CYNICISM IN THE FIN DE SIÉCLE

by

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Abstract

Cynicism is one of the most frequently used, but most polysemic, words in the modern lexicon. This dissertation attempts to shed some light on a dark subject by tracing the idea of cynicism from the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century and early twentieth in order to construct a multi-faceted theory of modern cynicism which is in turn applied to, and modified by, the writings of H. G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, and George Bernard Shaw. The genealogy of cynicism that I construct in the first chapter draws upon existing research in the area as well as original research from a range of books and articles published from 1790 to 1895. This genealogy shows that the idea of cynicism takes shape largely in relation to the nineteenth century’s anxieties about the social and subjective consequences of modern culture. In the remaining chapters, I examine each writer’s understanding of and engagement with cynicism and explore the ways that each participates in, modifies, or rejects the pessimistic form of modern cynicism associated with the fin de siècle. I suggest that in rejecting the pessimistic form of realism typical of the period, Shaw comes closer than other authors to recovering a salutary neo-Cynicism; I also argue that he perceived, but was not able to overcome, the subjective barriers to political change that more recent theorists have associated with twentieth-century cynicism.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Cynicism, it seems, is alive and well. A recent Google book search returned nearly two hundred title results, while the web search term “contemporary cynicism” returned six thousand. Commentators from both ends of the political spectrum, both secular and Christian, appear to agree that cynicism is one of the great challenges facing modern culture. In most of these accounts, cynicism is an attitude of contempt for, and disbelief in, participatory politics and collective action. Modern cynicism foresees that efforts to make things better (if not already mere rhetoric on the part of self-interested leaders) are predestined to miss the mark entirely or—more likely—to contribute to the very problem they are intended to resolve. Nor is cynicism seen to be restricted to the lower classes: it extends to the very top of the political and economic order, manifesting itself as the secret understanding that between ideals and reality is a gap that offers profit for those “in the know.” This form of cynicism is abetted by the cynicism it helps create: a public that is conditioned by experience to expect little more from politics than “more of the same.”

At the core of this idea of cynicism, like most cynicisms, is disillusionment. The cynic is often regarded—and denounced—as one whose conspicuous illness is the inability to recognize either cultural values or the value of culture. This, of course, is the view of cynicism indicated by Oscar Wilde’s famous characterization of the cynic as one “who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.” But disillusionment and loss of value have long been the preoccupations of modern literature, and this prompts the
question of how modern literature reflects and participates in the discourse of modern
cynicism.

The question is not entirely a new one, but it is one that is overdue for
reconsideration. In the nineteenth century, concerns were increasingly expressed about the
cynicism of modern art and the effect that it would have on culture. In England, these
concerns became especially common toward the end of the nineteenth century in relation
to realism and early forms of modernism. Today, one might be apt to dismiss them as the
moral panic of a moribund culture, but to do so is not only to discount what they can tell us
about the nature of modern cynicism, but also what modern cynicism can tell us about
modern literature. In order to facilitate this discovery, this study adopts the position that
Victorian moralists were not entirely incorrect in identifying a cynical strain in realism and
early modernism. Insofar as modern aesthetic culture regarded established culture with
contempt, revealed its dirty secrets, and exposed them to ridicule, it arguably occupied a
quintessentially cynical role within culture. But as we shall see, the critics of modern
realism also helped redefine cynicism by associating it with pessimism.

My primary interest in initiating this study was to answer the question of what
cynicism is and its relation to modern culture. Since I began this project, a similar history
has appeared in David Mazella’s *Making of Modern Cynicism*. Mazella’s study follows the
evolution of the word from its classical roots to the late nineteenth century. However, the
present study differs from Mazella’s in both aim and focus. Whereas Mazella is primarily
concerned with semantic changes to cynicism, my intent is to follow as far as possible the
idea of cynicism in order to draw out the attitudes that lay behind it. In practice, this means
not only tracking the evolution of the word and its application, but also the progress of the
concept, particularly where it relates to the question of modernity and modern art. Further, with only a few exceptions, the material used in this study has not been included in Mazella’s study, so there is little overlap in our accounts. As I attempt to show, many of the anxieties surrounding modern developments in the arts and in thought during the latter half of the nineteenth century can be regarded as a reaction against cynicism even if “cynicism” is not the word that is always used. Nevertheless, Mazella’s work has offered invaluable insights that have helped me in this study.

