutionary line with the machines to whom they are evolutionarily inferior.

At the same time, however, and in a classically Vitalist fashion, Butler is not asking us to reject the comparison between the living and the non-living altogether but, rather, to reinterpret it. His evocation of the order of the machines helps him restore order to the natural world. In contrast to Peter-Hans Breuer (328),¹⁴ Bernard Lightman

notes that Butler drew on natural theology in order to combat the materialism of Darwin and his so-called Bulldog, Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895). In *Natural Theology* (1802), the seminal work of Christian apologist William Paley (1743-1805), Butler found a useful analogy between machines and living beings. Admitting the superiority of nature to art when it came to “contrivances,” Paley asserted that however intricate, “in a multitude of cases, [these] are not less evidently mechanical, not less evidently contrivances, not less evidently accommodated to their end, or suited to their office, than are the most perfect productions of human ingenuity” (Paley, qtd. in Butler, *Erewhon* 187; n4). But, whereas a Mechanist would rely on the analogy between the living and the non-living to reduce both to the same laws, Butler used it to challenge the ontological distinction between matter and mind: that nature is so well “designed” is potent evidence that organs are material expressions of desire and products of effort—functions, in other words, of the same substance. Like Bergson, Butler adopted Paley’s finalism, but stopped short of projecting the existence of a Supreme Designer—thereby restoring purpose without giving up the possibility of individually motivated variations.

Moreover, in a manner meant to privilege life, Butler took causality, a typically Mechanist and empiricist concern, and redefined it. Echoing Bergson, who, in his discussion of the role of intellect, notes that causation is a prerequisite for planning (although it also stifles life, which is not subject to replicability), Butler admits that action demands the illusion of causality: “The assurance that the future is no arbitrary and changeable thing, but that like futures will invariably follow on the reproductions of like presents, is the groundwork on which we lay all our plans, the faith on which we do every

conscious action of our lives.” The narrator then adds, rhetorically, “Who would plough or sow if he disbelieved in the fixity of the future?” (Butler, *Erewhon* 198).

It is important that we look at Butler’s theories as *science*, because that is how he saw them himself. When referring to his linking of memory with heredity, he calls the explanation “the physics of memory” (“Vibrations” in *Note-Books* 66), employing “physics” rather than “nature” to highlight the scientific bent of his philosophical pursuit. As a writer of what he himself considered “science,” Butler did not, however, have as established an audience as his mainstream colleagues, such as Robert Chambers, John Fiske, Grant Allen, Arabella Buckley, David Page, or even Herbert Spencer (Lightman 118). He could appeal neither to theology, having rejected his father’s Christianity, nor to professional science, which he had discredited as a source of knowledge; he hoped, therefore, that the general public would vindicate him after the professional world had given up on his efforts to reconcile science and religion (Lightman 134-6).

Similar to Meredith, Butler was skeptical of modern science and empiricism, though he was also much more involved than Meredith—personally and professionally—with Darwin and natural selection. Butler described scientists as “those who do not much care about knowing but care very greatly about being reputed as knowing” (“Scientists” in *Note-Books* 218). Scientific terminology seemed, to him, an impenetrable maze of Latin names and classifications created for the sole purpose of alienating the public: “This is the Skylla’s cave which men of science are preparing for themselves to be able to pounce upon us from it, and into which we cannot penetrate” (“Scientific Terminology” in *Note-Books* 218). One way he subverts scientific language is by taking it entirely *au pied de la lettre*: “When people talk of atoms obeying fixed laws,” he points out, “they

are either ascribing some kind of intelligence and free will to atoms or they are talking nonsense. There is no obedience unless there is at any rate potentiality of disobeying” (*Note-Books* 72). He goes on to frame this in terms we would not normally associate with inanimate things, namely, by locating the activity of atoms someplace between “individual caprice” (or “free will”) and “stiffneckedness” (“necessity”), and concludes that “it would be most convenient to endow all atoms with something of a consciousness and volition,” though on a scale much more miniscule than our own (*Note-Books* 72). The point for Butler was not so much to create a pantheistic universe as to provide “common-sense” explanations which we could all understand, since, he believed, we were instinctually connected to the universe no matter how alienating it had been made by abstract scientific or academic discourses, both of which came under Butler’s attack.

* * *

In *The Way of All Flesh* (finished 1884; pub. posth. in 1903), Butler takes up Victorian parenting and education, as well as their connection to politics. The novel offers some autobiographical insight: its sardonic narrator, the writer of burlesques and Ernest’s godfather Edward Overton, admits that “[e]very man’s work...is always a portrait of himself, and the more he tries to conceal himself the more clearly will his character appear in spite of him.” “I am sorry that it is so,” Overton adds, “but I cannot help it” (*The Way* 62). Yet it is not, strictly speaking, an autobiography because, as Sally Shuttleworth demonstrates, Butler fuses in this novel the classic nineteenth-century form of the *Bildungsroman* with his biological and ontological view of hereditary continuity, which “does not recognize the conventional boundaries of individual identity” (148).¹⁵ Nor is Ernest Pontifex’s life particularly unique: his formation is heavily influenced by

genealogical history, and he keeps replaying, as it were, the lives of his “former selves,” especially his father whom he both resists and identifies with, a pattern Shuttleworth sees in Freudian terms as a “family romance” (144).

Given the importance of heredity, it is unclear how certain critics, like Richard Hoggart, can possibly see Butler’s evolutionary theory as a mere distraction; others, including David Guest, insist that social evolution is, in fact, the key to this text (Shuttleworth 144).¹⁶ Shuttleworth underscores this: “Despite, or indeed because of, his ongoing disputes with Charles Darwin, Butler undoubtedly took the ideas of biological evolution more seriously than any other nineteenth-century novelist” (143-4). The hero of his novel “read Mr. Darwin’s books as fast as they came out and adopted evolution as an article of faith” (Butler, *The Way* 362). When envisioning the shades of the dead by whom he would like to be welcomed into the netherworld, however, the Darwin Butler mentions is Erasmus, along with Buffon and Lamarck, who were evolutionary thinkers but not proponents of natural selection (“The Life of the World to Come” in *Note-Books* 378; “First Principles” in *Note-Books* 322). Butler listed the “re-introduction of teleology into organic life” as one of his own contributions to evolution (“Vibrations” in *Note Books* 66). With the anti-teleological Charles Darwin, on the other hand, he had both scientific and personal quibbles (*Note-Books*; n376). Butler felt betrayed by his neglecting “to acknowledge the contribution of his precursors,” and went on to criticize the “originality” of natural selection, claiming that Charles Darwin had added very little to his grandfather’s theory of evolution, and that all he was doing “was unconsciously repeating ‘ancestral voices’ that were contrary to the positions that he publically professed.” This was not only a question of literary authority, as David Amigoni argues

(94-6, 105); it touched on one of Butler's key evolutionary principles of trans-generational continuity, as we see in the force of heredity weighing down upon the novel's protagonist. In a curious manner, Butler had been aware of and often alluded to his literary predecessors, the other two Butlers: Bishop Joseph Butler, author of *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed to the Constitution of Nature* (1736) and the seventeenth-century poet Samuel Butler, author of the satirical *Hudibras* (1663-1678).

In addition, because he valued purposeful change, Butler could not help seeing Darwin's insistence on chance and randomness as a serious theoretical flaw. He considered natural selection to be spiritually false: "The theory that luck is the means of organic modification is the most absolute denial of God which it is possible for the human mind to conceive," he wrote in *Luck, or Cunning?* (1887). For Darwin, Butler charged, evolution and teleology were mutually exclusive, whereas he found that there were "two natural selections, and two survivals of the fittest," one of which proceeded solely based on chance mutation while the other was teleological and purposive (Butler, qtd. in Lightman 120-1). In the words of Shaw, Butler, "on whom Darwin had acted homeopathically, reacted against him furiously" and "ran up the Lamarckian flag to the top-gallant peak"; yet, much to Shaw's dismay, neither Darwin himself nor his supporters heard Butler's message, and instead came to hail "the banishment of mind from the universe as a glorious enlightenment and emancipation for which [Butler] was ignorantly ungrateful." Shaw describes Butler as "a prophet who tried to head us back when we were gaily dancing to our damnation across the rainbow bridge which Darwinism had thrown over the gulf which separates life and hope from death and despair"; he proceeds to implicate his fellow Edwardians (and us, too, insofar as this "we" includes Shaw's

future readership) in helping the Darwinists prevail: “We were intellectually intoxicated with the idea that the world could make itself without design, purpose, skill, or intelligence: in short, without life” (Shaw, *Methuselah* 36).

Butler believes that we are born with certain characteristics inherited from our predecessors, but this does not mean that his view is conservative and therefore allows for no change. In *The Way of All Flesh*, Overton insists that contrary to those who see Fortune as “a blind and fickle foster-mother, who showers her gifts at random upon her nurslings,” she is quite selective: “[h]er blindness is the merest fable; she can espy her favourites long before they are born” (Butler, *The Way* 17). This may be read as an expression of determinism, and since heredity is a given (or, following Butler, a series of “habits” made unconscious), there must be certain evolutionary shackles from which we cannot escape. Yet, for meaningful learning to be possible, the Neo-Lamarckian Butler insists that new “habits” must be acquired, through continual effort in response to changing environmental circumstances. Butler provides what Shuttleworth calls “built in safeguards”: “unwitting mimicry will only come into play if all the conditions are the same” (158). This, of course, runs contrary to Darwinian natural selection in which heredity is also a given, but change is random and therefore, to appeal to Shaw’s term once again, “senseless.” The disjunctive preposition in the title *Luck, or Cunning?* suggests that only one of the two options is available, and yet Butler was open to both, and could not accept Darwin’s singling out of the former alone.

The tension between heredity and change—meaningful change, in particular—is illustrated by the fact that, while Ernest may be one of Fortune’s “favourites,” as the narrator hints, he carries with him rather unfortunate genetics. Because life, according to

Butler, is not as old or as “unerring...in respect of things about which it is conversant” as is the force of gravity (“Mind and Matter” in *Note-Books* 77), it presents Ernest with several paths better not taken, requiring that he adopt—or, as Butler would say, “remember”—some habits while rejecting others. Butler opens the novel with a genealogy going back to Ernest’s great-grandfather “old Mr. Pontifex,” a carpenter by trade, as well as a self-taught artist and musician who had built two organs with his own hands; though initially unaware that he “remembered” this legacy, Ernest starts to gravitate toward carpentry and music, and is assisted in this by his aunt Alethea, herself her grandfather’s “favourite” (*The Way* 10), who appropriately becomes his godmother and future patroness.

To understand a bit better what Butler means by the connection between “memory” and heredity we must turn briefly to his lecture on the subject. In “On Memory as a Key to the Phenomena of Heredity,” delivered at the Working Men’s College in 1882, he argued “that the connection between memory and heredity is so close that there is no reason for regarding the two as generically different” (Butler, *Note-Books* 57). This is because living beings, like thoughts, are preserved through memory, which aids in their reproduction, so that a new life form can carry on the traits of its progenitor even when the latter no longer exists. Thus, Butler challenges the limited span of personal identity by tracing it back, via a special kind of hereditary “memory,” to one’s predecessors:

It is not just that the sins of the fathers should be visited upon the children, for the children committed the sins when in the persons of their fathers; they ate the sour grapes before they were born: true, they have forgotten

the pleasure now, but so has the man with a sick headache forgotten the pleasure of getting drunk the night before. (Butler, *Note-Books* 59-60)

“The only explanation,” as Bernard Lightman puts it, “is that we must be born with the memories of our progenitors” (119). The mind/body continuum discussed earlier buttresses his teleological view, helping Butler tie a change in structure to the desire to produce that change: “to connect the actual manufacture of the things a chicken makes inside an egg with the desire and memory of the chickens,” a neo-Lamarckian approach that empowers effort as a legitimate means of evolving new forms (*Note-Books* 67-9). The “vibrations” traveling between the mental and the material become, in effect, the carriers of this “memory,” as they are communicated from one substance to another, whether or not the matter itself were present at the original experience.

Butler’s version of genetic evolution has critical implications for education and, more generally, for living a moral life. Because “memory” may thus be extended over many generations, learning and moral responsibility may be passed on, he suggests, releasing the child from the need to re-acquire the lessons his or her parents took an entire lifetime to learn in the first place (another curious Butlerian idea, and one Shaw dramatizes in *Methuselah*, adding to the already extensive “memory” the advantage of a long life). Currently, that which it takes us decades to learn within a singular life is lost at death, and our offspring have to go back to square one; if we remembered more than we forgot, on the other hand, we would be able to build upon the foundation of “unconscious memory” and achieve a great deal more: “It is the business of memory and heredity to conserve and to transmit from one generation to another that which has been furnished by design” in that generation, Butler writes in a notebook entry appropriately

titled, “Accident, Design and Memory”; unlike “chances and changes,” “design” reflects an individual’s wants and needs (*Note-Books* 76). On the other hand, among the traits we “remember,” there may be some disagreeable or even detrimental ones, and so along with a propensity to fly through centuries of education, we also end up with some extra hereditary baggage.

The possibility of meaningful change, design, and also freedom despite hereditary necessity is a point that Overton brings up about two-thirds into his account of Ernest’s life. Immediately upon learning that Ernest was sentenced to six months of hard labor at Coldbath Fields for having mistaken a prostitute for a decent girl (a naïveté unforgivable given Ernest’s education, a point the magistrate implies when reading his sentence with “a touch of irony”), his father wants nothing to do with him. Evaluating their abysmal parenting, Overton concludes that neither Theobald nor his wife Christina is reformable, and “the case hopeless”: “They must not only be born again but they must be born again each one of them of a new father and of a new mother and of a different line of ancestry for many generations before their minds could become supple enough to learn anew” (Butler, *The Way* 272-5). The idea of “supple[ness]” should sound familiar as Butler takes it straight from Lamarck. Theobald’s sustained determination to cut off all communication with his son is, however, taken by Overton as a fortunate sign that “Ernest’s father was less of a fool” than he had previously thought, opening up the possibility “that his son’s blunders might be due to postnatal, rather than congenital misfortunes.” Butler appeals to evolutionary theory to draw an important distinction between traits that are malleable, being the result of “[a]ccidents which occur for the first time” during “the period since a man’s last birth,” and are not “permanent in their

effects,” and those which “happen to a man before he is born, in the persons of his ancestors,” leaving “an indelible impression on him” (*The Way* 277). Butlerian education, then, is the conscious process by which “postnatal” mistakes can be reversed or, ideally, prevented from happening.

The aforementioned ideas are succinctly communicated through character and place names, which do not form an allegory in any traditional sense but do provide a key to the novel’s meaning. Most proper nouns conceal or, rather, expose ironic incongruity, creating a satirical undertone (or *overtone*, as the narrator’s name implies) that complements the work’s clever narration. Ernest’s landing in prison at Coldbath Fields is an obvious example; not only is he in need of a cold shower following his misguided female encounter, but his time in prison also functions as a ritual cleansing. That Butler was consciously choosing speaking names while writing *The Way of All Flesh* is clear, even if, as “an unpracticed writer” of *Erewhon* some years earlier, he might have had “no idea the names could matter so much” (*Erewhon* 106n). Ernest’s mother Christina lived in Crampsford, an ironic home for someone with a “love of building castles in the air” as well as “vanity.” She and Theobald then moved to Battersby, the place where Ernest was exposed to “the long and savage cruelty” his father called education; the treatment to which his parents subjected him in childhood, if read literally, might qualify for a tort of battery, but was also part of what shaped Ernest’s character, as bread molded by a baker who has to *battre* it to make it rise (*The Way* 148, 274). Roughborough, the name of the school administered by Mr. Skinner, and London’s Ashpit Place, whither the morally ambiguous senior curate Pryer, an expert in so-called “spiritual pathology,” sends the naïve Ernest to pry into the souls of poor people—clearly speak for themselves.

Furthermore, his mother's Christian name, as well as Ernest's family name, could not be more inappropriate for a son whose life begins only when he rejects priesthood, and who, although a Pontifex, chooses to pontificate outside the confines of the Church. As Shuttleworth observes,

Pontifex, in its meaning of spiritual leader (or more narrowly, pope), creator of a bridge between earth and heaven, gives voice to Christina's fantasies about Ernest's future destiny—although as Carlyle noted in *Sartor Resartus*, in an irony that Butler no doubt appreciated, our first Pontifex, or bridge builders, were Sin and Death, “who built that stupendous Arch from Hell-gate to the Earth.” (Shuttleworth 149)

Christina, in turn, is the perfect consort to a man whose name, whatever its Germanic etymology, puns on the Greek for “God,” *θεός*; then again, we also learn that Theobald's ordination was a point of weakness against his father, which would make both the Germanic and the Greek ironic: not *bold* enough to decline his father's fortune, he had to accept God's poverty. It is not surprising that Ernest has more in common with his aunt and godmother Alethea, whose name suggests openness, with all of its critical implications: derived from the Greek *alethes* meaning “true,” *aletheia* or “truth” also means something which has not been “concealed” or “forgotten” (in the mythic Lethe). The youngest child of George Pontifex, born in 1805, Alethea is, in contradistinction to the severe Theobald, “exceedingly pretty and of a lively, affectionate disposition”; in fact, she is the only one in the family who showed affection toward her older brother (*The Way* 28-9) and toward Ernest (not counting Overton or the overly doting Christina).

Having explored the theoretical foundation of Butler's novel and having looked at some relevant texts which demonstrate Butler's engagement with the Vitalist/Mechanist debate (his appeal to Neo-Lamarckism to oppose Darwinian mechanistic evolution), we may now turn to the novel's most prominent theme of education or, more precisely, the detriment of forced education by rote, in order to consider what Butler thought about the state of Victorian upbringing and education at large.

The Way of All Flesh is, first and foremost, a novel about bad parenting.

Compulsory education is the result of such misguided strategies as those practiced by Theobald Pontifex. Theobald himself was thrashed by his father, since, "[a]t that time it was universally admitted that to spare the rod was to spoil the child" and that, unless young "wills were 'well broken' in childhood," they would not grow up to be obedient; the latter was sanctioned by Saint Paul himself, who "had placed disobedience to parents in very ugly family" (Butler, *The Way* 22). Although corporal punishment was not uncommon in Victorian schools, it was neither wholly celebrated nor wholly condemned. In his *Autobiography*, J. S. Mill admits that while he may now "rejoice in the decline of the old brutal and tyrannical system of teaching," at least it "did succeed in enforcing habits of application," whereas the new system produces individuals "incapable of doing anything which is disagreeable to them." Mill concludes, "I do not, then, believe that fear, as an element in education, can be dispensed with" (*Autobiography* 112).

Taking Overton to be Butler's mouthpiece, we see that Butler cannot disagree with J. S. Mill more. Bad parenting inspires in Overton an evolutionary fantasy that, like the SpheX wasp, we might be born provided for and thus without the need to deal with our parents (Butler, *The Way* 79). Clergymen, he claims, are unsuited for parenting:

“Before Ernest could well crawl he was taught to lisp the Lord’s prayer, and the general confession,” and any possible “ill weed which [might] grow apace” had to be “plucked out” through corporal punishment (*The Way* 88). Overton is highly critical of Theobald’s parenting and the education to which he subjects Ernest, as the result of which the boy grows up in fear, neither “healthy [n]or vigorous” (*The Way* 107). (Sadly, Ernest fares no better at school at Roughborough under the tutelage of Dr. Skinner who “was much too like his father,” although the two men differ in their politics [*The Way* 126-7].¹⁷) This parentless fantasy is, moreover, shared by Theobald as well as by Ernest: seeing children as a drain on the household economy, the one wishes they were “born into the world grown up”; the other is so fluent in the rhetoric of sinfulness and self-abasement underlying compulsory education that he himself, echoing his father, wishes he could skip childhood altogether and be born a fully formed adult: “All grown-up people are clever, except servants...Oh, why, why, why, could not people be born into the world as grown-up persons” (*The Way* 86-7, 125). This is by no means surprising given that no pleasure is allowed in learning, with a system of punishments rather than positive reinforcement driving the process, a point which only further exacerbates Ernest’s formed notion of himself as an unworthy, incapable being.

The combined impact of bad parenting and Church pressure stifles instincts and annihilates the proper sense of self. Theobald tried to explain to his father, as his son Ernest would also try to explain to him, that he had doubts about becoming ordained, but the fear of parental and religious authorities, as well as that of being cut off financially, prevailed in Theobald’s case (Butler, *The Way* 88). When Ernest finds himself in a

similar situation, however, he listens to his *daimonion* and not to his wallet, and it is the former, in Butler's opinion, that should ideally prevail.

By denouncing religion, Ernest manages to dissociate himself from his former "selves," from his father and, especially, his grandfather, whose greed and pretentiousness are epitomized in what is the most humorous scene in the novel, in which the water from Jordan, meant for the baptism of his eldest grandson, is accidentally spilled all over the floor of a wine cellar, sopped up with a sponge, and subsequently sent by his grandfather to Ernest's home with "his second best wine," all to provide a valid reason for old Mr. Pontifex to be named the child's godfather (*The Way* 75). The same man gives Ernest his name, trusting that it would leave "a permanent effect upon the boy's character"—much like the phial of Jordanian water (*The Way* 77). What enables Ernest to escape the generational doom into which he is born is neither the water nor his name; it is, rather, the combined effect of his aunt Alethea, who becomes his godmother "by her own special request," and Overton, his second godfather, and the second half, too, of a couple much more appropriate as parents for Ernest, if only because they are not in his direct hereditary line (*The Way* 76). Alethea, not Theobald or Christina, exerts the much needed "great influence" over his moral growth (seeing herself a better guide for him than his parents and hoping "to find in him a son rather than a nephew"), and takes his future financial stability into her own hands by willing her fortune to Ernest upon maturation. Overton takes over when she passes away.