Like Mazella’s, my work begins with and builds upon research conducted by the German scholar Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting who has located the roots of the modern negative idea of cynicism in the Enlightenment. In my first chapter I provide a brief account of this history, and reflect on the connection between modern cynicism and the fears about enlightenment.¹ I trace the idea of cynicism through a series of documents from 1790 to 1895 to show that many of the same anxieties about enlightenment re-emerge in Britain in relation to the critical ethos that Matthew Arnold, in his essay on Heinrich Heine, referred to as “the modern spirit.” Reflected in the documents that identify the danger of modern cynicism are anxieties about the decline in manners, civility, and morality in modern culture. These documents record and participate in the conversion of cynicism into a purely negative term, and help to establish a rough theory of cynicism that can be used to cast new light on the cultural tensions that emerge most clearly in the fin de siècle.

As my account of cynicism moves closer to the end of the century, I note the importance of Arthur Schopenhauer. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the

¹ In this study I follow Schmidt’s practice of differentiating between the Enlightenment as a historical movement and enlightenment as a process or ethos by reserving the uppercase for the former.
question of nature again came to the fore after the publication of Charles Darwin’s work, but a crucial development for cultural history and the history of cynicism was the belated discovery of Schopenhauer’s work. Schopenhauer’s pessimistic philosophy was in many ways the supreme philosophical expression of Biedermeier Weltschmerz. Although the first volume of his World as Will and Idea was published in 1819, his work remained essentially undiscovered until the 1850s, at which point its popularity and influence grew rapidly. Schopenhauer’s work influenced the French realists, and by the 1870s, it was also becoming widely known in Britain. His philosophy in many ways complements Darwin’s ideas and illustrates the moral and ontological implications of his evolutionary paradigm. For Schopenhauer, an irrational will is the agent behind both history and the individual, a fact which cast into doubt such things as free will, altruism, and rationality. Although these may have always been open to suspicion, Schopenhauer’s philosophy makes them matters of nature by suggesting that human beings are driven by wilful impulses which they either do not recognize, or which they habitually misrepresent to themselves and to each other. But undoubtedly Schopenhauer’s greatest contribution to modern cynicism was the attitude of pessimism. By showing the omnipresence of the will, Schopenhauer demonstrated that there could be little hope for happiness in the world. The individual’s best hope was therefore to retreat from involvement in the world into various forms of contemplation.

However, Schopenhauer’s philosophy also opens the door to cynicism in another sense of the word. This form of cynicism arises from embracing the implications of his naturalistic philosophy and making it a theory of action. Although Schopenhauer believed that the rational and ethical response to a reality governed by the will to life was to extricate oneself from it, the opposite response was also possible, namely, to embrace the
passions and desires of the will. For many Victorians embracing the will implied the
embrace of shamelessness, immorality, and egotism, which is precisely what many saw in
the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Appropriately, the history of cynicism I offer in the first chapter concludes with
Nietzsche, whose cynicism has recently received a significant amount of scholarly
attention. Much of this attention has been devoted to the question of whether Nietzsche’s
cynicism is closer to the classical form or the modern. My approach to the question,
however, is to examine closely Nietzsche’s use of the word and its relation to his
philosophy. I point out that Nietzsche used the word in both negative and positive ways,
and that his self-declared “cynicism” can be regarded as a conscious reaction against the
pessimistic cynicism of Christian (and post-Christian) morality. In this respect, I agree that
Nietzsche adopted a cynical position, but I also believe that the character of this cynicism,
remains dangerously enmeshed in a characteristically nineteenth-century view of nature.

Following this account of cynicism and its formation, I explore the ways in which
cynicism can be read in the works of H. G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, and Bernard Shaw. I
have selected these authors because each seems to me to represent a different engagement
with and response to cynicism. In the second chapter, I apply to Wells a perspective on
cynicism and utopianism suggested by Peter Sloterdijk. Briefly described, this view states
that one form of modern cynicism is a consciousness that is divided between a pessimistic
view of reality (one definition of modern cynicism) and utopianism. As Sloterdijk
describes it, the cynical utopian is a keen observer of human nature who is all-too-aware of
human imperfections and weaknesses—a realist. But he is unable to live with this
knowledge, and therefore devotes himself to the cause of humanity, albeit in occasionally
ruthless ways. Sloterdijk’s account of this personality type seems to describe the later Wells with such verisimilitude that I felt I had little choice but to explore it further. In the case of Wells, however, I have attempted to use Sloterdijk’s idea of dividedness as a means to illuminate the impulse behind Wells’s early science fiction—or as Wells referred to them, his scientific romances. At the base of these romances, I believe, is not so much the pessimism that Wells’s critics have so often identified, but a basic contempt for the world fashioned by a complacent and obdurate humanity. In his early fictions, Wells’s escapist impulses—impulses that would later be expressed through utopian ideas—were held in check by the knowledge that there could be no escape from nature. Nevertheless, these fictions display an increasing frustration with a humanity that refuses to take heed of the dangers facing it, and the desire to compel it into action through catastrophe, or punish it for inaction.

After Wells, I move to Conrad. I begin by examining Conrad’s own view of cynicism and his engagement with it in two of his novels before proceeding to consider Conrad’s own struggle with cynicism. Because he harboured deep suspicions about the powers of the human mind, Conrad remained pessimistic about humans’ ability to alter significantly their selves or their circumstances. Unlike Wells, Conrad dwelt in his cynicism, tending to regard capitalist bourgeois society and utopian idealism with equal suspicion. For Conrad, being was determined by forces beyond human influence, and it was for him the attempt to change reality rather than to see it correctly and to navigate wisely that produced tragedy. Perception is a major theme in Conrad, and it is also central to his view of cynicism; what connects the protagonists in the works I consider is faulty perception. Not only do they fail to see reality properly, they also fail to perceive correctly
their own true motives. This deception of self and other was for Conrad the essence of
cynicism.

Finally, I turn to Shaw. If the opinions of his early critics carry any weight, Shaw
was the most cynical of the authors discussed in this study, earning the title from his critics
for his satirical attacks upon the institutions of Victorian culture. And in many respects
Shaw’s critics were correct: having accepted Schopenhauer’s idea of the will and placed it
at the centre of his philosophy, Shaw directed his energy toward encouraging people to
liberate themselves from their subjection to prejudice and artificial morality in order to
embrace a nature that had been suppressed. In this respect, Shaw was a cynic, but his
cynicism had little to do with the pessimism or misanthropy with which the modern form is
generally associated. Indeed, Shaw’s project was in many ways directed against cynicism
in this sense. Beginning with Shaw’s early writing and then moving on to a selection of his
early plays, I describe Shaw’s engagement with cynicism and his awareness of its perils.
As I try to show, Shaw was fully aware of the limits both of the theatre and of
enlightenment; he was also aware that enlightenment could too easily turn into
disillusionment and pessimism, and for this reason he attempted to prevent its formation in
his audiences. For these and other reasons, Shaw comes closer than most of his
contemporaries to achieving a viable modern style of cynicism.

In following the history of cynicism and attempting to discern its influence and
appearance in the authors and the works discussed below, I am not interested in sorting
authors into cynics and non-cynics. Cynicism may be alive and well, but living cynics are
harder to find, and for that reason I prefer to talk about cynicism rather than cynics. For the
authors I examine, cynicism is (as it is for most of us) a stance, a pose, and an attitude that
is adopted in relation to social systems, schemes, policies, and sometimes toward
humankind itself. It can, in other words, no longer be considered an embodied philosophy.
This is especially true for authors who are for us the sum of what one reads by and about
them, a sum which cannot, of course, be mistaken for a whole. Thus in talking about an
author’s engagement with cynicism I am necessarily referring to the implied author’s
engagement with and reception of it.