Butler may be thinking here of James Mill's promotion of "pleasurable," not compulsory learning, and Spencer's emphasis on proper parental guidance. He does not offer a burlesque on Spencer's essay as does Meredith, but proposes his own Neo-

Lamarckian/Vitalist remedy. The opposite of compulsory education is, Butler suggests, one that is instinctive and designed to reflect a person's individual abilities. Such approach is meant to counteract forced, prescriptive learning that might stifle them. Advising that Ernest focus on his flesh rather than his spirit, his instinctual "self" is not condoning intellectual laziness, but is, rather, being "practical" in the sense that knowledge necessary for us to navigate the world is "practical," for only when felt as necessary does it become meaningful to the learner. "Never learn anything until you find you have been made uncomfortable for a good long while by not knowing it, the "dumb Ernest" insists; "when you find that you have occasion for this or that knowledge, or foresee that you will have occasion for it shortly, the sooner you learn it the better, but till then spend your time in growing bone and muscle." Ernest's instinct tells him to give up the study of Greek and Latin, which are "great humbug," "out of place" outside of their local culture, and could be pursued later in life (*The Way* 130-1). Ernest reasserts the value of non-compulsory education when he lets his own children, whom he was forced to leave with a farmer, choose not to learn to read or write (*The Way* 392).

The latter echoes one of John Ruskin's ideas on education according to aptitude. In "Modern Education," a short piece which first appeared as an appendix to his book on the moral aesthetic, *The Stones of Venice* (1853), Ruskin offers a scathing critique of the "European system of so-called education," claiming that the "great leading error of modern times" and one responsible for all others is "the mistaking erudition for education" (235, 238). As Sara E. Atwood discusses in her forthcoming book, *Ruskin's Educational Ideas*, the key principles of Ruskin's educational philosophy are aptitude and circumstance. That is why he challenges the common designation of one who "can write

Latin verses and construe a Greek chorus” as “educated,” and points out that such misguided thinking has produced so-called enlightened people who know little about the world they inhabit and still less about that which lies beyond that world, and who, finally, cannot function politically, since they are ignorant of “the science of the relations and duties of men to each other,” Ruskin’s definition of politics (Ruskin 236). Education is meant to help all individuals in the city, and hence all classes, to “be equally well educated” so as to achieve happiness. By focusing on the individual, he implicitly challenges class (and classicist) generalizations, allowing for as much, if not more, difference among the members of a single socioeconomic group as among distinct groups. Yet, for Ruskin, this does not mean that everyone ought to be *equally* “educated”: since “the material is as various as the ends,” and “not only one man is unlike another, but every man is essentially different from every other,” Ruskin argues, “no training, no forming, nor informing, will ever make two persons alike in thought or in power” (Ruskin 239). Butler seems largely in agreement with his appeal to nature so as to challenge societal convention: Ernest suffers from an aristocratic education which goes against “the way of [his] flesh,” and knows better not to interfere with his children, whose natural aptitude is best served by a healthy non-intellectual, agricultural setting.

Ruskin insists, moreover, that too much knowledge is as dangerous as too little, for “in the education either of lower or upper classes, it matters not the least how much or how little they know, provided they know just what will fit them to do their work, and to be happy in it” (Ruskin 239-40). Instead of blindly following the tenets of a classical education, which, along with theology, suppressed in the protagonist of Butler’s novel (as in Butler himself) all desire for learning, Ruskin proposes that we redefine education as

“stern, practical, irresistible, in moral habits, in bodily strength and beauty, in all faculties of mind capable of being developed under the circumstances of the individual, and especially in the technical knowledge of his own business; but yet, infinitely various in its effort” (241). Once we accept this, we will see that Greek prosody is not the most “profitable” or “practical”—words Ruskin employs in much the same way as Butler—for all classes of people, especially those who are called to pursue the study of concrete things and not abstract philosophy.

Ruskin introduces a vegetative simile to illustrate a principle which, as we see from reading both Meredith and Butler, is attuned to life’s diversity and thus intended to combat the rigid application of scripted pedagogical standards. He urges us to “giv[e] or withhold[d]” education in a way that best “fits” the given circumstances:

as a good husbandman waters his garden, giving the full shower only to the thirsty plants, and at times when they are thirsty; whereas at present we pour it upon the heads of our youth as the snow falls on the Alps, on one and another alike, till they can bear no more, and then take honour to ourselves because here and there a river descends from their crests into the valleys, not observing that we have made the loaded hills themselves barren for ever. (Ruskin 239-40)

Ruskin thus reiterates that too much can be just as detrimental as too little, and the language of fertility he evokes through the use of the adjective “barren” reinforces his belief that education should bring out one’s natural or biological productivity.

It is, indeed, due to the influence of his instinctive “self,” not the compulsory education and ordination which Ernest dreaded, that he becomes, by the end of Butler’s

novel, a confident writer immune to critical responses or commercial ambitions. This instinctual self is evasive at first, and he must be reinforced and encouraged through proper cultivation. His instincts begin to challenge Ernest's sense of personal "depravity" ("the more he disliked a thing the greater the presumption that it was right"), as well as his blind acceptance of ideas simply on external "authority," such as that of his father, then of Pryer, Reverend Gideon Hawke, and even, to some degree, Mrs. Jupp, his lying but otherwise harmless caricature of a landlady. We recall that Ernest's naïveté, coupled with a stubborn commitment to questionable principles, led to regrettable mistakes, such as his marrying the Pontifex's former servant Ellen, an act, we are told, no different from "the mistake of wedding himself to the Church" (Butler, *The Way* 335). In addition to being, for whatever reason, a "slow grower," Ernest was a victim of his education up until the age of twenty-four, which "had been an attempt, not so much to keep him in blinkers," Overton notes, "as to gouge his eyes out altogether" (*The Way* 268). The Oedipal allusion may be a clue to Ernest's liberation: he must figuratively kill his father by undoing what he had instilled, but part of this "gouging" involves realizing that he shares his identity with his father far too much. It is only after he spends two months in an infirmary with brain fever, the locus of the illness indubitably carrying symbolic weight, that Ernest is able to think more clearly and reject his father's profession resolving "to be a clergyman no longer" (*The Way* 279), a decision which sets him on a truer, though by no means direct, path to independence.

Another way in which Butler urges Ernest (as well as his readers) to resist dogma, a stumbling block for learning, is by challenging the authority of reason. Trusting his instincts requires that Ernest distrust his other "conscious self," and in such preference

for the instinctual as against the rational, Butler is most demonstrably attuned to the Vitalist tradition. Instinct is “more reasonable than...reason,” he asserts (*The Way* 129). When it comes to the question of existence, for example, the instinctual common sense, or what Butler calls “the court of mother-wit,” confirms that we exist, and does so “promptly,” whereas reason “after some wrangling” concludes that “the matter is very doubtful” (“Common Sense, Reason and Faith” in *Note-Books* 328). Consequently, his “true” instinctual “self” can help Ernest catch lies, with which he might otherwise be manipulated, as well as oppose the “priggishness” of the “rational” self, “the self of which [he is] conscious, [his] reasoning and reflecting self” who is “a prig begotten of prigs and trained in priggishness,” and hence will most certainly mislead him. “I will not allow [the rational self] to shape your actions,” the “true self” warns Ernest, “though it will doubtless shape your words for many a year to come,” since mental habits are more difficult to change than physical ones. Moreover, the “true self” takes over the role of the parent and can guide the young man’s action. It allows Butler to solve Spencer’s problem of balancing parental control and education by trial and error, encouraging, due to a “change in conditions,” the now independent individual to acquire new habits:

Your papa is not here to beat you now; this is a change in the conditions of your existence, and should be followed by changed actions. Obey me, your true self, and things will go tolerably well with you, but only listen to that outward and visible old husk of yours which is called your father, and I will rend you in pieces even unto the third and fourth generation as one who has hated God; for I, Ernest, am the God who made you. (*The Way* 130-1)

Along with the authority of reason, the instinctual “self” is opposed to language. It speaks in an idiom “too swift and sure to be translated into such debatable things as words” (hence, it is also referred to as “dumb”), language, from a Vitalist standpoint, having the potential to solidify and make rigid what is meant to be fluid or ineffable. When used as a rhetorical tool (given its connection to reason, which can be used to justify even absurd claims), language takes us farther from the truth.

Here, again, we might turn to Butler’s *Erewhon* for clarification. The Erewhonian language of “hypothetics” is the foundation of their system of education; although the narrator claims the word is untranslatable because the custom is unfamiliar, it appears to be a distortion of a familiar rhetorical practice; and although presented as being absurd, it exposes what to Butler is far more treacherous: accepting “the nature of things” as it is. The latter would serve poorly in preparing the youth “for the daily conduct of affairs” as citizens, because they would only have “a narrow and shallow conception of the universe”; “hypothetics,” on the other hand, is meant to “open [their] eyes to these possibilities, and so to prepare [them] for all sorts of emergencies...[by] imagin[ing] a set of utterly strange and impossible contingencies, and requir[ing] the youths to give intelligent answers to the questions that arise therefrom.” This practice is, accordingly, “reckoned the fittest conceivable way of preparing them for the actual conduct of their affairs in after life.” “Life,” Butler’s Erewhonians maintain, “would be intolerable if men were to be guided in all they did by reason and reason only” (*Erewhon* 175-7). And by “reason” Butler often means logic, a distinction he does not clearly draw (*Erewhon* 181; n10). His explanation for being suspicious of reason, and the logical necessity with which it allows us to justify contradictory premises, comes out of Hume and Kant; it is

also suited to the Vitalist critique, according to which, as we saw in Bergson, by relying on language, which “draw[s] hard and fast lines,” reason produces too narrow a snapshot of the complex universe which does not consist merely of extremes but also of greyer shades and middles (*Erewhon* 177). The author of *Erewhon* ultimately condemns reason, claiming that “there are no follies and no unreasonablenesses so great as those which can apparently be irrefragably defended by reason itself. There is hardly an error into which men might not easily be led if they based their conduct upon reason only” (177).

In *The Way of All Flesh* Butler suggests that thinking politically and living ethically requires the shedding of current patterns of reflection, couched in reason and tending toward dogmatic “uncompromisingness” (*The Way* 300). His portrayal of Alethea is a clear example of this. Alethea is a “free thinker” in religion, fundamentally opposed to dogma of any kind, religious or irreligious (*The Way* 147, 134). It is she, an embodiment of natural instincts, who brings out the best in Ernest by encouraging him to pursue the two activities which bring him pleasure, unlike his other studies at Roughborough: combining carpentry and music, as his great-grandfather, Ernest builds an organ and indulges in the beauty of Handel, an activity which “[h]is inner self never told him...was humbug, as it did about Latin and Greek” (*The Way* 141). Pursuing carpentry or mending clothes is an example of “kissing the soil,” the advice Alethea gives to her nephew (*The Way* 292). It is meant to remind him that matters of spirit alone cannot bring happiness if one is not grounded firmly in the real. In fact, the Earth is metonymically present from the very start, since to go “the way of all flesh” is also, of course, an idiomatic misquotation of the opening phrase in David’s last instructions to Solomon given as the former is about “to go the way of all the earth,” that is, to die (I

Kings 2:2/*The New Oxford Annotated Bible* 491). Not some distant afterlife but life in the here and the now, Butler suggests, should be our anchor. Additionally, when, following his financial and marital failures, Ernest finally inherits his aunt's money, he is diagnosed with "nervous prostration, the result of long and severe suffering," and the remedy for this is called "crossing": "Shake him out of himself by shaking something else into him," the doctor advises Overton; "to prevent monotony"—or, as Meredith would say, to battle "the malady of sameness, our modern malady"—and to reintroduce life, Ernest must be exposed to new experiences (*The Way* 352-4). Not surprising given the novel's evolutionary subtext and Butler's admiration for the zoologist Lamarck, the Zoological Gardens are suggested as one such experience.

"[K]issing the soil" is an unambiguously Vitalist metaphor, and it could also be traced back to Ruskin's essay on education. The main objective of "modern education," according to Ruskin, is to prepare individuals to cohabitate in the world conscientiously and responsibly with others, and this requires the knowledge of three "great branches of human knowledge," which the educational system of his time "ignores, or despises": Natural History, Religion, and Politics (Ruskin 234-5).¹⁸ Echoing Schelling's point about our strong "noble impulse to investigate nature" which motivates not only poetry but also "the lowly activity of empirical observation" (*Philosophy* §42; 66; see Chapter 2), Ruskin criticizes the minimal exposure that students have to geology: "unless a man's natural instincts urge him to the pursuit of the physical sciences too strongly to be resisted, he enters into life utterly ignorant of them," and this he calls an "evil," because it takes those with an aptitude for the study of nature into the domain of letters, for which they may not be "fit": "For one man who is fitted for the study of words, fifty are fitted for the study of

things, and were intended to have a perpetual, simple and religious delight in watching the processes, or admiring the creatures, of the natural universe” (Ruskin 235).

It is the more down-to-earth “physical” activities that eventually reignite Ernest’s “literary instinct.” After he sells his college books at the shop which he set up with his unfortunate wife Ellen, and even burns his sermons, he also starts reworking “some of [his] little pieces” (Butler, *The Way* 325). A born writer, he keeps a sketchbook in his pocket; and although, much to Overton’s dismay, he continues to write on metaphysics (e.g. Bishop Berkeley) and still seems to be largely unfamiliar with “a common-sense view of things” (mental habits being harder to break than physical ones), Ernest at least realizes that there is no “incontrovertible first premise” (*The Way* 329-31). Literature proves to be, in fact, Ernest’s “natural development,” even though—or all the more so, since—it has meager success and is, in a word, “unmarketable,” free of the external pressures or vested interests of Spencerian commercialism (*The Way* 362). Ernest’s lack of commercial success, coupled with his refusal to succumb to the public’s interests, reinforces the importance of independent thinking—even at the expense of alienating his parents and making literary enemies. Like Butler’s own books, which “had been all of them practically still-born” (as Butler notes in the 1901 Preface to the Rev. Ed. of *Erewhon*, employing the famous Humean phrase), Ernest’s publications are too sour to indulge his readers, and yet he feels compelled to write them, nor is dissuaded by his instinctual “inner self” from doing so. On the last page of the novel, we find out that Ernest writes “for the next generation rather than his own,” and to the publisher’s accusation that this approach cannot be “more impracticable and imprudent,” he replies,

“Wait”—as Butler reminds us that natural instincts, conceived on a broad evolutionary scale, must prevail over more immediate financial interests, whatever the cost.

On the whole, Ernest’s education is meant to help him become politically aware by bringing out his true potential and natural aptitude. Butler shares this interest with other Victorian thinkers, like Ruskin, for whom the moral and political are interrelated. Thinking politically and living with other people in a society requires the ability to engage in critical debate, and that is the most damning argument against learning by rote or “cramming,” as J. S. Mill puts it, as well as relying on traditional curricula in the face of evidence which testifies to their “impracticality”—either in terms of Spencerian commercial profit or those of a Butlerian “common-sense view of things,” which is closer to the goals of Vitalism.

Based on the foregoing discussion, the accusation that Vitalist thinkers are largely conservative—by John Herman Randall, Jr., notably—seems hardly justified. In *Philosophy After Darwin* (1977), Randall judges those thinkers who reacted against the mechanistic and materialist view of the universe—those like Bergson and Croce whom he calls collectively “the Idealists”—rather harshly for trying to find a moral foundation outside of science: “demanding a cosmic and universal sanction” and “insisting that the whole possibility of the Good Life depended on finding human standards enshrined in the heart of the world process.” Rather than appeal to the scientific method, these thinkers, Randall insists, fell back on older traditions: “Idealism was a ‘theistic’ interpretation of the world, that gave man and man’s interests, the values man cares for, a cosmic significance” (6). Far from promulgating a detached Idealist doctrine, both Butler and Meredith accept science, just not materialist science; they remind us that we need to trust

our basic instincts and “kiss the earth,” but this earth must not be construed in purely empiricist terms because, as such, it would provide little guidance for “the Good Life” other than yielding to the blind survival of the fittest. What is more, although short of suggesting a “vision,” both authors would not see themselves as somehow backward-looking or conservative despite their critique of advances in empiricist science with which they disagreed on moral grounds. While neither of them may be proposing an alternative, both represent in their fiction models of bad parenting that unambiguously call for a reevaluation of the systems that produced them.

* * *

Although Shaw would charge, in 1921, that neither Britain’s rulers nor her ruled “know that there is such a branch of knowledge as political science,” politics did appear in many educational writings over the course of the nineteenth century. Of the different types of education cited by James Mill, the political is the most important. Mill explains that “the strength of the whole depends on it”: “the political machine” ensures that through “great and virtuous conduct,” as well as the desirable qualities of “great intelligence, perfect self-command, and over-ruling benevolence,” “the grand objects of desire may be attained.” The best context for this, he implies, is meritocracy, where one is rewarded for conduct and talent, rather than based on subservience of someone else’s will, for in the latter case, politics becomes entangled with “intrigue, flattery, back-biting, [and] treachery” (James Mill, *Education* 72-3).

Self-command is a concern for Spencer, whereas the moral (and civic) dimension is one of the objectives Ruskin discusses in “Modern Education.” We recall that, in tension with his insistence on providing guidance, Spencer asks that children be left “to

the discipline of experience,” though short of a complete *laissez-faire* approach; the same applies to his view of society at large. Spencer offers an analogy between individual education to promote self-governance and that of the populace. “With family governments as with political ones, a harsh despotism itself generates a great part of the crimes it has to repress,” he observes, implying that, just as with parental involvement, the government’s role ought to be limited: to promote more democratic, individualist values, and to move away from the “absolutism” of “parental government” toward “self-government” (Spencer 204-13). Spencer calls this kind of education and “form of domestic government”—“comparatively liberal,” and adds, quoting Richter, that “The best rule in politics is said to be ‘*pas trop gouverner*,’ that is, not to govern too much (Spencer 210; original emphasis).

According to Ruskin, whom Shaw mentions just a few paragraphs after his provocative question in the Preface to *Methuselah*, “the nation’s moral health” had to be “restore[d]...through proper education,” and this required a responsible, ethical treatment of nature without which a child would not develop the necessary defenses against the industrialized world (O’Gorman 37, 46). Michael Saddler (1861-1943), one of Ruskin’s followers,¹⁹ a contemporary of Shaw, and a prominent educationalist himself, argued that the “moral” dimension of education, which Ruskin saw as having been largely neglected by his contemporaries, was important as training for citizenship: “All the current educational theories,” Saddler wrote in 1906, “lay stress upon the social aspects of education; upon the importance of making the schools prepare children for citizenship,” a point which he traced back to Ruskin’s educational philosophy (O’Gorman 50).

Like Shaw and Spencer, Ruskin found modern European education deficient in its disregard for politics, the understanding of all sorts of relations between individuals and society, as well as the principles behind important institutions of the law, labor, and commerce—“all this being coupled with practical knowledge of the present state and wants of mankind” which would prepare one to transition “straight out of college into Parliament” (Ruskin 237). Taking education in its etymological sense, as leading or bringing out (from the Latin *ex- plus ducere*), Ruskin defines “true education” quite simply as “leading human souls to what is best, and making what is best out of them”; in a manner that recalls Socrates’ discussion of specialization and the resultant inequality among social classes necessary to maintain justice in the ideal city, Ruskin goes on to identify the attainment of individual happiness with the training that makes one “most serviceable to others”—a training that requires that the “ends” be attuned “as wisely” as possible to the “material” at hand (Plato, *Republic* 427d-434d; Ruskin 238). Though he expects that students learn basic facts, Ruskin does not want that to be the end-all of education, as is suggested in the opening to Dickens’ *Hard Times*, serialized a year after his article had been published. Rather, he puts more emphasis on developing their moral and ethical sense, aiming at “the assimilation of knowledge with values” (O’Gorman 46).

Butler defines politics in comparable terms. Bringing the subject from the broader moral sphere down to the physical level of science, he describes the atom as facing “a conflict of duties,” the same “puzzle” as humans: “our duty towards ourselves, and our duty as members of a body politic” and the atom’s actions, as ours, will reflect which duty has the upper hand at any given moment (Butler, *Note-Books* 84). How to regulate this duty, however, is not clear. We find another reference to politics on the

final page of *The Way of All Flesh*, where the narrator describes the mature Ernest's political views. "In politics he is a Conservative so far as his vote and interest are concerned. In all other respects he is an advanced Radical" (*The Way* 410). Butler described himself in the same terms, Shuttleworth points out, and she identifies this as one of the tensions in the text: "iconoclastic in its form and attack on the institutions of family and religion, its satire resists the pressures for a socially transformative vision." Ernest's school friend Towneley, whom he admires and of whom even Overton approves, is "[t]he closest we come to a figure of the ideal"; but, ultimately, the weight of Ernest's inheritance seems too heavy for any positive change to be effected (Shuttleworth 161).

When interpreting Butler's epigraph to his other novel, which is the opening sentence of Aristotle's *Politics* (1.1), Peter-Hans Breuer comes to a similarly pessimistic conclusion: "In this context [the Aristotelian reference] underlines the extreme limitation of man's ability to choose correctly, for his choice is determined by inherited faculties, the use he has made of them, and the circumstances in which he finds himself, illustrating again man's moral intention can have little influence of the outcome of a choice" (Breuer 325-6). Butler quotes Aristotle in Greek on the title page and follows with a "paraphrase": "There is no action save upon a balance of considerations" (*Erewhon* 39).²⁰ The importance of forming a moral outlook to the maintenance of a civic community is one of *Erewhon*'s leading ideas, and although written in and informed by his experience of New Zealand, it is clearly intended to reflect the problems Butler identified in his native England. Although he thus evokes the deliberative and active capacities of individuals, stressing that political thinking is not only a prerequisite of informed action but also a necessary component of civic life, in the narrative of *Erewhon*, he suggests that

such ideal deliberation is not so easily attainable. Then again, based on Butler's other writings and his science, Breuer's reading seems too deterministic and hardly suits Butler who, following Lamarck, acknowledges the influence of heredity and circumstances, but does not promote complete surrendering to the uncontrollable and godless universe.