**Cynicism: Uppercase and lowercase**

It has become conventional to differentiate the classical form of Cynicism from the modern
form via the uppercase “C.” The uppercase is also sometimes used to indicate a post-
classical form of Cynicism which remains true, or mostly true, to its classical antecedent.²
While I tend to follow this convention in this study, it is not always easy to draw clear
boundaries between the classical and modern forms. Contrary to accepted ideas, it is not
always the case that modern cynicism represents a complete departure from the classical
form. As I attempt to show, much of what is now called cynicism appears as a negative
inversion of elements extracted from the classical tradition.

Before saying more about how Cynicism became cynicism, it will be useful to offer a
more comprehensive (although necessarily provisional) definition of the modern form. A
good summary of the characteristics of the modern cynic has recently been offered by Luis
E. Navia. According to Navia:

[the modern cynic is one] for whom most if not all human activities are suspect
and unworthy of trust, since no one, according to the cynic, ever seeks or
pursues anything except for the specific yet often secret purpose of benefiting
himself. For the cynic, accordingly, hypocrisy and deceitfulness, primitive
selfishness and unbounded egoism, and gross materialism and disguised
ruthlessness are the hidden characteristics of all human behaviour. Hence the

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² See Branham, “Uppercase and lowercase.”
cynic does not believe in ideals or lofty aspirations, which are in his mind only linguistic and behavioural games promoted for the purpose of manipulating and duping people, or ways to hide the enormous state of confusion that permeates the average human consciousness. (1)

Navia’s account of the psychology of the modern cynic is improved by the additional observation that the modern cynic is also one who uses this knowledge of human nature—often covertly—to advance his own self-interested ends. In extreme form, this type of cynic becomes a figure of immanent evil: the cynical villain who wants to derail the social system in order to see “anarchy” (understood as the law of the jungle) prevail. Often such cynics are more often the stuff of popular culture than of reality, but they are also the stuff of modernism: Conrad was also fond of drawing them.

Another view of the modern cynic has been provided by Sloterdijk in his influential book, The Critique of Cynical Reason. For Sloterdijk, contemporary cynicism can be understood as “enlightened false consciousness,” a melancholy condition produced by the loss of hope for a substantially better world. Like a modern Schopenhauerian, the modern cynic knows that late modernity is the worst of all possible worlds, but he is also convinced that there is nothing to be done about it. As a student of modern history, he suspects that all the attempts to make things better have only made things worse; critique has not only failed to bring about a better world, it has also deepened discontent by shattering “old forms of tradition, identity, and character” and contributing to “the complex of a modernity in which life knows itself to be at the mercy of a continuum of crisis” (76). Nevertheless, Sloterdijk’s typical cynic remains superficially committed to enlightenment, developing a “schizoid” personality which allows him to affirm enlightenment values, but to act “realistically” (i.e. strategically and self-interestedly) as a capitalist subject. This type of cynic is in many ways a disillusioned moral idealist, but Sloterdijk also identifies
another type, the modern “master cynic” who knows that social ideals are false but affirms them publically as a way to manipulate and control those who are not so “enlightened.”

To these definitions several more could be added. But at this point I would like to say more about what modern cynicism owes to the classical form. For most scholars—Navia is one example—the modern sense of the word preserves almost no connection to the original sense of the word, particularly when “cynicism” becomes a synonym for duplicity or manipulation. This, I think, is essentially true, but I also think that modern cynicism can be regarded as a composite that has been fashioned out of the fragments of the Cynic tradition. Navia points out that because no texts containing the tenets of Cynic philosophy survive; the history of classical Cynicism is the history of its reception. Most of what we know about the Cynics is contained in the anecdotes (chreia) of its practice, and most of them involve Cynicism’s most famous practitioner, Diogenes of Sinope. Over time, the best-known stories (and the best-known elements of these stories) have acquired both a positive and a negative charge. For the most part, the negative has come to overwhelm the positive and, in some cases, to subvert the post-classical idea altogether.