Looking again at Butler's paraphrase of Aristotle, we may infer that it is neither reason nor "hypothetics" alone, but the balance of the two that has the potential to produce true knowledge. When checked by "Unreason," Butler implies, reason could still be useful to us, but our instinct and common sense must help us determine that. Common sense judges on a balance of considerations and not the chain of evasion and hypocrisy which, without the guidance of instinct, might confuse someone whose thinking capacities have not been fully formed as those of the higher class of Erewhonians (the well-educated High Ydgrunites)²¹ (Butler, Introduction, *Erewhon* 28-9). Developing this sense is, to be sure, one of the goals behind Ernest's education.

Part of this sense, as we infer from reading Meredith and Butler in the context of nineteenth-century educational debates, involves adjusting theory to the demands of real life. The disconnect between theory and practice, a problem for Mill and Spencer, is responsible for the irony undermining Sir Austin's "Scrip"; it is meant by Meredith to expose the inadequacy of Victorian parenting: hence, Richard's tragic inability to forgive himself for his misguided action, valuing the System over and above reality. We see this in J. S. Mill's inability to experience pleasure due to his father's privileging of cold rationality, a failure of theory to translate into life, and also, in Ernest's failure to adjust to the demands of the real world for which his schooling had not prepared him, having suppressed, albeit not irreversibly, his capacity to read people and think for himself.

Finally, “a balance of considerations” which Butler adapts from Aristotle highlights the broader need for balance. Although “introduc[ed] to our o’er-hairy ancestry”—the sole achievement of science according to Meredith—humans do not have to act like them, but neither can they deny their instincts and connection to nature. It was important to know, for the Victorian educationalist and parent, that humans not only had an evolutionarily molded body and brain, but also, depending on secular or sacred terminology, a mind, a consciousness, or a soul; without a spiritual component, there could be no moral foundation for behavior, and although tailless, humans would be no better than apes. Then again, without an animal or physical component, they risked turning into cold analytical robots, as did Richard Feverel and Mill. Although coming at this from a different angle, in his essay on “Physical Education,” Spencer promotes both physical and mental growth, and reminds us that since “the physical underlies the mental, the mental must not be developed at the expense of the physical” (282). A balanced human being, accordingly, would have to be part animal and part divine, simultaneously ruled by forces of nature beyond his or her control while, at the same time, capable of willfully, if imperfectly, controlling those forces. Proper Education and parenting could achieve that, but that would require a fundamental rethinking of what “science” is and a redefinition of what is “practical” in non-mechanistic, non-utilitarian terms. Neither Butler nor Meredith tells us how to get there, but they do point us in the right direction: Meredith—by showing which way *not* to go, Butler—by urging us to “kiss the earth.”

* * *

It should be clear from the foregoing discussion of political thinking as a prerequisite for moral living why the *payment by results* system was so misguided.

Vitalist thinkers would oppose it on philosophical grounds because it was both utilitarian and empiricist, with teaching strategies adjusted, through trial and error, to maximize the results. Then again, even Spencer would oppose the kind of uncritical memorization—that is to say, “cramming”—it promoted. This system, which existed in English and Welsh elementary schools from 1862 until 1897, gives us a sense of the prevailing attitude to education informed by deadly determinism.

The principle behind this restrictive method of accountability was largely commercial: each school’s governmental grant depended on the pupils’ performance on the annual examination conducted by Her Majesty’s Inspectors. Brendan A. Rapple presented this as a valuable counter-model in 1994, but it is just as relevant today, and may be seen, in fact, as anticipating the recent Obama Administration incentive for public education, as well as the “cash for grades” practice initiated several years ago,²² with the standardized testing conducted by the Board of Education replacing the nineteenth-century network of Her Majesty’s Inspectors of Elementary Schools. To be sure, the problems resulting from and the debate surrounding the earlier policy remain useful for our current pedagogical concerns.

According to the Annual Reports on the system’s progress during the period from 1867 to 1880, many teachers relied on “mechanical” repetition, filling their pupils’ minds with factual information meant to be reproduced on exams, thus privileging exposition from memory over critical thinking. In a report from 1876-1877, it is stated:

Reading lessons were given without a word of explanation, without a question to test how far the children had understood what they had been reading; spelling was taught mechanically, with as little reference as

possible to the meaning of the words as affected by their form; arithmetic was not made interesting by the application of its principles to practical cases, but was dinned into the ears of the scholars in the same unvarying abstract form. Of geography, or grammar, or history I am persuaded that in the majority of schools not one word was spoken from year's end to year's end. (Rice-Eiggin, qtd. in Rapple, no pag.).

The same sentiment informs earlier reports, which comment on the pupils' "performing certain exercises with parrot-like facility" (*Annual Reports 1870-71*), and developing, in a manner which might make us think of the Sophists in classical Greece, "a mechanical readiness of utterance" without a corresponding understanding of any of the material they had just read (*Annual Reports 1867-68*). Due to the demands of the *payment by results* system as well as the shortage of funding to teach a broader curriculum beyond the classic three Rs (Reading, Writing, Arithmetic/Reckoning), especially upon the implementation of Robert Lowe's Revised Code of 1862, more advanced subjects, such as grammar, geography, or history, were either abandoned altogether or "set aside for the two or three months prior to the inspector's visit, in order that full time might be devoted to the examinable subjects." One inspector concluded in 1866, "It may be that the reading, writing, and ciphering in such schools are better, on the whole, than they used to be"; still, he was "persuaded that this gain, if gain there be, is more than balanced by the loss in another direction": the kind of critical thinking and practical application that the higher subjects promoted (Bowstead, *Annual Reports 1866-67*, qtd. in Rapple, no pag.).

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, Arnold, himself an inspector, criticized the system, pressing for the expansion of student learning and better training for

teachers, as well as challenging the damaging economic preoccupation by which success in education was correlated with financial gain. Arnold urged his British contemporaries to look to the Continent for more suitable models. Although, reporting on his trip to France in 1859, he described the French system's inferiority due to fewer "pupil-teachers" and hence larger classes and less effective instruction than in Britain, his findings following the Revised Code of 1863 show far more dissatisfaction with the public-school system at home: the new inspectors' roles were limited; they were now required not to "go beyond the three [Rs]," and thus neglect "grammar, geography, and history," for which entries "have altogether disappeared from the forms of report." Such measures, he concludes, were "inefficient" as "a stimulus to the intellectual life of the school," the latter, moreover, not being the "aim and object of the new system of examination" (Arnold 77-8, 93). Four years later, after another trip to the Continent, Arnold finds in English schools a "lack of intelligence much more striking now than...in 1859," with the special subjects—"by which, in general, instruction first gets hold of a child's mind and becomes stimulating and interesting to him"—largely "fallen into disuse and neglect." He attributes this change to *payment by results*, reduced government aid, which diminished the number of assistant teachers, and generally, to "a more mechanical method of instruction" (Arnold 103, 108, 114).

It is significant that Arnold criticizes the new education policy using the language of mechanism versus freedom and, more precisely, contrasting "mechanical" education ("the mechanical mode of examination the Revised Code has introduced"; "the character of an intricate and mechanical routine") with the liveliness of "free play": "More free play for the Inspector, and more free play, in consequence, for the teacher, is what is

wanted,” he reports, adding that the new testing leaves education “as formal and lifeless as the old one.” Arnold worries that learning by rote, the purely “mechanical” and thus “lifeless” approach that yielded the highest commercial results, would prevail, and at the high price of neglecting the very lifeblood of education: intelligence and creativity. “In the game of mechanical contrivances the teachers will in the end beat us,” he admits: “by ingenious preparation,” they will enable their students to pass the examinations “without their really knowing how to read, write, or cipher” (Arnold 115-6).

Although one could argue that Arnold is not thinking specifically of the Vitalist/Mechanist debate, his reports on the state of public education highlight an issue analogous to that dominating the debate in the life sciences, explaining the preponderance of the language of “mechanism” in various discourses. *Payment by results* presupposes a rigid causal mechanism aimed at attaining specific ends, a utilitarian logic driven by commercial interests. In their discussion of life, the Mechanists treat the outline, but not necessarily the substance of life, seeing living beings in terms of causality alone; this is similar to how (based on the inspector’s annual reports) in their pursuit of better results, late-Victorian public-school teachers appeared to have treated knowledge as a sequence of questions and answers, neglecting to dig more deeply, to consider the philosophical foundations of knowledge, or to interrogate its status. That the *payment by results* system was a step backward should be evident from the critique cited above. Vitalist authors like Meredith and Butler, who were conversant with the century’s educational theorists, would have opposed it on philosophical grounds, seeing “cramming” and factology as but one symptom of a far larger problem: the intrusion of science into the domain of life.

* * *

By way of an epilogue to this chapter, let us return to *The Mighty Atom*. Corelli cannot be called a Vitalist author; she does not shy away from promulgating dogma, particularly of the religious kind; and yet her bestselling novel, albeit at times too heavy-handed, offers a brilliant critique of materialist and positivist principles applied to education, thus not only echoing but distilling many of the ideas discussed earlier.

We recall from the dedicatory note discussed in the Introduction that, for Corelli, bad education means education without religion, and she charges its practitioners with nothing short of “child murder.” Across Europe, Tolstoy shared the same idea; in fact, the writer found the debates concerning what should be the basis of education *in lieu of* religion “foundationless” and “lacking in content.” These debates among the proponents of classical education, those of the physical sciences, or those who prefer practical skills, or even those who, having lost faith, still vote in favor of religion—are all meant “to fill up the stomach of a hungry animal”; however, “neither classicism which works just fine as a spice added to food; nor realism, which is quite useful as a plate or bowl to serve it; nor religion without faith, which consists of little more than leftovers of formerly wholesome food—can give the hungry animal its proper nourishment” (Tolstoy, *Polnoye* 17 353-6; my trans.).²³ Corelli dramatizes the effects of education without religion by showing the “solitary little student” Lionel Valliscourt turning prematurely old; as he sits behind his desk in the novel’s opening scene, he hardly resembles “a child barely eleven years of age”:

there was an almost appalling expression of premature wisdom on his pale wistful features;—the ‘thinking furrow’ already marked his forehead,—and what should still have been the babyish upper curve of his sensitive

little mouth, was almost though not quite obliterated by a severe line of constantly practised self-restraint. (Corelli 8-9).

Like J. S. Mill, Lionel experiences no delight in his studies, and only outside of the confines of the school-room and his lessons does he feel free—the latter being associated, in the novel, with health, the former with illness. It is only “the respite from study” that enables “his physical nature to breathe and expand,” and “a sense of the actual pleasure of life when lived healthily, [rouses] his exhausted faculties to new and delightful vigour” (Corelli 104-5). In fact, the “sad little furrow on his forehead, so indicative of painful thought and study,” disappears when Lionel goes outside, becoming “scarcely perceptible” and making him look “as nature meant all boys to look, bright and happy-hearted” (Corelli 18). According to Corelli, “truancy,” not study, produces heroes and reformers. Juxtaposing a life of action and daring with that stifled by the passive study of dead languages, the narrator asserts: “The young truant whom Mother Nature coaxes out into the woods and fields when he should be at his books...is probably the very destined man who, in time of battle, will prove himself a hero of the first rank”; the “truant” who “planted solitary in an unexplored country, will become one of the leading pioneers of modern progress and discovery” (Corelli 148-9). Despite what her damning reference to “those self-styled ‘progressivists’” suggests in the dedicatory note, Corelli makes it clear in this instance that she is not opposed to “modern progress,” in principle—only to positivist progress driven by science at the expense of human life.

Mr. Valliscourt, Lionel’s father, is the principal culprit: he believes that “[s]tarvation and solitude” are the proper disciplinary measures for a good education, “the mortification of appetite” being the alternative to corporal punishment and, in his

view, “the more natural means of discipline,” as well as “the best modes of procedure for the coercion of a refractory and obstinate nature” (Corelli 127). (The doctor’s advice reverses each premise: he prescribes for the ailing Lionel “[p]lenty of fresh air, nourishing food, and rest” [Corelli 234].) Contrary to Spencer and other nineteenth-century educationalists who opposed bookish learning in favor of “practical” activities, Mr. Valliscourt was in favor of books, the knowledge derived from them being “necessary to life” (Corelli 127, 129). Professor Cadman-Gore, whom Valliscourt hires to replace Montrose (the latter, in turn, having replaced “a Mr. Skeet” who was “a Positivist”), seems, at first, no better than his employer: he values discipline and is “an advocate of ‘cramming’”; he is presented as rigid and coolly rational throughout the narrative and identified primarily by his dedication to “the severe training and discipline of boys”; but he also opposes “parrot-like repetition merely” and expects his students to develop “absolute and distinct comprehension” (Corelli 149, 152, 155, 257-8). Although a seemingly trivial detail, this gives us an early glimpse at Cadman-Gore’s eventual transformation, as he becomes, in fact, more flexible than Lionel’s father and even grows to love the boy. We recall that J. S. Mill protested against turning pupils into “mere parroters of what they have learnt,” because, he insisted, they were “incapable of using their minds except in the furrows traced for them” (*Autobiography* 96). Lionel’s “furrow” is as deep as the knowledge “crammed” into him. The preponderance of these terms, likely reflective of Mill’s direct influence on Corelli or, more generally, of the language used in the pedagogy debates, indicates how profound a concern such uncritical memorization and factology were for the entire century.

Corelli is clearly an opponent of “cramming,” and stresses this point repeatedly, highlighting its dangers for a person’s character and body. “Over-study is fatal to originality of character; and both clearness of brain and strength of physique are denied to the victims of ‘cram’” (Corelli 149). In evaluating his own education, the shrewd Lionel says, “I am not clever. I am only crammed,” and he pronounces this “with an accent of such bitterness as might have befitted a cynic of many years’ worldly experience” (Corelli 43). He later admits to Jessamine’s father, the old sexton Reuben Dale, that he is “tired of books!—and [loves] to be out in fresh air” (Corelli 93). The fact that this eleven-year-old boy hangs himself in his school-room is a further indictment of his stifling education. As he writes his suicide notes, he is described as having “worked so many weary hours and days, pondering on things that never would, and never could be of any use to any one’s practical after-life”—proving his studies not only impractical but entirely useless (Corelli 294). “This is often the fate of brilliant and intelligent children,” the narrator explains in a scene where Lionel meets his new tutor; “the more quickly they learn, the more cruelly they are ‘crammed,’ till both heart and brain give way under the unnatural effort and forced impetus, and disaster follows disaster, ending in the wreck of the whole intellectual and physical organisation” (Corelli 148). At the end of the novel, and after recognizing Mr. Valliscourt’s utterly alarming indifference toward his son’s death, Cadman-Gore threatens to relate to the newspapers “the whole story of this distinctly murdered boy,—murdered by over-cramming” (Corelli 325). At Lionel’s funeral, finally, “the old scholar” finds it more tactful not to disclose his opinion that what wrecked the boy’s life was “the nature of the education...namely, scientific positivism, and lack of all religious training” (Corelli 331). Corelli is not at all subtle

here, and having established Cadman-Gore as both an intellectual luminary and a man capable of sympathy, she means her readers to take his accusation seriously.

But, just as Meredith and Butler, she does suggest an alternative: the language of “instinct,” rather than “cramming” or “parrot-like” mimicry, prevails once Lionel steps out of his school-room and the “system” for which it stands. Walking through a cemetery full of birds and headstones grown with green ferns and moss, a setting where humans have morphed with nature, having gone *the way of all the earth*, he is described as “[h]ushing his little footsteps instinctively.” Among the graveyard’s “forgotten dead,” he meets a grave-digger (Reuben Dale) in “a pit of earth, which the boy’s instinct told him was a grave” (Corelli 56-8). His “instinct” is immediately undermined, however, by the youth’s inculcated rationalism: when the grave-digger brings up the notion of an afterlife, Lionel is only too quick to dismiss it as “nonsense”: “Now it surely *is* nonsense, isn’t it, to think you can come to life again after you are eaten by the worms?”—Lionel asks rhetorically revealing his foundation in empirical science (Corelli 60-2; original emphasis). More akin to Meredith than to Butler, Corelli introduces the remedy only to indicate that the poison has progressed too far to be counteracted by it.

This language of “instinct,” and the natural territory it carves out, is coupled with that of the Bible, the latter meant to reframe nature in religious terms, rather than those of scientific Positivism. When he meets Jessamine, the sheltered youth “quite los[es] his head,” and remembers only “the natural facts that he was a little boy, and she was a little girl”; Lionel’s entrance into the natural world is commemorated symbolically by the young couple’s exchange of a red apple, which he proceeds to feed to her (Corelli 71). The edenic allusions are confirmed by the detail that the apples were “lately plucked from

the tree.” The girl’s role in helping him develop his natural instincts is further highlighted by her floral name, “Jessamine,” the flower also mentioned in the suggestively biblical phrasing found in the novel’s opening chapter. That this naming is significant is confirmed by her question whether “Lionel,” too, is a floral name (“Wot’s Li’nel? Tain’t a flower?”). Lionel’s nickname turns out to be “Lylie,” and it is his mother, whose spirit he inherits, that calls him by this name, thus also evoking the traditional attribute of Mary, the symbol of purity (Corelli 72, 79). But neither the divine nor the natural is available to Lionel, because, we are led to conclude, his mother’s spirit, as his mother herself, can no longer oppose the force of paternal discipline. Floral imagery connects the girl, moreover, not only to Lylie but also to the boy’s tutor, Montrose, thanks to whom he starts to question his father’s positivism. And although Lionel initially cannot help dismissing Jessamine’s faith as “semi-barbarian” or being skeptical of Montrose’s, he learns to love her notwithstanding (Corelli 74-5).

As in the case of Meredith’s Richard, the cold rationalism of the educational system devised by Lionel’s father is challenged and finally crushed by women: the little farm girl Jessamine, who introduces Lionel to God as well as to simple pleasures,²⁴ and his mother, whose departure leads to the boy’s illness and, though indirectly, his suicide; he hangs himself with the baby sash his mother had left as a keepsake after learning of the little girl’s death. One may see such characterization as essentialist on Corelli’s part, casting women as agents of Nature who come to remind men of having abandoned their roots and punishing them by demanding that they, quite literally, return to the earth whence they had mythically sprung. This is, indubitably, an indictment, and a

problematic one, but it is not one of women. Lionel's suicide is Corelli's way of telling us that the Valliscourt system itself must be destroyed.

Corelli communicates the latter point imagistically by appealing to "splendor," the attribute of light normally ascribed to God whose conspicuous absence from Lionel's education and life in general leaves him very little choice other than suicide, given the novel's logic and didactic mode. More specifically, we find several references to Richard Cœur de Lion, Lionel's ironic namesake, whose "perpetual oath 'Par le Splendeur de Dieu!'" the boy ridicules, describing the king himself as "a very dense...brave dunce" (Corelli 201-2). Lionel also compares himself to the unfortunate Psyche, whose story the narrator evokes more than once: like Psyche who "didn't know" and "wanted to find out,...we light our little lamps, and begin to try and discover things," only to see our Eros, whether it be the Mighty Atom or God, vanish forever (255). A bit later, Lionel has to admit that we are worse off than she is: while Psyche at least "feels her lover; and though the darkness of earth's perplexities stretches out yearning hands to grasp the actual Divine which Is," our human "lamps of learning, ill-trimmed and dull, cannot shed light on such Eternal Splendour" (Corelli 301). In his final letter to his tutor, Lionel brings up the story of Psyche yet again, explaining that he "got it into [his] head that if [he] put[s] out [his] lamp altogether [he] shall see much better," for "God must be far too splendid to need any lamps to look at Him" (Corelli 321).

Through the repetition of "Splendeur"/"Splendour"/"splendid" Corelli connects the legendary King Richard with the mythic Psyche, but only to show that neither is available to Lionel. The young boy cannot conceive or hope for an afterlife. If, upon finding out about his daughter's death, the old sexton can be consoled by the thought that

“Mother an’ child are wi’ the Lord,” and that “in a matter o’ short years [he]’ll meet them both again.” But this does little for the boy, who finds in this death confirmation that “[t]here is no God,—there is only the Atom which does not care!” (Corelli 276).

Like Butler’s Ernest, Corelli’s Lionel is moved by organ music: “the organ-loft moved him strangely to thoughts hitherto unfamiliar,” and he is eventually led to contemplate the existence of the divine, comparing this music to “angels singing...suggest[ive of] God’s great voice speaking tenderly” (Corelli 91). As he finds himself opening up to the possibility of there existing something beyond the material, Jessamine embraces him in an act that is symbolic of their instinctual union. Yet, Lionel never fully accepts God or believes in an afterlife because, as in the case of Meredith’s Richard, his father’s system is by then too well ingrained in his own. Echoing the author’s dedicatory note and his predecessor Montrose, Cadman-Gore concludes, in the closing pages of *The Mighty Atom*, that Lionel’s education is a crime: “*What a monstrous crime it is to bring up this child without a faith!*” he exclaims, “[a]mazed at his own involuntary and unusual feeling,” and finding it increasingly more difficult to justify substituting reason for faith (Corelli 324). Science fails to provide moral guidance. The experimental method gives Lionel no other alternative to learning about the life beyond than by testing what death is empirically.

¹ Published as Supplement to the 5th ed. of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; 1818, rpt. 1828.

² Spencer introduces Pestalozzian views in his essays on education with the main purpose of criticizing them; he relies, rather, on the writings of Marcel and Wyse: the Frenchman Claude Marcel (1793-1876), who, while serving as French consul in Cork, published in English a two-volume study, *Language as a Means of Mental Culture and International Communication: or Manual of the Teacher and the Learner of Languages* (London, 1853) and Thomas Wyse, Esq., who wrote the first volume of *Education Reform: or, the Necessity of a National System of Education* (London, 1836) (Offer 292-3).

³ Of Spencer's four essays published over the course of five years, the first appeared before Meredith's novel ("Intellectual Education"; May 1854), the second around the time that Meredith started writing in 1858 ("Moral Education"), the third ("Physical Education") two months before the novel's publication, and the last ("What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?," which is also the most original) appeared after *Richard Feverel* had been published (Lionel Stevenson provided this chronology cited in Grabar 130). The resemblance is greatest with "Moral Education" due to the coincidence of date; other commonalities, Grabar argues, are not due to direct influence, but rather to both Meredith's and Spencer's incorporating and responding to current theories (130).

⁴ It could be Meredith's ironic comment on the supposed newness of the theory, actually.

⁵ The function of books is "supplementary," as they only allow you to "se[e] through other men what you cannot see for yourself" and are only "eager to give second-hand facts in place of first-hand facts" (Spencer 60). Proposing that drawing be the basis of early education, he also points out that children prefer (concrete) color to (abstract) outline or form (Spencer 140).

⁶ *Richard Feverel* "presents no convincing female characters, nor does it indicate or imply a normative ideal for woman," DeGraaff charges, citing the fundamental flaws of all women in Richard's life (from the fluctuating Mrs. Berry to the one-dimensional temptress Bella "Mount" or Clare Forey, the victim of a similarly misguided system). The same skepticism about marriage informs Meredith's portrayal of Richard as "a knightly cipher, perpetually trapped in his own egocentrism," incapable of assuming the parameters of a "believable human personality" and of learning from any "painful, but potentially educational" experience (DeGraaff 86-7).

⁷ Meredith connects comedy with civilization, social freedom, and feminism, arguing that "there never will be civilization where comedy is not possible; and that comes of some degree of social equality of the sexes": that is to say, if women are seen as inferior and have no freedom, comedy is absent; if they are independent but uncultivated, they may only be sentimentalized in melodrama; but because "comic intelligence" relies not on contempt or disdain but on "kindness," charity and sympathy, it requires that women be free and equal (Meredith, *Essay* 32, 42).

⁸ Sir Austin's misogynist pamphlet attracts predominantly female readers driven by the desire to convince him otherwise; thus, they figure as Maenads surrounding Orpheus.

⁹ In *The Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit (An Essay on Comedy, 1877)*, which is often published with Bergson's *Le Rire*, Meredith reminds us that civilization is founded on common sense, which he conceives as the golden mean between unyielding rationalism and extreme sentimentalism, and he urges us to put a country to "the true test of true comedy" by seeing whether the latter would "awaken thoughtful laughter" as opposed to ridicule. Laughter is meant to expose and correct vices "whenever they wax out of proportion, [becoming] overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastic, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate," allowing civilization to go on (Meredith, *Essay* 47-8).

¹⁰ Citing Meredith's appropriation of Darwinian language ("selection," "fittest," "nature"), Williams writes, "The irony of these passages is directed not against Darwin but against Willoughby's [the protagonist of *The Egoist*] fatuous appropriation of Darwin" (62). I see the irony as being aimed, rather, not at evolution but at a materialist reading of evolution, which entails the moral egoism Meredith is trying to expose.

¹¹ His empiricist stance forces Spencer to assign to aesthetic culture (painting, sculpture, music, poetry, architecture) a secondary role. Although he denies the inference that we have "to slight these less essential things" in favor of more practical—and, by implication—*more* "essential" pursuits, the valuation is clear: they "may be truly called the efflorescence of civilized life," but they are also, ultimately, ornamental or, as he makes it clear through a flower analogy, they are the flower which thrives at the expense of the plant. The problem with contemporary education, he concludes in this vein, is that it "neglects the plant for the sake of the flower," and, naturally, such privileging does not aid self-preservation (72-4). Short of dismissing the arts, Spencer proceeds to relegate them to "*the leisure part of education*," and makes a feeble attempt at pointing out the poetic potential of Science (75; original emphasis; 84). Spencer concludes that science is "religious" because it instills in us the devotion to and respect of the world, and it is also, as the positivists would also argue, is "highest alike in worth and beauty," and thus "will reign supreme" (Spencer 92, 96).

¹² Butler includes in this "Book" an extended version of an earlier article, "Darwin among the Machines" (1863), published during his stay in New Zealand under the pseudonym Cellarius.

¹³ As an example of such evolution Butler cites "the little protuberance at the bottom of the bowl" of a tobacco pipe, a "rudimentary" trait, the purpose of which "must have been to keep the heat of the pipe from marking the table upon which it rested" (*Erewhon* 196).

¹⁴ Breuer argues that Butler came to reject natural theology because he found it less plausible than "empirically true norms" which imply a more rigid utilitarianism, a position which, despite his growing criticism of Darwin, Butler never revised having dramatized it in *Erewhon*. The main disappointment, Breuer indicates, came with Butler's confirming that a "spiritual" life did not guarantee happiness or success (328).

¹⁵ Based on her reading of Ernest's struggle to self-identify as against the deterministic hereditary backdrop, Shuttleworth provides a rather elegant summary of the novel: "Butler's 'Story of English Domestic Life' explores the relations between fathers and sons on multiple levels: the fierce psychological struggles for self-definition are set within the biological context of the pressures of shared evolutionary identity" (144).

¹⁶ See Richard Hoggart's Introduction to *The Way of All Flesh* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966: 12); David Guest's "'Acquired Characters': Cultural versus Biological Determinism in *The Way of All Flesh*" (*English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 34.3 [1991] 283-292).

¹⁷ Theobald “professed to be on the Whig side” but “in his heart hated Liberalism” (and opposed the Church of Rome, hoping “all Roman Catholics turn Protestants”), while Skinner spoke with “a truly liberal spirit” (XXVIII: 119).

¹⁸ To these correspond three basic questions: “First. Where he is. Secondly. Where he is going. Thirdly. What he had best do, under those circumstances.”

¹⁹ Among these, Sir J. Lubbock, later Lord Avebury, argued for a more enlightened view of education, and following Ruskin, hoped that science coupled with an appreciation of beauty could help us see not the “mud we tread under our feet in the street” but “exquisite possibilities”; the prominent physicist Oliver Lodge (1851-1940) emphasized Ruskin’s interest in physical science despite the view that the latter’s attitude toward it was antagonistic; and Patrick Geddes was inspired by the Ruskinian holistic approach stressing the importance of art, economics, and science (O’Gorman 41-6).

²⁰ The opening paragraph of the *Politics* (Oxford ed.) reads as follows: “Observation shows us, first, that every city [*polis*] is a species of association, and, secondly, that all associations come into being for the sake of some good—for all men do all their acts with a view to achieving something which is, in their view, a good. It is clear therefore that all associations aim at some good, and that the particular association which is the most sovereign of all, and includes all the rest, will pursue this aim most, and will thus be directed to the most sovereign of all goods. This most sovereign and inclusive association is the city [or *polis*], as it is called, or the political association” (Aristotle 7).

²¹ As the editors point out, “Ydgrun is obviously an anagram for Mrs. Grundy, the popular symbol for public propriety, first mentioned in the comedy *Speed the Plough* (1798) by Thomas Morton (1764?-1838); she never appears but is referred to as someone whose opinion is to be considered” (*Erewhon*, n151-2).

²² On the apparently unsuccessful “cash-for-grades” incentive (run during the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 academic years, with 8,320 participating students paid \$1.5 million), see Jennifer Medina’s “Next Question: Can Students Be Paid to Excel?” (*New York Times*, 5 March 2008) and “Cash Offers Not Enough to Improve Test Scores” (*New York Times*, 8 April 2010); or Lisa Guernsey’s “Rewards for Students Under a Microscope” (*NYT*, 2 March 2009). For the recent reforms by the Obama Administration’s Education Secretary Arne Duncan, see, for example: Maria Glod’s “Chicago School Reform Could Be a US Model” (*The Washington Post*, 30 December 2008).

Currently, a similar scheme has been introduced in the UK with the goal of incentivizing people to perform good civic deeds, such as recycling and picking up litter. See Rachel Williams’ “Council Plans ‘Big Society’ Reward Points” (*Guardian*, 31 October 2010).

²³ “Место это теперь осталось пустым, вакантным, и мы видим те озабоченные, сложные, бессодержательные и, главное, безопорные споры о том, что должно

быть главным предметом преподавания и целью воспитания... И те, [и] другие, и 3-и, и 4-е подобны людям, которые бы не имея никакой пищи, придумывали бы средства, как наполнить желудок голодного животного. Ни классицизм, (казавшийся когда-то хорошей приправой кушанья, ни реализм, весьма полезный как посуда для кушанья, ни религия без веры, к[оторые] суть только объедки когда-то хорошей пищи, не дадут питанья голодному животному.”

²⁴ The day he spends at Jessamine and her father's is the happiest: "An' yon poor pale little lad looks a'most as if he was h'appy for once in's life!" the old sexton exclaims (Corelli 89).

CHAPTER 5

From Lilith to Shavian Super(wo)man: “Revitalizing” Social Evolution

Out of the concepts drawn from Lamarck, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Butler, he evolved a weird mystic power which he named the Life Force after the *elan vital* of creative evolution. This immanent force is slowly evolving through the aeons...toward ultimate Godhead. Not long before his death Shaw asserted that this was the only credible religion; but he seems to have been his only convert...

Allan Chappelow, *Shaw the Villager*¹

...however successful a revolution might be, it is certain that mankind cannot change its whole nature all at once. Break the old shell, certainly; but never forget the fact that the new forms *must* grow out of the old.

H. M. Hyndman, “Historical Basis of Socialism”

The only fundamental and possible Socialism is the socialization of the selective breeding of Man: in other terms, of human evolution. We must eliminate the Yahoo, or his vote will wreck the commonwealth.

G. Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*

In the previous chapter, we saw how some thinkers in the second half of the nineteenth century imported evolutionary theory into the domain of education, emphasizing meaningful change and effort to counter Darwin’s random selection, while promoting organic growth. Evolutionary thinking also influenced economics. An important parallel was drawn by Karl Marx, who, according to John Spargo, member of

the old Socialist Party of America, “likened his own work in the sociological field to that of Darwin in the biological, and he was always manifestly pleased when others made the comparison.” As Isaiah Berlin reports in *Karl Marx: His Life and Work* (1910), Marx acknowledged, “Nothing ever gives me greater pleasure than to have my name thus linked with Darwin’s. His wonderful work makes my own absolutely impregnable. Darwin may not know it, but he belongs to the Social Revolution” (qtd. in Morrison 129). In fact, he even offered to dedicate *Das Kapital* to the author of the *Origin*, believing that natural selection had “done for the morphology of the natural sciences what he himself was striving to do for human history” (Morrison 130).²

Shaw shared none of Marx’s enthusiasm for Darwin and, despite his youthful admiration for the *Kapital*, remained a critic of Marxism throughout most of his life.³ Relying neither on Marx nor on Darwin exclusively, Shaw conceived change in evolutionary terms, as both Marx and Darwin did, since such thinking had become ubiquitous; drawing on both economics and biology, and, later in his life, the religion of Creative Evolution, he adapted the “conceptual language” of Vitalism to social evolution in order to articulate his vision to reform humanity—more so than the authors considered so far and in even starker contrast to many of his contemporaries who, trusting Darwinian science and Spencer, had all but given up on the world.

A close reading of Shaw’s major works, particularly his evolutionary plays and their prefaces, reveals that he had initially adhered to what was, in a way, the Socialist counterpart to Lamarck’s *Use-inheritance*, that is, changes of habit resulting from changes in the environment (Chapter 1); and argued that the abolition of private property (the environment) would bring about changes in cultural values (habits). But finding

such thinking insufficient in the biological as well as the social domain, Shaw, like Bergson, adapted a notion of genetic evolution *in nature* more akin to the Neo-Darwinian deviations through germs—without, however, giving up on purpose and Leibnizian finality, which, also like Bergson, Shaw envisioned functioning most effectively on the scale of the Life-Force rather than that of an individual will. The Life Force has an end insofar as it is directed toward greater knowledge, but it is blind and not limited by it; this entails, moreover, that species which, as Shaw puts it in the Preface to one evolutionary play, “have not sufficient energy” nor “desire the end enough,” be replaced by those that are more willful (*Prefaces: Man* 177). Nor are the philosophies to which a species may be deeply committed immune to this forceful sweeping of the old: even Socialism, in which Shaw is rooted, must one day yield to a new theory. Creative Evolution—“the genuinely scientific religion for which all wise men are now anxiously looking” (Preface to *Methuselah* 15), which Shaw synthesized from the ideas of the Neo-Lamarckians and christened after the title of Bergson’s book—gives us the most comprehensive view of his program for social reform. It also justifies Shaw’s status, as well as this chapter’s placement, at the culmination of the Vitalist movement.

In the course of this last chapter, we will consider Shaw’s views on evolution, as presented in his critical works and dramatized in his philosophical plays, with a focus on how they inform his views on Socialism and, more generally, social evolution. Although critics disagree on the relationship between Shaw’s journalistic and literary pursuits,⁴ I interpret them holistically, though not uncritically and, on occasion, *cum grano salis*, as complementing and clarifying Shaw’s thinking. I take the plays, specifically, to be dramatizations of the ideas Shaw discursively pursued in the prefaces, with neither being

in any way incomplete—an approach that differs from that of a recent critic who claims, since Shaw “could play *with* ideas,” his plays of ideas were politically ineffectual, and so the accompanying prefaces had to make up for “the insufficiency of the form of the drama for expressing what [Shaw] thought he wanted to have expressed directly” (Alexander 219). And although, as Tracy C. Davis reminds us, “Shaw is not necessarily the best authority on Shaw,” especially since “[i]n the preface to *The Apple Cart* he exhorts us not to take his plays at face value” (xxi), I still take Shaw to be a better authority on Shaw than anyone else.

* * *

Based on his critical and dramatic output, the three approaches to change Shaw was continually revisiting may appear to be in tension, but can, in fact, be reconciled given the broad scope of the Shavian evolutionary vector: namely, a gradualist approach, attuned to the Vitalist mode; an anarchic stance, when it comes to social institutions, laws, and moral codes (as, for instance, in Shaw’s 1898 play *Caesar and Cleopatra*, where Julius Caesar lets the Alexandrian library burn to build a new world upon its ashes); and his later, more dogmatic commitment to Creative Evolution. Anarchism is a stage along this vector, meant to clear the ground for the development of a higher form: in texts of social criticism, Shaw calls this form “the Superman,” making sure to dissociate the term from Nietzsche’s; in the visionary plays of the *Methuselah* cycle, he imagines a succession of species the evolution of which culminates in “pure thought.”

Without completely abandoning a Marxist understanding of Socialism as grounded in economics, after 1900, Shaw espoused selective breeding and an evolutionary religion; he made the principle of “equal income for all” a fundamental one

in his vision, but only because it would help level out the reproductive field and thus enable individuals to procreate regardless of socioeconomic restrictions; he left much of the constitutional gradualism of the Fabians and the revolutionary anarchism of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF) behind (which might seem surprising for someone who had famously self-identified as a Socialist and an Atheist). Whether agitating in favor of uprooting outdated institutions, or envisioning himself merely an “instrument in the grip of Creative Evolution,” as he put it in the 1944 Postscript to *Back to Methuselah*, with his authorial role delimited to little more “than that of an amanuensis or an organ-blower”—Shaw remained a social reformer, even after his contemporaries had given up on the world; and as a Vitalist, he also remained a believer in order and purpose, even after Darwin had banished them from the Universe.

What I call “the Shavian evolutionary vector” does not, in principle, contradict the views of Shaw scholars that later in life, he had given up on Socialism (Eric Bentley, Edmund Wilson). However, the traditional biographical approach tracing Shaw’s intellectual development chronologically, from his fascination with Marx to his involvement with the Fabians and ultimate disillusionment with Marx and Socialism, is too neat for someone so complex—whether this complexity be derived from critical inconsistency, a penchant for the paradoxical, or intellectual playfulness.⁵ In fact, we may recognize the gradualist, anarchist, and evolutionary aspects at various stages of development more or less pronounced depending on any given text’s objectives. That is because Shaw’s thinking was directed toward greater knowledge, as the term “vector” implies, the same way that Shaw imagined the Life Force was directed and evolved.

Other critics have commented on the complexity of Shaw's intellectual evolution. Focusing primarily on his style and art, Charles A. Carpenter describes Shaw's thinking in terms of the individualistic/anarchistic and the rhetorical/oratorical axes. In *Bernard Shaw as Artist-Fabian*, one of two monographs on Shaw's Socialism published in 2009, Carpenter discusses Shaw as, first and foremost, an artist and in his polemic—an “artist-Fabian,” with art taking precedence over politics. Notably, complementing his rhetorical oratory, the individualistic/anarchistic axis combines Shaw's sense of individuality and the will, as well as his awareness of himself as a genius and vessel for the *Zeitgeist* (and the Life Force), which seemed to some of his colleagues egotistical; this view went along with the anarchism Shaw saw as a means of upholding individual initiative within the Socialist party, especially to counterbalance the collectivism promoted by Sidney Webb (Carpenter 13-5; also Shaw's 1886 article, “What Socialism Is”).

In the other monograph from the same year, entitled *Shaw's Controversial Socialism* (2009), political theorist James Alexander explores the tensions and inconsistencies in Shaw's thinking, which he deems symptomatic of “an age of uneasy, shifting belief,” in order to reconstruct Shaw's continuous re-conceptualization of Socialism between 1884 and 1904 and, though in a less focused manner, in the ensuing decades. According to Alexander, Shaw redefined his Socialism vis-à-vis Liberalism and Marxism, donning different hats to suit his immediate critical concerns: as economist, propagandist, revisionist, or imperialist. Shaw saw Socialism not as a “unitary doctrine opposed to both Liberalism and Marxism,” but as “a dual doctrine,” thereby reconciling two purposes: a Liberal purpose, with reform conceived in individualistic terms, and a Marxist one, couched in revolutionary collectivism (Alexander 17-8).

Alexander sees this “amalgam of reformist and revolutionary, individualistic and collectivist, Liberal and Marxist elements” as a mark of Shaw’s “vivacious Socialism,” an arena for debate which he had to expand since “there was not enough room in Socialism for all that Shaw saw”; he also concedes, however, that Shaw’s controversial Socialism could be seen as a failure precisely because Shaw never did “choose *either* Marxism *or* Liberalism” (228-9). For this reason, Alexander does not provide a fixed definition of Shaw’s Socialism: strictly speaking, Shaw had no system; his two major attempts at systematic thinking about politics—*The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* in 1928 and *Everybody’s Political What’s What* in 1944—were both written belatedly given his involvement with the Fabian Society at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century (11). Shaw’s Socialism was, therefore, “something only loosely determined,” if in part because the doctrine was itself largely undefined when he had encountered it. It meant, to him, “a faith or a philosophy that attempted to make sense of where humanity, society, and the state were at any given stage in history,” and “involved...views about economics, politics, and history; it depended on a fundamental understanding of the workings of society; and it laid emphasis on the ends of equality, harmony, and welfare” (Alexander 4). The ambitious scope of this definition does not disqualify it as such, but it does underscore the far-reaching applications of Shavian Socialism.

As a brief aside, we should note that Shaw continues to inspire critics.⁶ In addition to the two above, there have been other studies in the past few decades on the subject of his Socialism. Notable is, for example, Jack Schwartzman’s discussion of the impact of the American social thinker and economist Henry George on Shaw, whose

book *Progress and Poverty* (1879) motivated the latter to study economics (114); Schwartzman shows that while George was in favor of democracy and cooperative individualism, Shaw, building on but then moving away from Marx, supported statism, a socialist dictatorship led by a Superman. Others, too, have commented on Shaw's admiration, in his later years, for Russian dictators because they could use their authority successfully, as well as his eventual disillusionment with the parliamentary system (Couchman 15). Patricia Pugh situates Shaw's analysis of imperialism in its greater cultural context, and short of claiming direct influences, makes a good case for his foreseeing many of the changes in colonial policy in the early twentieth century. Several years earlier, Susan Moller Okin in her then new introduction to Shaw's *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism*, demonstrated the modern relevance of Shaw's arguments for egalitarianism, his critique of inequality and laissez-faire capitalism,⁷ and his discussion of the connections between feminism and socialism, as well as of the paradox of parliamentary socialism sustained by faith in what the Fabians called "the inevitability of gradualism" (viii, xxvi).⁸

* * *

Before we get to Creative Evolution, however, we must begin, as did Shaw, with Socialism. "All economic analyses begin with the cultivation of the earth," Shaw states in his lecture on the economic basis of Socialism, the first in the collection of *Fabian Essays in Socialism* (1889) that he edited and prepared for the Fabian Society, of which he was a member from 1884 to 1911.⁹ Although it may represent something different to the astronomer, the farmer, the city-dweller, or the economist,¹⁰ "Man" (in general) finds himself "mocked by Earth his step-mother, and never knows as he tugs at her closed hand

whether it contains diamonds or flints, good red wheat or a few clayey and blighted cabbages” (*Fabian* 15-6). The precarious condition into which Nature puts humankind inspires the desire that there be some “power” or “goodwill” capable of distributing its “capricious gifts...justly according to the labor done by each in the collective search for them.” This desire Shaw defines as “Socialism,” opposing it to that of “Private Property or Unsocialism,” that is, “the gambling spirit [which] urges man to allow no rival to come between his private individual powers and Step-mother Earth” (*Fabian* 16). Private property, Shaw insists, is not only the cause of economic and social inequality, but also the main obstacle to equal distribution. For evolution of any kind to occur, the institution of private property must be dismantled: this, along with the principle of “equal income for all” Shaw adopts later, is one of the main ideas on which his Socialist thinking pivots.