In the modern discourse of cynicism, the part often stands for the whole. Perhaps the best example of this is the cynic’s tub. According to Laertius, Diogenes occasionally inhabited a large discarded tub (pithos) which was located on the fringe of the Agora. Viewed both philosophically and sympathetically, this act can be interpreted as an example of Cynic simplicity and minimalism, of adapting an object at hand to suit the present need. One might also suggest that the tub’s proximity to the Agora reflects the classical Cynic’s attitude to society, including the fact that while he disapproved of society, he cared enough about people not to abandon them entirely to it. The cynic in his tub has also often been
taken (especially by Renaissance writers) to symbolize intellectual independence. But 
often this independence carries with it the suggestion of contempt and disregard for others. 
Viewed from a position of extreme hostility, the cynic in the tub can also imply egotism, 
pessimism, and contempt. 

Other Cynic elements also have echoes in the modern idea. Some of these will be 
described in more detail as I proceed, but it will be useful to list some of the main themes 
and ideas of the Cynic (and cynic) tradition as a means of further defining the philosophy 
of cynicism in both its positive and negative forms. Moreover, because cynicism has 
become such a diffuse idea, we should not be surprised to find—as we do in Nietzsche— 
that the word can be used by a single writer in both positive and negative ways without any 
suggestion of logical inconsistency. 

The first I’d like to mention is the idea of defacing the currency (paracharattein to 
nomisma). Laertius tells us that Diogenes was exiled from his homeland of Sinope for 
defacing the public coin, thereby beginning his life as a Cynic. But defacing the currency 
can be regarded as both the first cause and the modus operandi of classical Cynicism. 
Because nomisma can mean customs as well as currency, Diogenes’s assault on the public 
coin becomes a metaphor for his attack on social customs and morality. Again, viewed 
positively, this critical practice is salutary, exposing counterfeit truths and preventing 
outmoded customs from becoming dogmas or hollow rituals. The opposite of this, 
however, is the unsympathetic view of the cynic as a counterfeiter who wantonly disfigures 
cultural values and corrupts public morality. 

The second element I want to mention is frank speech or “parrhesia.” According to 
Laertius, when he was asked by someone “What was best among men?” Diogenes replied

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3 See translator’s footnote, p. 224 of Laertius’s Lives.
“parrhesia.” As Michel Foucault observed in his lectures on the subject, speaking one’s full mind was for the Cynics a show of courage and a virtue. Cynics would suffer death rather than relinquish their right to speak frankly. As Foucault also notes, parrhesia was inseparable from Cynic practice: “They wanted their own lives to be a blazon of essential truths which would then serve as a guideline, or as an example for others to follow” (“Discourse and Truth”). Cynic parrhesia (like the pantomimic displays that sometimes accompanied it) was sharp and often shocking, designed to expose hypocrisy and demonstrate the absurdity of the social practices of which the Cynics disapproved: it can be understood, metaphorically, as the hammer used by the Cynic to strike out of circulation false currency. On the negative side, however, parrhesia appears at best an unconstructive form of speech which primarily reveals the bitterness and disillusionment of the speaker, while, at worst, it becomes a means of deception and manipulation.

Parrhesia, however, is also an important part of post-classical cynicism as a form of confession. The cynical confession is generally “on behalf of,” meaning that the cynic confesses his own motives and nature in the belief that he speaks for humanity. As Mazella notes, this sense of the word is relatively recent, emerging in relation to Jean-Jacques Rousseau who became the spokesman of human nature, but also the symbol of “cynical” or self-interested confession.⁴

The last element I would like to mention is Cynic cosmopolitanism. The first known use of the word is found in Laertius’s life of Diogenes. Asked the question of where he was from, Diogenes responded that he was a “citizen of the world” (kosmopolite), a reference perhaps both to his exile and his acceptance of it. The classical Cynic, it seems, strove to be at home in the world irrespective of whatever fate befell him. This view of Cynic cosmopolitanism has been a constant throughout history.⁴

⁴ I say more about this meaning of the word in chapter three.
cosmopolitanism finds its complete inversion, however, in the idea of the modern alienated cynic trapped in an indifferent and meaningless world, or in the idea of the cynic who wishes to destroy society out of anger, frustration, and contempt.