Shaw’s reference to “Step-mother Earth” summons Tennyson more readily than Wordsworth, that is to say, “Nature, red in tooth and claw” more so than an *alma mater* teeming with “divine vitality.” At least at this Fabian stage, Shaw still seemed to posit the Hobbsian/Darwinian model with regard to “human nature,” as well. Carpenter notes that Shaw’s call to abolish the State derives from his conviction that humans are selfish, and hence a Socialist state with “unselfish” members eager to contribute to the common good is “impossible” (15). Economist Willard Wolfe describes Shaw’s “scientific” Socialism as “based solidly on economic and social science, that would take human nature as it existed—vain, selfish, and competitive—rather than try to remold it to some ideal plan” (qtd. in Carpenter 16). Later, Shaw would assert that more than the abolition of the State (curtailing the “Unsocialis[t]” “gambling spirit” that turns humans into “rival[s]”), a radical change *in nature* was necessary for true reform.

What Shaw meant by “Socialism” and suggested as a means of reconnecting with an estranged Earth becomes clearer in his commentaries on Ibsen and Wagner: in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891; 1913) and the *Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Niblung’s Ring* (1898), which was “jam full of Socialism in the manner of Ruskin,” as Shaw told Sidney Webb (qtd. in Carpenter 12); as well as in the prefaces to his plays *Major Barbara* (1905), *Man and Superman* (1903), and *Back to Methuselah* (1921). In “The Basis of Socialism: I. Economic,” he outlines modern Socialism’s larger ramifications, namely, that it can “challeng[e] individualism, scepticism, pessimism, [and the] worship of Nature personified as a devil” (the latter signaling a parallel between Darwin’s base and ruthless nature, and that found years earlier in the writings of the Christian church fathers). All terms in this list are philosophical counterparts to natural selection, which Shaw defines as “the struggle for existence—the remorseless extirpation of the weak—the survival of the fittest” (*Fabian* 44). Hence, in addition to offering a path toward humanity’s “Step-mother,” Socialism also offers one away from Darwin.

Similarly, in the *Quintessence*, Shaw criticizes natural selection, this time because it could be used by the bourgeoisie not only to justify the miserable conditions of the working class, but to encourage their exacerbation. He clearly sides with the workers, who are not blinded by the alleged scientific inexorability of natural selection and, unlike the middle class, are able to visualize positive change. Identifying the workers’ notion of change with Socialism and calling implicitly for the latter, Shaw writes,

according to the theory of Natural Selection, progress can take place only through an increase in the severity of the material conditions of existence; and as the working classes were quite determined that progress should

consist of just the opposite, they had no difficulty in seeing that it generally does occur in that way, whereas the middle class wished, on the contrary, to be convinced that the poverty of the working classes and all the hideous evils attending it were inevitable conditions of progress...and every attempt on the part of the workers to raise their wages by Trade Unionism or otherwise, were vain defiances of biologic and economic science. (Shaw, *Major: Quintessence* 75)

The Earth, Socialism, and evolution—or, as in the above quotation, “biologic and economic science”—are interrelated in much of Shaw’s thinking. This is largely because, as his fellow Socialists in the Fabian Society, Shaw conceived social history in evolutionary terms. Such an understanding of change was shared by the Fabians, who promoted a gradualist/constitutionalist approach, and by the revolutionary Marxists, whose view was more radical. Sidney Webb (1859-1947), Shaw’s colleague and member of the Executive Council of the Fabian Society, underscored the need to think of the “social ideal,” after “Comte, Darwin, and Herbert Spencer,” as being “dynamic” rather than “statical” in character. “No philosopher now looks for anything but the gradual evolution of the new order from the old, without breach of continuity or abrupt change of the entire social tissue at any point during the process,” Webb writes in his historical overview of the “democratic ideal,” the economic side of which he identifies with Socialism, arguing that “Democracy” requires the control of the people over their “political organization” no less than over the “main instruments of wealth production” (*Fabian* 47-8, 52).

On the other hand, the view of historical change proposed by the English social theorist and founder of the Marxist SDF, H. M. Hyndman (1842-1921), was more radical and rooted in conflict, albeit within a broader evolutionary context: “I am aware that there are some who suppose that our present bourgeois arrangements must be totally destroyed and others substituted almost at a blow,” Hyndman writes referring to the more radical anarchists. “But however successful a revolution might be, it is certain that mankind cannot change its whole nature all at once. Break the old shell, certainly,” Hyndman insists, but also reminds us that we should “never forget the fact that the new forms *must* grow out of the old” (*Fabian* 48n).

The motto of the SDF was “Educate, Agitate, Organize.” Shaw and the early Fabians had initially supported it, but later, to reflect their *evolutionary* rather than *revolutionary* character, they replaced “Agitate” with “Permeate”: the latter was defined by one of the Fabians as “a policy of inoculation, of giving to each class, to each person, that came under the influence the exact dose of collectivism that they were prepared to assimilate” (*The Diary of Beatrice Webb*, qtd. in Carpenter 11). The Fabians’ refusal to acknowledge the existence of class warfare which required radical action was criticized by Hyndman and the SDF. Shaw’s individual contribution was to add “Irritate” to the slogan—stressing, as we will see in the ensuing discussion of the *Quintessence*, the need to shock people out of complacency (Carpenter xvii, 11, 77).

* * *

How does change occur, according to Shaw? One of the main obstacles to lasting social change is our stubborn clinging to so-called “ideals,” masks which hide from us the brutal nature of reality: that the universe is in continuous flux; that humanity is far

from unique and will be replaced by a higher species; that this is part of a grand design of the divine Life Force, driven by necessity and proceeding blindly through trial and error; but also, paradoxically, that within this drive, there is room for the will and purposeful change; and that humans are responsible for participating in this evolution, and cannot take the back seat and wait for some random mutation to weed them out. Hence, the first task of the Shavian reformer is to shatter such “ideals,” and to expose all other “isms” which, like “idealism,” fuel complacency and prevent what Shaw calls in the Preface to *Man and Superman* “real changes” (*Prefaces: Man* 169, 173). This task is anarchic; it involves not only protesting against, but also destroying conventional arrangements and institutions. To an “idealist,” on the other hand, life becomes a construct and an illusion, which runs the risk of falling apart along with its stage props. We will see that this is precisely the tragedy of the Elderly Gentleman in *Back to Methuselah*, who is unable to survive without his “ideal” institutions and can therefore only will himself to die.

To begin to understand what Shaw means by “ideal” and “idealism,” we must look at the hypothetical scenario he draws in the *Quintessence*, his critical commentary on Ibsen’s drama. There we also find a *précis* of the argument he would make in other critical works: that the “realist” (the “pioneer,” the “Superman,” or the prophet—and Shaw cites P. B. Shelley as an example of the latter) must break the older “ideals” (institutions, laws, customs, illusions of progress), even at the cost of being accused of immorality and condemned for bringing society face to face with difficult truths, the most basic of these dealing with economics and reproduction. The final decision on which factor proves more crucial to social evolution would, in fact, take Shaw away from

Marxism and toward a genetic/biological understanding of history, which demands a change *in nature* (or genetics) and not just the material conditions of human existence.

His hypothetical scenario runs as follows: Shaw imagines a community of a thousand members, seven hundred of whom adhere to the “British family arrangement,” whereas two hundred and ninety-nine “find it a failure, but must put up with it since they are in a minority” (*Quintessence* 48-9). The latter not only conform to the rule of the majority, but also convince themselves of the sanctity and beauty of the seemingly “natural institution” of marriage which is, in reality, “a conventional arrangement, legally enforced, which the majority, because it happens to suit them, think good enough for the minority, whom it happens not to suit at all.” Shaw gives the example of “ideal marriage” as a “mask” invented by the minority to protect themselves from the truth:

The family as a beautiful and holy natural institution is only a fancy picture of what every family would have to be if everybody was to be suited, invented by the minority as a mask for the reality, which in its nakedness is intolerable to them. We call this sort of fancy picture an Ideal; and the policy of forcing individuals to act on the assumption that all ideals are real, and to recognize and accept such action as standard moral conduct, absolutely valid under all circumstances, contrary conduct or any advocacy of it being discountenanced and punished as immoral, may therefore be described as the policy of Idealism. (*Quintessence* 49)

The seven hundred, who “comfortably accept marriage as a matter of course and never dream of calling it an ‘institution,’ much less a holy and beautiful one,” will then be labeled “Philistines” by the “idealists.” Only the remaining man is “strong enough to

face the truth that the idealists are shirking”; he would naturally be thought “mad” by the Philistines and feared by the idealists, who will then go on to ostracize him for breaking such a carefully guarded silence: “How far they will proceed against him depends on how far his courage exceeds theirs. At his worst, they call him cynic and paradoxer: at his best they do their utmost to ruin him if not to take his life” (Shaw, *Quintessence* 49-50). But, whatever the outcome, act he must: Shaw refers to Idealism as a “policy,” rather than a “philosophy,” highlighting *praxis* over theory and calling for its active abolition.

Shaw labels the reformer a “realist,” but is careful to distinguish his sense of “realism” from that of the materialists (Zola and Maupassant), aligning himself, rather, with Plato and Platonic “realism” (*Quintessence* 50-2). The Shavian “realist” eventually finds himself disillusioned with the “ideals,” recognizing in them “only something to blind us, something to numb us, something to murder self in us, something whereby, instead of resisting death, we can disarm it by committing suicide.” Unlike the “idealist” who hides behind masks, the “realist” sees them for what they are. Because he “has come to have a deep respect for himself and faith in the validity of his own will,” the “realist” “declares that when a man abnegates the will to live and be free in a world of the living and free, seeking only to conform to ideals for the sake of being, not himself, but ‘a good man,’ then he is morally dead and rotten” (*Quintessence* 53). Echoing Meredith and anticipating Butler, Shaw confirms the need for independent thinking; also, as the other two Vitalists, he associates freedom with life and artificially donned dogma—with death.

The process of social evolution requires the elimination of our “duty” to these so-called “ideals” and the commitment to our individual will. Shaw writes, “The point to

seize is that social progress takes effect through the replacement of old institutions by new ones; and since every institution involves the recognition of the duty of conforming to it, progress must involve the repudiation of an established duty at every step”: without the repudiation of duty, there would be no political progress, and the English would still have to obey the absolute monarch; women would still have to obey their husbands, and without the protection of the Married Women’s Property Act, they would have few rights with respect to education. There would not have been a Protestant Reformation without Luther’s repudiation of his duty to the Church. “There is nothing new, then, in the defiance of duty by the reformer,” Shaw maintains, and redefines political, social, and religious progress as a series of repudiations of just this kind, which entails the condemnation of the reformer for the sake of the change he or she upholds: “every step of progress means a duty repudiated, and a scripture torn up. And every reformer is denounced accordingly, Luther as an apostate, Cromwell as a traitor, Mary Wollstonecraft as an unwomanly virago, Shelley as a libertine, and Ibsen as all the things enumerated in the Daily Telegraph,” where his plays were famously slandered (*Quintessence* 40). “Duty,” Shaw concludes, is “the primal curse from which we must redeem ourselves before we can advance another step,” and until we realize that, we cannot accelerate the otherwise “crablike progress of social evolution, in which the individual advances by seeming to go backward” (*Quintessence* 46, 40).¹¹

Let us take, for example, the “ideal” of the “the womanly woman” or “ideal wife,” whose “natural vocation” is construed as “domesticity” and “domestic management” (*Quintessence* 58-60). Shaw would later soften this “radical feminism” (liberation along the lines of Nora in *A Doll’s House*) and acknowledge the role of the

woman in the household, as Okin points out (Shaw, *The Intelligent* xxi-xxii). He calls for the unequivocal repudiation of woman's duty, pointing out that the nursery and the kitchen are no more a "natural sphere" for a woman than a cage is for a parrot, despite what convention might suggest about "womanliness" (*Quintessence* 60). Shaw makes the shattering of this "mask" the woman's own responsibility, thereby recognizing her agency, and by this very gesture—that is, by framing "womanliness" in terms of duty and not that of, exclusively, a war of the sexes—he already assumes an inherent equality between men and women. "In that repudiation lies her freedom; for it is false to say that Woman is now directly the slave of Man: she is the immediate slave of duty; and as man's path to freedom is strewn with the wreckage of the duties and ideals he has trampled on, so must hers be" (*Quintessence* 61-2). Shaw is uncompromising on this point: treating "the womanly woman" as "a means" goes against her "person's right to live" (*Quintessence* 58). The pursuit of "equality for women and men" requires the destruction not only of this ideal but also of others, but "the advantage of the work of destruction is, that every new ideal is less of an illusion than the one it has supplanted; so that the destroyer of ideals, though denounced as an enemy of society, is in fact sweeping the world clear of lies" (*Quintessence* 62). We find here one instance of Shaw's combining anarchism with gradualism, as well as his sober view of social evolution as a series of struggles, but not, as a Marxist would, class struggles.

We must pursue the dismantling of our "duty" to "ideals," Shaw maintains, even if that inspires accusations of immorality, because the need to replace older forms with new ones is simply too great to be abandoned for fear of making people uncomfortable or having reformers vilified. Defending Ibsen's *Ghosts* against this very charge of

immorality, Shaw observes that the term “does not necessarily imply mischievous conduct,” but rather “conduct...which does not conform to current ideals” (*Quintessence* 145). He reframes “immorality” as a type of iconoclasm, a necessary stage in the overall evolution of ideas, once again reminding us that old forms must be replaced, a process which requires shocking people out of their normalcy: “The plain working truth is that it is not only good for people to be shocked occasionally, but absolutely necessary to the progress of society that they should be shocked pretty often” (*Quintessence* 146). Immorality is shown to be, paradoxically, a stepping-stone to a moral life, while its counterpart, as Jack Tanner, the hero of Shaw’s *Man and Superman*, insists, “can go to its father the devil” (*Complete: Man* 344).

It is through a series of shocks, Shaw suggests, that we can hope to evolve; the movement is gradual but by no means smooth or continuous. In the *Perfect Wagnerite*, Shaw notes us that “human enlightenment does not progress by nicer and nicer adjustments, but by violent corrective reactions which invariably send us clean over our saddle and would bring us to the ground on the other side if the next reaction did not send us back again with equally excessive zeal” (*Perfect* 243). What results is a continual interchange of “ideals” which is ultimately static: “Ecclesiasticism and Constitutionalism send us one way, Protestantism and Anarchism the other; Order rescues us from confusion and lands us in Tyranny; Liberty then saves the situation and is presently found to be as great a nuisance as Despotism” (*Perfect* 243). Then again, such movement is partly inevitable: “we must be content to proceed by reactions, hoping that each will establish some permanently practical and beneficial reform or moral habit that will survive the correction of its excesses by the next reaction” (*Perfect* 244).

Several decades before Shaw would call Joan of Arc a “Protestant” in the Preface to *Saint Joan* (1924), he conceived Wagner’s Siegfried as one in *Man and Superman*, where he also claimed Wagner had been “a confirmed Life Force worshipper” (*Prefaces: Saint* 604; *Complete: Man* 389). Shaw was sure to restore to the term its original meaning—dissociating it from the institution of the Protestant Church but keeping the ideal of individual rebellion against dogmatic authority. Defining “Protestantism” as an affirmation of the power of “every man’s private judgment” to interpret “the will of Humanity,” rather than “God and revelation,” he urges that it “take a fresh step in advance, and become Anarchism” (*Perfect* 241). The latter, which he calls “one of the notable new creeds,” is meant to take “Protestantism” to the next logical level, helping the new “Protestants” not falter, as their predecessors did by forming their own Church and thus replacing one vulnerable institution with another equally as vulnerable. But, again, he also realizes that the majority (in his allegorical reading of Wagner’s *Ring*,¹² it corresponds to the giants) is conservative and tends to resist rather than promote change, clinging to existing institutions: hence, all change ends up being gradual and slow.¹³

* * *

To prevent retrogression or “static” reactionary movement, a more radical approach is necessary. In the Preface to *Major Barbara* (1905), Shaw is more optimistic than in the *Wagnerite*: “all men are anarchists with regard to laws which are against their consciences” (*Prefaces: Major* 135). He envisions change in explosive terms: as dynamite. Destructive and anarchic, dynamite can clear the path for higher forms to emerge. Its impact cannot be reversed with prayer or the purchase of indulgences. “We shall never have real moral responsibility,” Shaw argues, “until everyone knows that his

deeds are irrevocable, and that his life depends on his usefulness” (*Prefaces: Major* 136).¹⁴ The Christian confessional is, for this reason, counterproductive, and so, in a genuinely Protestant spirit, Shaw exposes it in the visionary third act of *Man and Superman*, where finding herself in Hell, the Old Woman (Doña Ana) objects that she “sincerely repented” and “loved confession” so much that she confessed to “[m]ore sins than [she had] really committed.” Finding herself damned anyway, she regrets not having been “so much wickeder” (*Complete: Man* 368).

Once the path to reform has been cleared, it is money (the source of and solution to economic inequality, its redistribution being the goal of Socialism) that can help rebuild the world. Shaw famously condemns poverty as “the greatest of our evils, and the worst of our crimes,” claiming that “our first duty, to which every other consideration should be sacrificed, is not to be poor”: this is, of course, “the irresistible natural truth which we all abhor and repudiate,” and to dramatize this point, Shaw creates the character of Andrew Undershaft, the arms dealer, distiller, and dynamite maker, who does business with any party willing to pay (*Prefaces: Major* 118). Undershaft, whose religion *is* Money, is conscious of this truth, and he chooses “the lucrative trade in death and destruction” over poverty; but although an “opulent villai[n],” he is also an energetic entrepreneur with financial power and the ambition to create “a revolution of incalculable beneficence” (*Prefaces: Major* 120-2). Honest poverty perpetuates misery and crimes, as we see in the play itself, where unreformable drunkards keep coming back to the Salvation Army headquarters for more pittance without any intention of mending their ways; on the other hand, the credo of wealth, as “a point of honor for which [Undershaft

is] prepared to kill at the risk of [his] own life,” could help eradicate the economic source as well as its social reverberations (*Prefaces: Major* 120).

In fact, Undershaft’s initially idealistic daughter (Major) Barbara must realize precisely this: not ideals but money is the means to reform. “Money is the most important thing in the world,” Shaw says,

It represents health, strength, honor, generosity, and beauty as conspicuously and undeniably as the want of it represents illness, weakness, disgrace, meanness, and ugliness...It is only when it is cheapened to worthlessness for some and made impossibly dear to others, that it becomes a curse. In short, it is a curse only in such foolish social conditions that life itself is a curse. For the two things are inseparable: money is the counter that enables life to be distributed socially: it *is* life as truly as sovereigns and bank notes are money. (*Prefaces: Major* 122)

The Shavian evolutionary vector combines here an iconoclastic rejection of ideals (since what the nation needs is money and not “the grace, love, and fellowship of Trinity”) with his vision of Creative Evolution: Undershaft is the instrument of “a Will or Life Force,” a point that would be unclear only “because you are walking either in artificial Darwinian darkness, or in mere stupidity” (*Prefaces: Major* 122-3). Barbara learns that the Salvation Army, for which she works, is already her father’s accomplice, funded by his money; but even without Undershaft, there are many morally ambiguous resources subsidizing the Churches (the rents of public houses supporting Ecclesiastical Commissioners; the Chicago meat king paying to rebuild churches and public schools).

Dynamite forms the initial stage of a much larger reform that is to take place beyond the play. Barbara discovers that “there is no salvation...through personal righteousness, but only through the redemption of the whole nation from its vicious, lazy, competitive anarchy” (*Prefaces: Major* 125). The foundation for this is laid in the dénouement where Barbara’s fiancé, Adolphus Cusins (the Greek scholar who is shown beating on his Dionysian drum and whose interest in religion, unlike Barbara’s zeal, is purely academic), becomes the heir to Undershaft, thereby uniting her religious passion and his Greek intellect and humanism with her father’s sheer material power. Indeed, it is the final union of Undershaft, Barbara, and Cusins—of power, passion, and intellect—that introduces the possibility of collective redemption and evolution.

Carpenter identifies in the irresolution of Shaw’s discussion plays a tactic of engaging his audience into coming up with their own program for change—a tactic of “permeation,” that is, administering propaganda in an indirect but potent way. The point of *Major Barbara* is clear. When originally staged, however, the dénouement—where the capitalist Undershaft triumphs having converted the idealists Barbara and Cusins—was more shocking than suggestive. Another member of the Fabian Society, Beatrice Webb (née Potter; 1858-1943) described it in her diary as “an intellectual and moral morass...hell tossed on the stage, with no hope for heaven,” with Barbara’s turning to reality and power seen as “demonic” (qtd. in Carpenter 67). But Webb’s accusation is not entirely just: a way out of hell is offered, as is hope, but it involves the rejection of heaven. While Undershaft may be an arch-capitalist, he is also an enlightened one: he shows Barbara that it is far more effective to save people’s souls on a full stomach, than it is to buy the loyalty of the hungry ones with the bread of salvation.

* * *

Shaw may have notoriously described himself as an Anarchist, but he knew the limits of anarchy and sided not with destructive but with Creative Evolution. He envisioned the Superman and the Superwoman, armed with symbolic dynamite, shattering old ideals in order to usher in a new age—though only to be superseded by an even higher form and a still newer age.

In the Epistle Dedicatory to *Man and Superman*, Shaw imagines Don Juan as a philosophical anarchist. What makes this character so suited to Shaw's vision is that he follows his instincts and does not stop before obstacles; both qualities make him a perfect vehicle for the Life Force: "Philosophically, Don Juan is a man who, though gifted enough to be exceptionally capable of distinguishing between good and evil, follows his own instincts without regard to the common, statute, or canon law"; because of this, he "finds himself in mortal conflict with existing institutions" (Shaw, *Prefaces: Man* 151). Tracing the evolution of this figure to his day, Shaw concludes that, by the second half of the nineteenth century, Don Juan had, in fact, "changed his sex and become Doña Juana, breaking out of the Doll's House and asserting herself as an individual instead of a mere item in a moral pageant" (*Prefaces: Man* 152). This change is all the more important since there is a "a political aspect [to the] sex question," and in progressing from Despotism to Democracy, "the initiative in sex transactions [must] remain with Woman...because our political experiment of democracy, the last refuge of cheap misgovernment, will ruin us if our citizens are ill bred" (*Prefaces: Man* 158).

The solution, as we see time and again, lies for Shaw in nature rather than nurture: simply changing material conditions, or the Marxist economic infrastructure, is ultimately

ineffectual; Shaw demands that we go deeper and tackle the issue through genetics. The Shavian polis requires not just a single ruler (a dictatorship by a Superman, as Schwartzman describes it), but “a whole population of capable voters: that is, of political critics who, if they cannot govern in person for lack of spare energy or specific talent for administration, can at least recognize and appreciate capacity and benevolence in others, and so govern through capably benevolent representatives” (*Prefaces: Man* 159). But “real change” does not stop there: “Until there is an England in which every man is a Cromwell, a France in which every man is a Napoleon, a Rome in which every man is a Cæsar, a Germany in which every man is a Luther plus a Goethe,” we read in “The Revolutionist’s Handbook,” “the world will be no more improved by its heroes than a Brixton villa is improved by the pyramid of Cheops. The production of such nations is the only real change possible to us.” What we need, Shaw concludes, is “a Democracy of Supermen” (*Prefaces: Man* 173, 175). He thereby organically combines the individualist with the collective, keeping an eye to the larger goals of his project for “real change.”

Although phrased another way, the same call to “a Democracy of Supermen” can be found in the *Perfect Wagnerite*. Different races of *The Ring* represent different classes of people above whom stands “the order of Heros.”¹⁵ If there were a race of heroes instead of the singular case of Siegfried, we would notice a new social order: “if the next generation of Englishmen consisted wholly of Julius Caesars,” Shaw explains, “all our political, ecclesiastical, and moral institutions would vanish, and the less perishable of their appurtenances be classed with Stonehenge and the cromlechs and round towers as inexplicable relics of a bygone social order” (*Perfect* 215-6).

The Shavian grand vision requires, indeed, the transformation of a whole people; what initially appears as an invitation to individual hero-worship turns out to be a collective enterprise.¹⁶ “No individual Siegfried can rescue [Wagner’s giants] from this bondage and hypocrisy,” Shaw stresses, adding that individuals of this kind risk being destroyed by the masses. Rather than sponsoring “the devising of laws and institutions to prop up the weaknesses of mobs and secure the survival of the unfittest,” he urges the governing forces to listen to “Wotan’s inspiration” and focus, rather, on “the breeding of men whose wills and intelligences may be depended on to produce spontaneously the social wellbeing our clumsy laws now aim at and miss” (Shaw, *Perfect* 242).

What distinguishes these Supermen is that they not only trust their instincts but are also, importantly, driven by an “evolutionary appetite,” which is “superpersonal” and directed at greater knowledge and power. In the Preface to *Saint Joan*, Shaw writes that, quite different from the “selfish pursuit of personal power,” such instincts are “forces...which use individuals for purposes far transcending the purpose of keeping these individuals alive and prosperous and respectable and safe and happy in the middle station of life” (*Prefaces: Saint* 610). The appetite for evolution is not selfish; or, rather, it is *selfish* only insofar as it is meant to preserve the species, not its individual members.

Nor is this “evolutionary appetite” ever expended on worthless changes. “One does not face the throes of creation for trifles,” the He-Ancient in the final play of *Back to Methuselah* confirms, though one “can alter the shape of his own soul” or even that “of his nose if the difference between a turned-up nose and a turned-down one were worth the effort” (*Methuselah* 293). In Part II of the *Methuselah* cycle, Franklyn Barnabas, former clergyman turned cleric and the brother of the evolutionary biologist Conrad,

makes it a point to distinguish “mere idle fancies” (such as the irresponsible acquisition of money) from “the tremendous miracle-working force of Will nerved to creation by a conviction of Necessity. I tell you,” he insists, “men capable of such willing, and realizing its necessity, will do it reluctantly, under inner compulsion, as all great efforts are made” (*Methuselah* 141). This necessity need not be conscious, but it will still trigger the necessary volition: “They will hide what they are doing from themselves: they will take care not to know what they are doing. They will live three hundred years, not because they would like to, but because the soul deep down in them will know that they must, if the world is to be saved” (*Methuselah* 141). This is another example of the way Shaw balanced the individualistic with the collective. Additionally, by making the survival of the species the main mission along a broader evolutionary vector, he “revitalized” Tennyson’s Nature, which cares little for any individual; he did so not by shaping her into an idealized *alma mater*, but, building on the post-Humean complex view of dynamic matter, by assigning to this selfish nature a greater humanistic purpose.

Gordon W. Couchman discusses the preference for “realism in place of muddle-headed romanticism” as Shaw’s “gospel of efficiency,” a need for competence embodied in his most memorable heroes: Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Andrew Undershaft, and Saint Joan (13). According to its logic, “a man must be prepared to prove the worth of his existence.” Couchman sees ““evolutionary appetite”” as an expression of efficiency, as well, and defines it as “an insatiable craving for improvement, for bettering the race” (19, 17). It is through Creative Evolution, moreover, that we see the higher form of “efficiency” and not just the utilitarian, “unromantic, aggressively realistic” side of it: “As a part of the dramatization of the evolutionary appetite, the ideal of efficiency gains

in subtlety and complexity, lifting a mere belief in practicality to a higher, more truly humanistic plane” (Couchman 20).

To produce Supermen and Superwomen capable of “real change,” women must take the evolutionary prerogative seriously and allow their instincts to lead them to suitable mates irrespective of social convention, class, or romantic interest. Marriage must be seen in purely evolutionary terms, purged of external factors, such as sentimentality or “plutocratic inbreeding.” At the end of Act III of *Man and Superman*, Doña Ana asserts her belief in the Godhead, “the Life to Come,” and demands “a father for the Superman!” (*Complete: Man* 389). In the third play of *Back to Methuselah* (“The Thing Happens”), the two unsuspecting long-livers, the former parlor maid Mrs. Lutestring and the Archbishop, decide to marry as soon as they learn of each other’s existence, a marriage necessary for the survival of the world and one that gains in vital utility what it loses in romance: “They dont [sic] want to,” says another character in reference to this union; “They will do it in cold blood because their children will live three hundred years,” just as the Barnabas brothers predicted (*Methuselah* 181). To recall Shaw’s contrast between the “real” and the “ideal” as set out in the *Quintessence*, once the mask of love is removed from sexual appetite, we can start contemplating what a “real woman” and “real marriage” could potentially become. The truth concealed by the blinding mask is that genetics and romance tend not to coincide.

In addition to dismantling the institution of marriage, Shaw argues in *Man and Superman*, we must get rid of property, which was also his objective in the Fabian essays: “marriage, whilst it is made an indispensable condition of mating, will delay the advent of the Superman as effectually as Property, and will be modified by the impulse towards

him just as effectually.” Once again, sexual selection must be released from “irrelevant conditions,” such as property rights and dowries, all of which are “hostile to the evolution of the Superman” (*Prefaces: Man* 171-2). Simple selection (grafting, breeding) will not suffice; humanity must therefore “trust to the guidance of fancy (*alias* Voice of Nature), both in the breeders and the parents, for that superiority in the unconscious self which will be the true characteristic of the Superman.” The genetic pool must be expanded accordingly and freed of all obstacles: “Equality is essential to good breeding; and equality, as all economists know, is incompatible with property” (*Prefaces: Man* 169-70).

Reading Shaw in the twenty-first century, we may not feel entirely comfortable with his promotion of eugenics. “The majority of men at present in Europe have no business to be alive,” we read; “no serious progress will be made until we address ourselves earnestly and scientifically to the task of producing trustworthy human material for society. In short, it is necessary to breed a race of men in whom the life-giving impulses predominate, before the New Protestantism becomes politically practicable” (Shaw, *Perfect* 242). His references to “the weeding out of the human race” bring to mind Spartan ruthlessness at best. To produce a “healthy” population, Shaw would have “unhealthy” members intermarry rather than have them sterilized (the expectation being that “unhealthy” offspring would not survive past maturity); this is, however, a precaution against human misjudgment and a way for Nature to take its course: “Though more costly than sterilization of the unhealthy, it has the enormous advantage that in the event of our notions of health and unhealth being erroneous (which to some extent they most certainly are), the error will be corrected by experience instead of confirmed by evasion” (*Prefaces: Man* 170).

Shaw's genetic reasoning is, undoubtedly, as brutally honest and logical as it is morally disheartening and unpleasant; his tactic is, after all, to shock his readers into reevaluating their beliefs. With Shaw, it is often hard to distinguish between a rhetorical stance and an actual prescription. James Alexander, for example, argues that Shaw displayed a different "self" in different forms of writing: whereas in drama, he was "a worker, a creator, an author," in politics, "he was himself an actor"; and this discrepancy entailed also one of freedom: in the former case, what the characters say depends on him as an author, while in the latter, he was "(almost) fully free," as it was himself he "impersonated" (Alexander 220-6). Alexander's is a strange notion of "freedom," however; I see in the sheer multiplicity of voices in Shaw's drama far more freedom not only to play with, but also to propose ideas. There is a stronger assertion of agency and responsibility in the "I" of the prefaces; but because their connection to the drama they accompany is more complex and intimate than Alexander is willing to admit, I find it equally tempting, if not imperative, to see in this "I" the same level of playfulness as in the plays themselves. That is by no means an invitation to dismiss outrageous claims. Much like Aristophanes, Shaw is serious in a very comic way and comedic in a very serious way. Moreover, we should be reminded that Shaw was writing these lines prior to Nazism and the two world wars, and was more concerned with the evolution of the human race than with racism. In fact, however problematic, this vector was actually meant to help erase racial (biologic) and socioeconomic differences.

Finally, we must be reminded that Shaw's evolutionary thinking be examined on its own merits and within the larger scope of his philosophy so as to avoid uninformed statements which, in an attempt to expose Shaw's ignorance, reveal that of the critic.¹⁷

* * *

Although they disagreed on the actual character of historical change, Shaw shared with his Marxist rival Hyndman the awareness that humanity “cannot change its whole nature all at once.” After the institutions of marriage and private property have been abolished, people “would still call their watches and umbrellas and back gardens their property,” language often lagging behind thought and becoming a fossil, a historical record of the change in the institution, creating the confusion Shaw dramatizes in Part IV of the *Methuselah* cycle. Similarly, marriage “also will persist as a name attached to a general custom long after the custom itself will have altered” (*Prefaces* 171).¹⁸

To carry out “real change,” Supermen and Superwomen must usher in a new age, and that is inherently different from simply transforming existing political, social, economic, or religious institutions. “The mere transfiguration of institutions,” Shaw maintains, results in nothing but “changes from Tweedledum to Tweedledee: *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*.” He cites the transition “from commercial dominance to proletarian democracy” and that “from slavery to serfdom [and] from serfdom to capitalism,” both of which bear clear Marxist markers, and should, presumably, lead to a Socialist utopia. Yet, Shaw then dismisses those in favor of more fundamental biological changes which would prove more lasting—changes, that is, on the level of germs, if we recall the initial distinction between Lamarckian and Darwinian acquired traits:

But the changes from the crab apple to the pippin, from the wolf and fox to the house dog, from the charger of Henry V to the brewer’s draught horse and the race-horse, are real; for here Man has played the god,

subduing Nature to his intention, and ennobling or debasing Life for a set purpose. And what can be done with a wolf can be done with a man.

(Shaw, *Prefaces: Man* 168)

Shaw's point is two-fold: first, that "real changes" are produced by purposeful selection, and if the domestication of animals by humans be not impressive enough, we can only imagine the tremendous capacity of the Life Force; second, that non-radical Socialism, such as that of the gradualist Fabians, as well as Socialism at large, would result in little more than a game of "Tweedledum" and "Tweedledee."

As idealism in general, idealist Socialism came under Shaw's attack early on. Critic I. M. Britain elucidates some misconceptions about Shaw's and Ibsen's attitude toward Socialism, as well as the historical divisions within the movement itself. "In his book on Richard Wagner," Britain writes, "it is unquestionable that Shaw tended to identify the views of his subject with socialism—a kind of socialism, however, with a strong anarchist undercurrent rather than the orthodox Marxist variety" (383). In Ibsen, Britain argues, Shaw saw an iconoclastic Norwegian playwright and not strictly a Socialist, as well as a medium to expose idealist Socialism which, like every other "ism" and "ideal" had to be undermined for the world to be reformed: "'With Ibsen's thesis in mind,'" Britain quotes from the "Fabian Lecture on Ibsen" (Shaw's original talk on Ibsen's drama in which this point is more evident than in the later edition of the *Quintessence*), "it was 'impossible to think without concern of the appalling adaptability of Socialism to idealist purposes.'...In the final analysis, Shaw could not see that 'the chains of socialistic idealism' were any 'less burdensome than those of genteel idealism' nor that they led 'to less obstructive and hurtful conduct'" (Britain 388).

In “The Revolutionist’s Handbook,” we see more of Shaw’s dissatisfaction with traditional Socialists. Blinded by the “illusion of progress” by circumstantial means (changing “conditions of nutrition, environment, and training”), they could not see that it was only through further evolution that “Man as he is” could grow into “Man as he might become” (*Prefaces: Man* 176). While he admits that the reforms of the “Anarchist, the Fabian, the Salvationist, the Vegetarian, the doctor, the lawyer, the parson...” will all enable us to progress somewhat, the symbolic “hill will never be climbed by Man as we know him,” since in its current state of evolution, the will is not sufficient enough to produce the kind of change that is necessary to reshape the world: “We are not going to tread those paths: we have not sufficient energy. We do not desire the end enough: indeed in more cases we do not effectively desire it at all” (Shaw, *Prefaces: Man* 177). Evolution, in other words, reveals Socialism’s shortcomings: biology triumphs, but a biology that presupposes purposeful and not random selection.

In *Man and Superman*, Shaw represents the Socialist commitment to redistributing wealth as the work of brigands, albeit led by an honest and sympathetic Mendoza, who wait around for automobiles in the Sierra Nevada region and rob the rich in order “to restore [their wealth] to circulation among the class that produced it and that chiefly needs it: the working class” (*Complete: Man* 363). More tellingly, Shaw caricatures the three Social-Democrats (two of whom do not even have names, but are distinguished based on temperament: “rowdy” and “sulky”) as well as the Anarchist (who is also defined by his politics and remains otherwise anonymous). The three Social-Democrats “are not on speaking terms” and have “three distinct and incompatible views of Social-Democracy,” a reflection of the historical divisions among Socialists on matters

of policy.¹⁹ The Anarchist, in turn, accuses the third Socialist, the stereotypically vociferous Frenchman Duval, of having “sold out to the parliamentary humbugs and the bourgeoisie,” thus “[c]ompromis[ing]” his views to include, presumably, capitalist elements (*Complete: Man* 363-4). The “Socialist meetin [sic]” (364) is called to a close by the arrival of Jack Tanner, Shaw’s Don Juan and proto-Superman, who helps the brigands avoid arrest, thereby putting into question the efficacy of the latter group’s Socialist project. The Superman, in other words, saves the day.

The same critique applies to the Fabians. Shaw admits that, “with its peaceful, constitutional, moral, economical policy of Socialism, which needs nothing for its bloodless and benevolent realization except that the English people shall understand it and approve of it,” the Fabian Society may have a better chance of winning political support than a more radical party; at the same time, however, “if the nation adopted the Fabian policy, it would be carried out by brute force exactly as our present property system is.” The new law would regress to the old ways, and “those who resisted it would be fined, sold up, knocked on the head by policemen, thrown into prison, and in the last resort ‘executed’ just as they are when they break the present law.” Ultimately, both the peaceful parliamentary means and those “by which the dynamitard asserts his conception of natural human rights” turn out to be temporary: “Man will return to his idols and his cupidities, in spite of ‘movements’ and all revolutions, until his nature is changed” (*Prefaces: Man* 179). Otherwise, all we can have is but “an illusion of progress,” which is “indeed the Illusion of Illusions”:

There will always be an illusion of progress, because wherever we are conscious of an evil we remedy it, and therefore always seem to ourselves

to be progressing, forgetting that most of the evils we see are the effects, finally become acute, of long-unnoticed retrogressions; that our compromising remedies seldom fully recover the lost ground; above all, that on the lines along which we are degenerating, good has become evil in our eyes, and is being undone in the name of progress precisely as evil is undone and replaced by good on the lines along which we are evolving.

(*Prefaces: Man* 179-80)

Shaw concludes that evolution itself has to be “socialized.” We cannot simply replace old forms with new ones, as by fitting a mask and a wig on an actor, and “pretending that his nature has been changed; “real changes” must take place through a radical alteration *in nature*, not in material circumstances—for otherwise the new generation would regress back to the old. Neither “the socialization of the means of production and exchange,” which is “the Socialist’s dream,” nor that of the Positivist to “moraliz[e] the capitalist” will do. “The only fundamental and possible Socialism is the socialization of the selective breeding of Man: in other terms, of human evolution,” Shaw asserts, seeing this, as always, in political terms: “We must eliminate the Yahoo, or his vote will wreck the commonwealth” (Shaw, *Prefaces: Man* 185).

So much for “the Socialist’s dream.” The same inability to promote “real change” characterizes “the Positivist’s dream of moralizing the capitalist” (Shaw, *Prefaces: Man* 185). Shavian evolution is meant to correct the Enlightenment Positivist conception of progress: by revealing that this movement is non-linear, and also by resisting the lingering belief in reason—which was, as we have noted, associated with dogmatic metaphysics and nihilism, on the one hand, and on the other, with rational egoism, along

with its philosophical allies: materialism, empiricism, and pessimism. Shaw's main avenue of attack here is gendered and meant to underscore the role of feminine intuition. And instincts, we recall from Lamarck, do not err. Shaw points out that, while reason has not helped men avoid drawing the wrong conclusions, neglect thereof has, in fact, enabled women to arrive at the right ones:

In actual experience, the first shock to rationalism came from the observation that though nothing could persuade women to adopt it, their inaptitude for reasoning no more prevented them from arriving at right conclusions than the masculine aptitude for it saved men from arriving at wrong ones. (*Quintessence* 42)

Moreover, where reason fails—and on this point Shaw is in full agreement with Tolstoy whom he admired—is in its tendency to deny the most fundamental human volition: the will to live. We can sense it in Doña Ana's primal call to conceive a Superman and in the creative potential of Lilith, the figure who frames *Back to Methuselah*. Shaw identifies this will as the moving force for change: "all valid human institutions are constructed to fulfill man's will, and that his will is to live even when his reason teaches him to die." Evoking the utilitarian maxim Shaw states, "[r]ationally considered, life is only worth living when its pleasures are greater than its pains." The problem is that, however, contrary to the rationalist's belief, there is no "logical necessity" behind living; the latter "can never be a motor in human action, and is, in short, not necessity at all" (*Quintessence* 42-3). The "realist," we recall from the hypothetical scenario at the start of this chapter, knows this, and acts on her instincts.

Shaw connects the refusal to espouse life unconditionally with the pessimism which defines the modern age: “It is useless to pretend,” he writes, “that the pessimism of Koheleth, Shakespear, Dryden and Swift can be refuted if the world progresses solely by the destruction of the unfit, and yet can only maintain its civilization by manufacturing the unfit in swarms of which that appalling proportion of four to one represents but the comparatively fit survivors. Plainly then,” Shaw concludes not unironically, “the reasonable thing for the rationalists to do is to refuse to live...for positive science gives no account whatever of this will to live” (*Quintessence* 43). When it came to questions of being, we recall, positive science also failed Levin, Tolstoy, and Corelli’s Lionel.

The excesses of Positivist science are dramatized in the final play of the *Methuselah* cycle, where Shaw imagines the creation of two homunculi, a male and a female, by the scientist unsubtly named Pygmalion. This serves as a mirroring bookend to the opening play, in which the creation story from *Genesis* is retold. Similar to Victor Frankenstein, the scientist who plays God suffers here as well: in the hands of science, creation runs amok, and Pygmalion is murdered by his very own genetically-engineered children. He is, appropriately, a Mechanist: “I am a man of science,” Pygmalion asserts, contrasting himself to the “mystic” who “draws a line between an automaton and a living organism,” a line which he himself “cannot draw...to [his] own satisfaction” (*Methuselah* 278). This is entirely logical since, according to the mechanistic view, living and non-living phenomena alike abide by the same laws. Pygmalion views humans as complex automata, equating reflexes (responses to outside impulses) with feelings, and the ability to tell lies with consciousness, focusing, that is, solely on its external manifestations rather than its inner stirrings. But even the Mechanist Pygmalion, his scientific bravado

notwithstanding, is eventually forced to admit that, although they are “so very lifelike,” the artificial male and female who are “the very highest living organism[s] that can be produced in the laboratory” are still not nearly as perfect as those produced by Nature (*Methuselah* 278-9).

More dangerously, the two figures are the epitome of modernity preaching a soulless determinism. The Male figure exclaims, “Free will is an illusion. We are the children of Cause and Effect. We are the Unalterable, the Irresistible, the Irresponsible, the Inevitable: in a word the Determinists” (*Methuselah* 281). He uses the language of Mechanism to describe his reactions; though an exaggeration, his message warns us about the unnaturalness of scientific meddling with life: “Look to your words,” the Male says; “for if they enter my ear and jar too repugnantly on my sensorium, who knows that the inevitable response to that stimulus may not be a message to my muscles to snatch up some heavy object and break you in pieces” (*Methuselah* 282). Shaw’s point about the moral vacuum is, indeed, a moralizing one, but given the pessimism of the age and the challenges to life presented by empiricism, it is hardly unwarranted.

* * *

At no point is Shaw unaware of the personal risks and burdens involved and the general difficulty of implementing “real changes.” One important change, as we learn in *Back to Methuselah*, is the extension of the human lifespan to three hundred years or, as the title to the play cycle suggests, to nine hundred and sixty, the lifespan of the biblical Methuselah, which adds to the colossal hardship and sacrifices involved a colossal geological time frame. In the penultimate play of the cycle, there are still two distinct species, the older of which finds itself not only at an evolutionary disadvantage but, more

tragically, at the mercy of the new long-livers. In the play directly preceding it, “The Thing Happens,” Confucius paints a rather bleak picture of what life would be like if everyone lived to be three hundred:

Every moral man and woman in the community will begin to count on living for three centuries...The family will dissolve: parents and children will be no longer the old and the young: brothers and sisters will meet as strangers after a hundred years separation: the ties of blood will lose their innocence. The imaginations of men, let loose over the possibilities of three centuries of life, will drive them mad and wreck human society.

(Shaw, *Methuselah* 184)

The “discovery” that longliving is not only possible but, in fact, real, and that there exist a new Adam and a new Eve capable of creating a higher race—comes with a price. The sage concludes, therefore, that it “must be kept a dead secret” (*Methuselah* 184).

We learn, moreover, about the economic instability involved: for the former parlor maid, Mrs. Lutestring, the “horror of facing another lifetime of drudgery, of missing [her] hard-earned rest and losing [her] poor little savings, drove everything else out of [her] mind,” since she could not legitimately keep drawing on her Old Age Pension (*Methuselah* 174). The other long-liver, the Archbishop, had to stage a series of suicides by drowning and start anew by assuming a different identity with each successive “lifetime.” The examples are bogus, to be sure, but they are a way for Shaw to voice real social critique: our current institutions, such as the family and social welfare, do not lend themselves to radical evolutionary reform; what is more, we are so attached to them that we may not even be able to imagine “real change,” let alone commit to producing it.

Once the term of human life is extended, our responsibility to our bodies acquires far more urgency, and potentially dangerous acts which promised instant gratification earlier become less irresistible. In Part III of *Methuselah*, the President of the British Islands in the year 2170 declines to hop on the Irish Air Service and be parachuted in for a dip with his female friend once he realizes the venture is “risky”; after learning that he might live longer than expected, he finds “behaving recklessly” no longer as desirable, and his life becomes, all of a sudden, “worth bothering about” (*Methuselah* 188).

Although it comes with greater moral responsibility to the self and to others, a longer lifespan is the only way to obtain a worthwhile education that could lay the foundation for “real change.” “Life is too short for the experience and development needed to change romantic schoolboys and golfing sportsmen, or even prematurely forced Quakers, into wise senators,” Shaw writes in the Postscript, admitting that even in his “89th year I am no more fit to rule millions of men than a boy of 12”: “My soul goes marching on; and if the Life Force would give me a body as durable as my mind, and I knew better how to feed and lodge and dress and behave, I might begin a political career as a junior civil servant and evolve into a capable Cabinet minister in another hundred years or so” (Shaw, *Methuselah* 315).

How serious was Shaw about the evolution of long-livers and the biblical life span? Whether or not he meant it quite literally, the greater symbolism of his claim is unambiguous: clearing the path for change, radically altering social as well as biological structures, and creating a new race—all demand time and effort; however, nothing less should be expected to *reform* a world the formation of which, as modern geology had proven, took billions of years in the first place. Besides, though ostensibly not inspired

by Shaw's play cycle, the success of the Methuselah Foundation, which is a non-profit organization founded in 2000 in Springfield, Virginia, and devoted to the study of senescence as well as to finding methods of coping with diseases related to aging, suggests that his was neither an entirely bogus nor an irrelevant suggestion.²⁰

* * *

Shaw's Vitalism can be seen throughout and will look familiar based on the motifs we have examined thus far. In the opening play of the *Methuselah* cycle set in the Garden of Eden (and aptly titled "In the Beginning"), the Serpent tells Eve about Lilith's "mighty will," and how after she, like Eve, had seen a dead fawn, "she knew...that she must find out how to renew herself and cast the skin" like a snake; in effect, the Neo-Lamarckian Lilith "strove and strove and willed and willed for more moons than there are leaves on all the trees in the garden," finally dividing into two: "one like herself, the other like Adam" (*Methuselah* 69). Shaw recasts the creation story in Vitalist terms, emphasizing the feminine principle and the creative potential of the will. "If I bind the future I bind my will. If I bind my will I strangle creation," the Serpent tells Adam, who silences her, as well as Eve, and sets out to "bind the future" with "certainty" (*Methuselah* 78-9). Adam, the farmer who is always digging the ground, can only sustain and cultivate what has already been created but not initiate it: hence, it is not to him but to the imaginative Eve that the Serpent tells life's mystery. Eve learns of it subsequent to her encounter with death: the circularity motif is thus also added to this already complex image. Further, creation and the will are interrelated, since both require unconditional freedom, a characteristic of Vitalist thought from Schelling to Bergson.

In the second play, “The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas,” Shaw criticizes empiricist science and sides with the “poets and story tellers”: “the poem,” says Franklyn Barnabas, “is our real clue to biological science. The most scientific document we possess at present is, as your grandmother would have told you quite truly, the story of the Garden of Eden” (*Methuselah* 131-2). Franklyn goes on to reinterpret this account, as Shaw has just done in the preceding play, as Adam and Eve’s coming to terms with mortality: facing, on the one hand, the threat of accidental death and, on the other, “the prospect of living forever,” the first man and woman “had to invent natural birth and natural death, which are, after all, only modes of perpetuating life without putting on any single creature the terrible burden of immortality.” Shaw therefore conceives human life in evolutionary terms, with old individuals being replaced by new ones, though not before “the new are ripe for them” (*Methuselah* 132).

This is Bergsonian/Neo-Lamarckian evolution with a purpose, not Darwin’s random selection. “The Eternal Life persists; only It wears out Its bodies and minds and gets new ones, like new clothes,” the biologist Conrad adds, stressing how insignificant human lives are within this “path to Godhead,” a point with which traditional evolutionary thinkers would agree, though they would take issue with the overall teleological movement. Franklyn characterizes life as the “pursuit of omnipotence and omniscience”: “Greater power and greater knowledge: these are what we are all pursuing even at the risk of our lives and the sacrifice of our pleasures. Evolution is that pursuit and nothing else. It is the path to godhead. A man differs from a microbe only in being further on the path” (*Methuselah* 133). What is more, this pursuit is endless since neither power nor knowledge has limits.

Although it has a *telos*, Shavian evolution is neither limited nor necessarily foreseeable, because it proceeds blindly; and while its pursuit is, as we have noted, humanistic (for greater knowledge), its end is not humanity, which could very well turn out to be an “error” and be replaced by a higher form. “The force behind evolution, call it what you like,” Franklyn says, “is determined to solve the problem of civilization; and if it cannot do it through us, it will produce more capable agents. You and I are not God’s last word: God can still create. If you cannot do His work He will produce some being who can,” and humanity, Conrad adds, will then “go the way of the mastodon and the megatherium and all the other scrapped experiments” (*Methuselah* 138-9).

Only Life—which Shaw conceives vitalistically as a perpetual flux—can transcend all other stages as it progresses: “growing-from within, by its own inexplicable energy, into ever higher and higher forms of organization, the strengths and the needs of which are continually superseding the institutions which were made to fit our former requirements.” Shaw advises the governing classes not to panic each time another “ideal” is shattered, “since the apparent growth of anarchy is only the measure of the rate of improvement” provided “the energy of life is still carrying human nature to higher and higher levels,” or, alternatively, a symptom of degeneration and decay which “no panic-begotten penal measures can possibly save anyway” (*Perfect* 249). For the Vitalist, life only is boundless; hence, Shaw adds that Siegfried’s “Anarchism” or “neo-Protestantism” necessary to produce “Freethinkers,” or that of the nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary Mikhail Bakoonin, whom he mentions alongside the mythic Siegfried, is, nonetheless, also transitory and “just as hopeless as any other panacea”; it, too, will be superseded by some higher form as “an inevitable condition of progressive evolution.”²¹

Shaw develops this idea, finally, in the conclusion to the *Methuselah* cycle, embodying in a mystical vision of transcendence a most brutal reality: that along with humanity, all of its prize possessions, its “ideals,” “idealism,” idealist Socialism, and even its most imaginative mythology and poetry will be replaced by newer forms. In “As Far as Thought Can Reach,” Lilith, the first woman of the Kabbalah and creation incarnate—“the poem” itself—must vanish to make space for a higher form. “Of Life only is there no end,” says Lilith, and although she is its source having “brought life into the whirlpool of force” by “sunder[ing] [her]self in twain and launch[ing] Man and Woman on the earth,” she will be “supersede[d]” (*Methuselah* 305). The She-Ancient in the final play predicts that one day, after the “tyrannous body” is itself superseded, “there will be no people, only thought.” In the closing vision, the ghost of Lilith explains that, once we have achieved “redemption from the flesh,” and “the vortex [has been] freed from matter,” we can proceed “to the whirlpool in pure intelligence that, when the world began, was a whirlpool in pure force” (Shaw, *Methuselah* 297, 305).

* * *

We have traced the development of Shaw’s thinking from his forceful call to shatter the “Ideals,” as well as the “idealisms,” which conceal from us unpalatable truths about the world, necessary despite and against any feeling of duty which renders this uprooting undesirable or terrifying; to his embodying of radical change in the anarchic potential of dynamite, which would help clear the path for the new age to unravel upon the ashes of the old, and would require that men and women join forces in creating “a Democracy of Supermen,” a project that would require, in turn, the dismantling of marriage and property, not to mention sentimentality, romance, or even basic

compatibility. This vector of social evolution entails colossal personal burdens stretched over a biblical time frame: for, to reiterate, “Of life only is there no end.”

Creative Evolution, Shaw’s celebration of Life, makes his vision unambiguously Vitalist, suggesting that this otherwise obscure philosophy was much more than a vehicle to address ethical and existential concerns, or to critique the staleness of Victorian education: it was nothing less than a key to the future of humanity. In *Back to Methuselah*, Shaw thus “revitalizes” social evolution and envisions, in the chronologically progressing plays, its continuous “eternal pursuit” of “Godhead.” He appeals to Christianity not to impose dogma; quite the opposite: even “Creative Evolution,” he admits in the 1944 Postscript, “though best we can devise so far, is basically as hypothetical and provisional as any of the creeds” (*Methuselah* 318).

However “hypothetical,” it is a necessary component of Vitalist science—without which we cannot emerge from the spiritual tomb of empiricism and materialism.

By way of an epilogue to this fifth and final chapter, let us examine one other interchange of analogies prevalent in this period: namely, between evolutionary and language theory, with the discourse of organic life appropriated by one field of knowledge from another. As Gillian Beer has shown, because the study of language had been more developed by the time he began to explore geological questions, Darwin borrowed metaphors from the linguists and described “the natural geological record, as a history of the world imperfectly kept, and written in a changing dialect” (*Origin*, qtd. in Beer 164). In the *Descent of Man*, Darwin treated language in genetic terms, as “a species” with a “birth-plac[e],” and the “survival or preservation of certain favoured words in the struggle for existence [as] natural selection” (*Descent*, qtd. in Beer 165).

Though likely influenced more by mythologist F. Max Müller than by Darwin, in *Back to Methuselah*, Bernard Shaw presented language as a fossilized record of extinct thought the deciphering of which required a special archaeological study.

Specifically, in the “Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman,” Shaw envisions “a country where nobody understands civilized institutions,” and it is the dismantling of these so-called pillars of civilization (polite forms of address and general customary propriety; private property; expectations for women to enter into marriage and motherhood; even blushing upon embarrassment when mores of this sort are breached) that make the epitome of nineteenth-century gentlemanly species “die of discouragement” (*Methuselah* 195, 249). Part IV is set in the year 3000; Baghdad is now the capital of the British Commonwealth; the titular character comes to the shore of Galway Bay in Ireland “on a pious pilgrimage” to visit the land of his ancestors, thus becoming the only member of the Travellers’ Club to set foot there, only to realize, soon enough, that he himself is, by and large, a human fossil: a repository of obsolete social, linguistic, and cultural knowledge (*Methuselah* 195). The Elderly Gentleman thinks he is speaking “plain English,” but no one seems to understand him; while the language remains and lives, the institutions to which it refers have long been superseded and redefined: “thoughts die sooner than languages,” he is told, and to understand such “dead thought,” a “special study must be undertaken” (*Methuselah* 200).

Through the linguistic and cultural confusion encountered by the titular character, Shaw suggests that language, with its evolving historicity, is analogous to the geological record of the Earth. The implication is that, just as erosion working on the Earth’s strata, time and the evolution of thought would undermine the linguistic record, leaving our

present institutions, with all of their biases and ramifications, a mere curiosity for the mental archaeologist. For example, without the institution of private property, the word “landlord” would become extinct, and without complex rules of propriety, even the very concept of a “civilized country” would cease to exist (*Methuselah* 195-8). Indeed, while they may have meaning as syntactical units, the Elderly Gentleman’s words sound, to the ears of the long-livers, like a character-string of a malfunctioning word processor.²²

But what does it really mean for “thoughts [to] die sooner than languages”? To appreciate what is at issue here, we must turn to Müller. After becoming a British subject, the German-born mythologist, who was connected with the East India Company, set out to popularize the study of Sanskrit with the English public, with whom the ancient Indians shared, he claimed, a common Aryan origin. Known for founding Comparative Mythology but nowadays largely ignored, he took the Victorians by storm with his theory of Aryas, or the proto-Indo-Europeans who were born poets, felt the immediacy of the world, and put their powerful emotions into their “primitive” language. Since they had too few concrete or abstract words to express their emotions adequately, Aryas tended to speak in poetic metaphor, saying, for example, “the burning one sits down on his golden throne” instead of the more prosaic, “the sun sets.” With time, however, such expressions ossified and their meaning was lost so that later generations had to invent stories, all of them dealing with the sun which dominated primeval poetry and religion, to explain those otherwise meaningless metaphoric relics from the past (*Csapo* 19-24).²³

Müller’s theory of the Aryas is not just a dead-end relic of the East India Company. It provides the key to understanding the tragedy (and the “Tragedy”) of the Elderly Gentleman. That Müller’s name should be conspicuously absent is, in fact, a clue

to this scholar's relevance: his ideas were so popular at the time that they needed no attribution. "The Victorians gobbled up [his] solar myths with insatiable appetites" (Csapo 27).²⁴ Today, however, when Müller's Aryan sunrises and sunsets have been forgotten, the connection appears less obvious; nevertheless, it is crucial and must be reconstructed to make sense of Shaw's play.

To my knowledge, no critic has explored this parallel at length. Eric Bentley reads *Back To Methuselah* in the context of post-WWI pessimism, as one of the later "fantasias or extravaganzas in which the disappointment of many liberal hopes is announced and the apartness of Shaw from the new generation is implied," who, like the Elderly Gentleman, confronted a new generation that did not share his ideals (Bentley 50). Similarly, Edmund Wilson recognizes in "The Tragedy" clear signs of the author's despair, with "[t]he fate of the Elderly Gentleman...evidently intended by Shaw to have some sort of application to himself." Wilson connects this despair to the failure of Socialism, which "was plausible enough to pass before the war" but "[had] taken a terrible blow" (28-9). Daniel J. Leary and Richard Foster similarly underscore Shaw's identification with the Elderly Gentleman, who is forced to admit that "mankind's development" demanded "that his own class with its charm, its eloquence, its art, its Bernard Shaws, must be removed...to make room for a classless society even more fully dedicated to the idea of mankind's development" (114-5).

Certainly, younger generations tend not to listen to their elders. But that is just the tip of the iceberg. Neither of the abovementioned critics sufficiently explains why the Elderly Gentleman's language of poetic metaphor is not only rejected, but utterly incomprehensible to the new generation of long-livers, an evolved species who speak in

simpler, literal phrases. This goes beyond intergenerational conflict: the long-livers do not share the Elderly Gentleman's "liberal hopes" because to them it is "dead thought," an expression from a distant past which has ossified and lost its meaning—the institutions which such hopes were meant to challenge having been abolished. The tragedy of the Elderly Gentleman is that he himself, like his Liberal thought, has become all but *extinct*: there is no such institution among the long-livers.

More convincingly, Peter Gahan, who also sees the play-cycle as Shaw's "own imaginative response to the catastrophe of war," explains the differences between the short-livers and the long-livers in terms of the evolution of creative imagination which, like Lilith's poem, must lose its meaning (by losing its basis in metaphor) as it transcends itself "in order to acquire a greater perception and understanding of reality" (215-6). Gahan looks at Shaw's distinction between romantic imagination, which is "[t]he power to imagine things are they are not," and realistic imagination, "the power to imagine things as they are without actually sensing them," as outlined in the Preface to his play *Misalliance*. "It is romantic imagination from which most of the short-livers (which is to say, most of us) suffer," Gahan argues, "and it is realistic imagination that the play [*Methuselah*] champions. The politicians of Part 2 and, most tragically, the Elderly Gentleman in Part 4 all suffer from romantic imagination" (Gahan 223-4).²⁵

Politically, their romantic liberal ideals are not only contrary to reality, but downright bogus and unrealizable; in the language of imagination, conception, and creation, they prove sterile, particularly in the context of war. Philosophically, this movement of creative imagination beyond itself is, according to Gahan, one of "platonic ascent" at the apex of which creative imagination's power to create images becomes

“redundant” and is replaced, in the words of the She-Ancient, with ““a direct sense of life””: “Shaw, and *Back to Methuselah* is eloquent testimony to this, is a fully paid-up subscriber to the philosophy of the *logos*,” with thought preceding writing and ultimately transcending it—as “thought without language”; and although Gahan claims that Shaw foresaw some of the deconstructionist objections to logocentrism, “[b]y taking . . . image out of the concept of imagination, by stripping metaphor from language, Shaw is left with Platonic thought contemplating reality” (Gahan 230-1).

What Gahan sees as the clash or mix of romantic imagination with its realistic counterpart may be reframed in terms of linguistic evolution, which would also explain why the long-livers refer to the thought of the Elderly Gentleman (as of all short-livers) as “dead,” rather than romantic or unrealistic. Müller’s notion of the “disease of language” means, essentially, that metaphors carry ideas which are no longer tenable or even intelligible, and that the meanings of the Aryan expressions the thought of which has “died” are therefore lost, while their expressions may remain in currency, “preserved as curiosities and ornaments and deciphered at last by the antiquarian, after the lapse of many centuries” (Müller 80; Csapo 23). As an artist, Shaw would have disagreed with Müller’s materialist approach to myth, dismissive of the myth-making imagination, which would be incompatible with Shaw’s imaginative project of rewriting the “Metabiological Pentateuch” and “revitalizing” the biblical myth of creation. Just as he was forced to agree with Darwin on the genetic basis of evolution despite their ideological differences, however, Shaw could recognize in Müller’s evolutionary understanding of mythology a reflection of his own understanding of social evolution: the

language of the “ideals,” lingering even in the absence of the institutions to which it refers, is like that of the Aryan metaphors.

Whatever his take on Müller’s materialist reading of myth, Shaw made his theory the basis of his satirical mechanism to attack outmoded social conventions, bringing the evolutionary and the Socialist objectives together. The objects of Shaw’s satire are marked by words that have no meaning for the long-livers, although the Elderly Gentleman is convinced that he is “speaking the plainest English.” The Woman whom he encounters does not know what “pauper” means, since the long-livers differentiate on the basis of lifespan, not that of economics, with the two options being “the shortlived and the normal.” Moreover, she is baffled by terms such as “trespassing”; “private property”; “claim” (as in “making claim” to someone else’s property); the “satisfaction of damage” (material compensation); “landlord,” which is known to her only as the name of “an animal [that] used to be hunted and shot in the barbarous ages [but] is quite extinct now” (Shaw, *Methuselah* 193-5). The irony is that the gentleman himself is, of course, on the brink of extinction in a community that finds his social etiquette and chivalrous gallantry to be obsolete and unnecessary pretensions.²⁶

What the Woman considers an extinct biological entity is, for the Elderly Gentleman, a prerequisite of civilization. “It is a dreadful thing to be in a country where nobody understands civilized institutions,” he laments, inviting us to speculate whether “civilized” and “institutions,” given their meaning for his generation, might not deserve to be declared “dead” after all. It comes as no surprise that “gross impertinence,” “insult,” and “sneer” should mean nothing to the female long-liver—the gentleman’s conviction that she is exercising the meaning of these very terms upon his person

notwithstanding. Though he insists on not being treated as “a foreigner” and speaks the same language, the import of his words gets lost in translation (*Methuselah* 191-6).

Nor does an exercise in semiotics allow him to win, for something may only be defined against its opposite when either of the two is understandable; otherwise, it becomes a play of perpetuating confusions. Defending his dress against the charge that it is “extraordinarily ridiculous,” for instance, the Elderly Gentleman gets himself into a typical rhetorical puzzle posed by the word “decent”: “There is no such word in our language...What does it mean?” To this, the discouraged short-liver replies, “It would not be decent for me to explain. Decency cannot be discussed without indecency.” Naturally, the Woman “cannot understand [him] at all” (*Methuselah* 192-3). At no point does Shaw attempt to sugarcoat the difficult path to social evolution; he acknowledges that a certain amount of compromise, even sacrifice, is inevitable. Long-livers are not particularly admirable, but they, too, like short-livers, are but a link in the evolutionary chain and will be replaced by a higher form as the Life Force spirals up to Godhead.

The Elderly Gentleman’s conservatism and stubborn clinging to a static view of nature are not admirable, though they do not make him entirely unsympathetic either: “Human nature is human nature,” he claims, “longlived or shortlived, and always will be,” but he will not, at the same time, give up the idea of progress—not realizing, as Jack Tanner makes it clear, that true progress and real changes cannot be executed without a fundamental evolution in our nature itself (Shaw, *Methuselah* 215). The Elderly Gentleman is neither ignoble nor despicable; if he were, this play would be a mere a farce.²⁷ He actually “accept[s] [his] three score and ten years. If they are filled with usefulness, with justice, with mercy, with good-will: if they are a lifetime of a soul that

never loses its honor and a brain that never loses its eagerness, they are enough for me,” he adds, “because things are infinite and eternal, and can make ten of my years as long as thirty of yours.” Besides, given the evolutionary scale, a lifetime of seventy and one of three hundred are practically “equal” as “the difference between one drop of water and three in the eyes of the Almighty Power” (*Methuselah* 240).

Even before his short lifetime expires, however, the Elderly Gentleman chooses assisted suicide—an alternative to dying of “disgust and despair” upon having all of his “ideals” shattered. In the 1944 Postscript, Shaw was a bit kinder to his plight, perhaps realizing that, even despite his awareness and tireless promotion of “real change,” as well as his belief that he himself had been the vehicle of the Life Force, Shaw was, at the end of the day, a humble short-liver like the rest of us. “Discouragement does in fact mean death,” Shaw admits, so “it is better to cling to the hoarest of the savage old creator-idols, however diabolically vindictive, than to abandon all hope in a world of ‘angry apes’, and perish in despair like Shakespear’s Timon” (*Methuselah* 318).

¹ Qtd. in Harry Morrison’s *The Socialism of Bernard Shaw* (108).

² Darwin, however, declined the honor, claiming “he was unhappily ignorant of economic science”; evidently, he was also reluctant to be associated with a socialist revolutionary (qtd. in Morrison 130).

³ One notable exception was during his visit to the Soviet Union in 1931. Eager to rediscover Marx, Shaw seemed to have overlooked the differences between Bolshevism and Marx’s Scientific Socialism. In response to Shaw’s review of Marx’s works in the *Daily Herald*, on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of his death, Clifford Allen objects that “Shaw’s knowledge of Marx’s theories is painfully lacking,” based on his assertion that Marxism “has produced a new civilization in Russia” by putting the theory’s principles in practice. Allen finds this assertion irreconcilable with the Bolshevik approach, since it adhered neither to Marx’s gradualist evolution (with society passing continuously from one stage to another and not skipping from, say, Feudalism to Socialism), nor his belief that for revolution to take place, the state had to be

industrialized with a majority of wage-workers (“Shaw vs. Marx” in *The Western Socialist* [May 1943] 31; qtd. in Morrison 167-8).

⁴ Cf: Alexander insists on the lack of continuity between Shaw’s dramatic and non-dramatic writings: whatever the resemblance between Shaw’s drama and politics, “any comparison is almost wholly without value” (219).

⁵ Case in point: After reading Marx, Shaw experienced what James W. Hulse describes as an “emotional conversion” (qtd. in Carpenter 13). But, later on, at the start of his debate with Hyndman who was his Marxist rival, Shaw would assert, “Marx is as dead as a mutton. I, Bernard Shaw, have killed him” (qtd. in Carpenter 79, 81). Then again, even in his ninety-third year, Shaw wrote in his *Sixteen Self Sketches* (1949), “I never threw Marx over. In essentials I am as much a Marxist as ever” (qtd. in Morrison xiii).

⁶ There was, for example, a panel on “GBS: Global Bernard Shaw” at a recent convention of the Modern Language Association (2010).

⁷ Shaw pointed out, for example, the inevitability of oligarchic rule so long as capitalism persisted; since the fortune required to run for office in Britain in the 1920s is, as Okin observes, comparable to that in contemporary America, Shaw’s argument is more than relevant to politics today (Shaw, *The Intelligent* xxvii).

⁸ For more on Fabian Socialism, see: Edward Pease’s *The History of the Fabian Society* (London: A. C. Fifield, 1916); Margaret Cole’s *The Story of Fabian Socialism* (London: Heinemann, 1961); A. M. McBriar’s *Fabian Socialism and English Politics, 1884-1918* (Cambridge UP, 1962); Patricia M. Pugh’s *Educate, Agitate, Organize: 100 Years of Fabian Socialism* (London: Methuen, 1984); George J. Stigler’s “Bernard Shaw, Sidney Webb, and the Theory of Fabian Socialism” (*Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 103.3 [Jun 15, 1959] 469-475); as part of a broader history of Socialism: Mark Bevir’s “Republicanism, Socialism, and Democracy in Britain: The Origins of the Radical Left” (*Journal of Social History* 34. 2 [Winter, 2000] 351-368).

⁹ Alexander challenges the Fabian Society’s self-proclaimed achievements, that “it had undermined Marxism, influenced the Liberal Party, and launched the Labour Party (8). For a discussion of Shaw’s contribution to the Society—which Edward Pease, in the first *History of the Fabian Society* in 1916, criticized as being of “literary” rather than “political” kind, a qualification Shaw later “vehemently protested”—see, e.g., Alexander (7-15) and Carpenter (87).

¹⁰ Namely: “a ball spinning in space,” a source of sustenance, “a great gaming table,” or “a sort of burial place of hidden treasure.”

¹¹ So, for example, the rationalist who gives up the commandments does not immediately become immoral, but finds another foundation for ethical behavior; at the same time,

however, having also given up on God for the sake of so-called “free-thinking,” such a person inevitably turns to “syllogism worship” (Shaw, *Quintessence* 41).

¹² Based on the facts of Wagner’s life, he claims, we are more than justified to read the Ring allegorically and see in it “industrial and political questions...from the socialistic and humanitarian points of view” (Shaw, *Perfect* 213). In the Preface to the Second Edition (London, 1901), Shaw explicitly addresses the “protests” against his identifying Wagner as “a famous Anarchist in a rebellion” or describing “Niblunghome under the reign of Alberic” as “a poetic vision of unregulated industrial capitalism as it was made known in Germany in the middle of the nineteenth century by Engels’ Condition of the Laboring Classes in England” (Shaw, *Perfect* 88).

¹³ The majority in any society has to be governed by the “capable” few through the establishment of a governmental “mechanism,” which is then left to those “incapable” of government to operate, with certain adjustments made to prevent “the continuous advance or decay of civilization,” and, finally, maintained as “sacred” by those who know the laws to be, in fact, “obsolescent makeshifts” (Shaw, *Perfect* 241-2).

¹⁴ We may find the other two suggestions more objectionable: Shaw suggests, first, that the country’s wealth be distributed on a daily basis to the able-bodied who are producing the full equivalent, with prisoners’ rations forming a possible exception; and second, that the system of punishment be abandoned in favor of putting up with the criminals’ vices long enough for them to qualify for the lethal chamber—the reasoning behind this including unnecessary pain imposed on those who do not know any better, as well as the moral cost of maintaining institutions of torture (*Prefaces: Man* 136-7).

¹⁵ These classes comprise “the dwarfs, giants, and gods are dramatizations of the three main orders of men: to wit, the instinctive, predatory, lustful, greedy people; the patient, toiling, stupid, respectful, money-worshipping people; and the intellectual, moral, talented people who devise and administer States and Churches” (Shaw, *Perfect* 215).

¹⁶ Another argument against the accusation of hero-worship comes from our mistaking “blind instinct” for “logical design”: “The truth is,” Shaw writes, “we are apt to deify men of genius, exactly as we deify the creative force of the universe, by attributing to logical design what is the result of blind instinct. What Wagner meant by ‘true Art’ is the operation of the artist’s instinct, which is just as blind as any other instinct” (Shaw, *Perfect* 274). The agency “to do what is necessary for the good of the race” (*Perfect* 242) is ascribed to something higher: Life, Godhead, Nature, or “Humanity,” not its vehicle. This would be a cogent objection to the accusation of egoism Shaw himself elicited from the Fabians—seeing himself as a vessel of the Life Force.

¹⁷ Baffled by Shaw’s dismissal of the empirical method and Darwin, one critic unfortunately claims, “One has to conclude that in most respects Shaw’s arguments in Preface and play alike are false, ill-informed, unfair, shallow, scientifically disproved” (Shippey 203).

¹⁸ But the persistence of the name is, actually, a useful characteristic which facilitates more than retards change: "...as in the case of Property, the absolute confidence of the public in the stability of the institution's name, makes it all the easier to alter its substance" (Shaw, *Prefaces: Man* 171-2).

¹⁹ This would only exacerbate in the future decades. In her Introduction to *The Intelligent Woman's Guide*, Susan Moller Okin discusses the political context in Britain from 1918 on, when the Labour Party had become the definitive party of the working class, but this did not mean it was characterized by any cohesion in matters of socialist policy (x-xi).

²⁰ See the Foundation's Mission Statement (<http://www.mfoundation.org>).

²¹ Shaw directs Siegfried's admirers toward "The Impossibilities of Anarchism," a tract published by the Fabians "which explains why, owing to the physical constitution of our globe, society cannot effectively organize the production of its food, clothes and housing, nor distribute them fairly and economically on any anarchic plan: nay, that without concerting our social action to a much higher degree than we do at present we can never get rid of the wasteful and iniquitous welter of a little riches and a deal of poverty which current political humbug calls our prosperity and civilization" (*Perfect* 250).

²² An analogy of the human mind to a computer may elucidate this point: it "suggest[s] that the mind or brain manipulates symbols, thought of as the instructions in a machine program, and that those symbols are representations of the world" (the way a computer manipulates the sign "\$" without "knowing" if it stands for currency or something else). "The point is sometimes put by saying that the mind, on this theory, becomes a syntactic engine rather than a semantic [one]" (Blackburn 329). The Elderly Gentleman's language *looks* identical to that of a long-liver, enabling the brains of the long-livers to grasp it syntactically, as a combination of symbols; but it has no referential content that they can understand. In structuralist terms, the "deeper structures" (rules governing such communication) have been lost so that the "surface structures" (the utterances themselves governed by those rules) no longer make any sense (def. adapted from Csapo 189-90).

²³ It is these stories that Müller associates with the first myths, products of "uncomprehending rationalizing mind[s] responding to words whose meanings have been lost in a degenerative process which [he] referred to as the 'disease of language'" (Csapo 26). But for all of his fascination with the Aryas, Müller saw it as a product of a childlike mind (Csapo 26). Myth, in turn, does not fare any better in his book—being, in a Frazerian sense, a misguided attempt at an explanation which is doomed to be false, because the original causality has already been necessarily lost.

²⁴ Even as late as 1909 Otto Rank complained that scholarship on myth still bore the imprint of "the young sun rising from the waters, first confronted by lowering clouds, but finally triumphing over all obstacles" (qtd. in Csapo 27).

²⁵ His reason for why the Elderly Gentleman's case is tragic is a bit less clear, however: Gahan locates the source of his tragedy in that "it is mixed up with realistic imagination in a language of dead thought, which is why he dies after his exposure to the long-livers, possessors of realistic imagination *par excellence*" (224).

²⁶ Leary and Foster note that Shaw wanted to promote "a religion that would encourage men to behave like gentlemen." He wrote, "the real gentleman says...I hope and I shall strive to give my country...more than it has given to me; so that when I die my country shall be richer for my life" (from *The Socialism of Bernard Shaw*). The tragedy of the Elderly Gentleman, then, is this: "In this world of senseless bloodshed and political lies he finds himself to be a gentleman without a cause" (Leary and Foster 114-5).

²⁷ Contrast Edmund Wilson's observation that there is in this play, "nothing burning or touching, and there is nothing genuinely thrilling except the cry of the Elderly Gentleman"; yet, even this cry, "for all the pretense of revelation, is answered by a simple extinction." Wilson concludes that the "Elderly Gentleman is frightened, but his tragedy is not a real tragedy," and the "horror of *Back to Methuselah* is a lunar horror" (as opposed to the "human horror" of *Saint Joan*) (Adams 29).

AFTERWORD

Vitalism After Shaw

It can be seen how, by fragmenting in depth the great table of natural history, something resembling a biology was to become possible; and also how, in the analyses of Bichat, the fundamental opposition of life and death was able to emerge. What was to take place was not the more or less precarious triumph of a vitalism over a mechanism; vitalism and its attempt to define the specificity of life are merely the surface effects of those archaeological events.

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*

The Vitalist chronology presented in the previous chapters ends with Shaw's Postscript to *Back to Methuselah*, specially written to commemorate the work's inclusion into the 500th volume of Oxford World's Classics, issued in the Spring of 1945. Shaw ends his Postscript rather boldly, asserting that "Back to Methuselah is a world classic or it is nothing"; he writes this only seconds after evoking *Faust* and aligning his meta-biological religion with Goethe's "Eternal Feminine that draws us forward and upward," claiming the latter as "the first manifesto of the mysterious force in creative evolution" (*Methuselah* 318-9). Although he harks back to the past and to the Romantic tradition, Shaw is, in fact, looking primarily to the future: "creative evolution means change," whereas "civilization means stabilization," he writes, urging us "not [to] stay as we are," "undertake a new world as catastrophic Utopians," or follow "the nonsense of Weismann and the atrocities of Pavlov, in which life is a purposeless series of accidents and reflexes, and logic only a thoughtless association of ideas." Rather, Shaw suggests, we need to embrace change, for the universe is perpetually evolving, so even Creative

Evolution is, as Lilith at the end of the *Methuselah* cycle, ultimately transitory: it “is basically as hypothetical and provisional as any of the creeds.” Yet, it is, at the same time, “a frame of reference” which can help us navigate between “microscopic revelation and metaphysical speculation,” that is, between empiricism, synecdochically represented by the microscope, and idealist metaphysics—the very space between theoretical extremes occupied by Vitalist thought (Shaw, *Methuselah* 317-8).

Shaw thus engages with several important points that also inform this dissertation. In addition to locating Vitalism in the theoretical middle-ground between empiricism and idealism which, as we have seen, gives the movement a much coveted philosophical openness and flexibility, and pointing to an evolutionary future that is defined but not delimited by continuous *change*, Shaw also urges “the metaphysicians and artist-philosophers [to] cooperate with the astronomers and physiologists in separate but friendly and at the edges overlapping departments of social service” (*Methuselah* 317). This call to interdisciplinarity was born in the Vitalist/Mechanist debate around 1800, when the scientific discussion of life spilled into culture, and it remains a significant component of contemporary scholarship, thereby making Vitalism very much *au courant* in the twenty-first century. Moreover, Shaw’s brief but poignant reference to “the darkness beyond,” which compels us “to tolerate” both empiricism and metaphysics for the time being, ushers in Vitalism’s existential dimension, and reminds us of Levin’s frustration with science, which failed to answer adequately what happened to the body after death, and Shaw’s own evocation of “discouragement,” which necessarily accompanies the shattering of “ideals”—or, we might say, old idols.

But Vitalism did not come to an end with Shaw, who died five years after his *Methuselah* had been proclaimed “a world classic.” Gertrud Hvidberg-Hansen and Gertrud Oelsner’s *The Spirit of Vitalism: Health, Beauty and Strength in Danish Art, 1890-1940*, published in February 2011, is a good indication of the ongoing interest in Vitalism. The book examines Vitalist art in Denmark (including such Danish artists as J. F. Willumsen, Jean Gauguin, Kai Nielsen, and Rudolph Tegner), which was rooted in Nordic mythology and Greek antiquity, and was also part of a wider interest in physical and spiritual beauty evident in the culture’s attentiveness to hygiene and nutrition.

As we noted in the Introduction, moreover, one possible development of vitalistic thought and, particularly, of the movement’s ethical component—what Shaw refers to as “social service” (*Methuselah* 317)—can be located in the recent work in ecocriticism. In the words of Michael P. Cohen, the movement “was born out of the perceived disjunction between business as usual in the university and the environmental crisis”; Cristopher Hitt adds that it “shares with a number of other critical approaches...the conviction that literary criticism should assume an overtly ethical stance” (Cohen 27; Hitt 125). With its roots in Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), Aldous Huxley’s *Literature and Science* (1963), Leo Marx’s wonderfully titled but ultimately disheartening 1964 book, *The Machine in the Garden*, and Joseph Carroll’s *Evolution and Literary Theory* (1995), to name a few, ecocriticism remains a vibrant ground for debate, confirming Glen A. Love’s statement that “biology may be seen as the least exact of the hard sciences, hence the most open to conflicting interpretations” (Love 568-9).

However, the nineteenth-century Vitalists’ concern for the environment transcended the politics and practicalities of reclamation and nature preservation: it was

part of a much broader philosophical reconsideration of the relationship between humans and nature which continued on well into the twentieth century. Writing in the *Journal of the History of Biology* several years ago, Garland E. Allen appeals to Martin Heidegger's organicist and anti-Cartesian phenomenology and, specifically, to his concept of "En-Knowing" ("Da-Sein"), according to which we cannot extricate ourselves from nature or look at it as an external object; rather, we can only see it from within—which is fundamentally contrary to empiricism's claim to objectivity (Allen 470). Schelling articulated this idea in his Identity Theory over a century earlier, of course, and the revived interest in his *Naturphilosophie* (most notably in *Schelling Now*, 2005) validates his relevance to contemporary thinking.

Heidegger was but one of many prominent philosophers drawn to vitalistic thinking or the study of Vitalism in the past fifty years. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972) is often cited by scholars of twentieth-century literary Vitalism. Though his philosophical allegiances remain a subject of debate, Deleuze himself famously said, "Everything I've written is vitalistic, at least I hope it is" (*Essays* xiii). And Foucault, who wrote the Preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, discusses Vitalism in his analysis of the new empiricities of Labor, Life, and Language; while crediting Cuvier and Bichat more so than Lamarck, he also legitimizes our study of this "surface effec[t]" of a deeper shift in the archaeology of knowledge (*Order* 252).

The status of Vitalism now, *after Shaw*, undoubtedly differs from that one or two hundred years earlier, but it is far from dead. If, in the words of Nicholas Roe, "the vitality debate" of the 1790s had "surged from science into literature" bringing together "science, the poet's imagination, and political and religious liberty" (qtd. in Ruston 2), in

contemporary science, such as chemistry, physics, and the recently forged bio-compounds, such as biochemistry, vitalistic thinking has become all but obsolete; the subject is still brought up in articles on the history and philosophy of science, but ostensibly to be discredited. That science dominated by the philosophy of empiricism has little tolerance for vitalistic thinking is a point made repeatedly in the preceding chapters, so it is by no means surprising that already in 1967, decades before Daniel C. Dennett ridiculed it in *Sweet Dreams* (2005), Morton Beckner had dismissed its theoretical validity in an encyclopedic entry, claiming that, due to the unknown-factor claim, “Vitalism is irrefutable” and therefore an unscientific hypothesis (Beckner 254). But, as Hans Driesch forcefully argued, in his Gifford Lectures (1906-1908), the so-called scientific explanations did not explain everything. Driesch’s notion of “entelechy” is based on the Vitalist belief that a living being’s agency and directionality evade physics and chemistry. Writing in 1997, Claus Emmeche et al. confirm that, contrary to chemistry and physics, the holistic notion that the whole is more than the sum of its components, is still a definitive point of contention between vitalism and reductionism (mechanistic materialism); but they also claim that, when it comes to self-organization, “emergence” (that properties at a certain level of organization cannot be predicted at lower levels) offers an explanation philosophically superior to that of the vital spirits. Still, although Emmeche et al. set out to replace vitalistic thinking with the notion of “emergence,” the similarities between the two and the authors’ need to evoke Vitalism suggest that even in science, the debate about life is not yet over.

The invitation to explore the movement’s shifting from science, where its currency has been largely discredited, into literature and philosophy, is evident in the

History of Science Society's call for papers for the 2010 panel for Northeast Modern Language Association, entitled "Uncovering the Tradition of Vitalism in 20th-Century Literature." The organizers' objective was to explore the relationship between twentieth-century literature and theories of Vitalism, which they define as "the belief that the material world and humans are best understood as being shaped by a dynamic field of energy and flow," in modernist as well as post-modern texts: from D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller to Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and Toni Morrison, in such genres as the historical avant-garde, as well as "the New Left" and other mid-twentieth-century counterculture movements. At the resultant seminar held on April 10, 2011, papers ranged from Deleuzian influence on Kathy Acker and Bergsonism in Nikos Kazantzakis to Vitalism in Julio Cortázar, Henry Miller, and the French symbolist theatre.

In this dissertation, I have sought to identify and analyze nineteenth- and early twentieth-century "Vitalist" texts, and to study the movement's history and evolution as it branched out of science and into literature and philosophy. The recent scholarly publications and presentations on the subject indicate that there is great interest in Vitalism; however, much more remains to be explored in this fruitful interdisciplinary area in other periods, as well, inviting literary and culture critics to cooperate with biologists, philosophers of science, ethicists, and other scholars who may lack the expertise in neurology or molecular physics, but all share the belief that humans are not machines, and that along with helping us solve practical problems, science also presents us with challenging, and often unsolvable, moral and ethical dilemmas. I sincerely hope that *A Spirit of the Earth: Vitalism in Nineteenth-Century Literature* will be a welcome addition to this ever-expanding and vitally important critical field.

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