While these elements do not of course supply an exhaustive account of either Cynicism or cynicism, they can at least help us to identify some of the common tropes and themes of cynicism in both its forms. Thus equipped, we are ready to examine in more detail the formation of modern cynicism.

**From Cynicism to cynicism**

As I have suggested, the divisions that occur in cynicism are the result of a long history of polarized reception, but it is during the nineteenth century that the most significant transformations in the word occur. Niehues-Pröbsting and Mazella have both placed the origins of the word’s semantic transformation in the Enlightenment and its aftermath. As Niehues-Pröbsting notes, Enlightenment thinkers such as Christoph Weiland, Voltaire, Rousseau and Denis Diderot were interested in Diogenes; they associated him with freedom from prejudice, the open criticism of secular and religious authorities, the autonomy of the individual, the separation of morality from religion, universal philanthropy and cosmopolitanism (332). But Niehues-Pröbsting also notes that if Cynicism was one of Enlightenment’s ideals it was also one of its secret fears. Already within the Enlightenment the Cynic appeared with a dual aspect, representing not only an ideal of independent thought, but also the philosopher of folly. Cynic and “false cynic” are used as a term of abuse both in the reaction against Enlightenment and within the movement itself. As Niehues-Pröbsting notes, the modern sense of Cynicism first appeared as a result of Rousseau’s conflict with his fellow philosophes and later revelations.
concerning his personal life. Rousseau’s philosophical style and his valorization of the
natural man had invited comparisons between himself and the Cynic Diogenes. These
comparisons became commonplace, serving not only to designate Rousseau a modern
Diogenes, but also helping to redefine the image of the Cynic for the age (340). But
precisely because Rousseau was closely identified with Cynicism, its reputation was linked
to his. When his relationship with the other philosophes ended in a bitter row and his
reputation was tarnished by some of the details contained in his *Confessions*, Rousseau
became the symbol of a negative or “false” Cynicism: a modern Diogenes without reason
(345). As Mazella summarizes it, Rousseau (and cynicism) came to represent “not Reason
but rationalization; not tolerance but indifference; not scepticism but disbelief; not
independence but distrust; not sensibility but empty professions of feeling” (142).

Niehues-Pröbsting cites Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew* as an important moment in the
formation of modern cynicism during the Enlightenment. Diderot, even more than
Rousseau, had seen himself as a disciple of Diogenes, but in *Rameau’s Nephew*, Niehues-
Pröbsting believes, Diderot explores the prospect of the Enlightenment turning into a
cynical parody. The nephew is also a disciple of Diogenes, but he is a cynic of a different
stripe, one who in many ways hearkens back to Lucian’s caricatures of the “false” Cynics
of his time. As Niehues-Pröbsting points out, the nephew is not only one of the earliest
versions of the modern cynic, but he is also a “nightmare” of the Enlightenment, one in
which “the totally enlightened person who has been freed of all prejudices is not the
embodiment of the pure ideal of humanity...but a disillusioned, callous, and filthy cynic”
(353). The nephew, in other words, is one who has been liberated not only from prejudice
but also from morality and decency. He eschews philosophy and formal reason, preferring
instead to rely on his untutored intellect. He recognizes the vanity and hypocrisy of polite society, but he uses this knowledge only to exploit its weaknesses, becoming in the process a fraud and a parasite.

It is worth noting that similar anxieties had long attended upon enlightenment. As Jonathan Israel has noted, many of the critics of the early phase of Enlightenment recognized that Spinozism and similar ideas posed not only a threat to religion, but also to the stability of the social order. He notes that Ludwig von Seckendorf (1626-1692) recognized that radical philosophy sought “to make ‘life in this world’ the basis of politics,” but he also expressed fear that under such a system the only legitimacy in politics would be the self-interest of the individual (5). And, as James Schmidt has observed, the question of how to control enlightenment was an important part of the enlightenment debate in Germany in the later eighteenth century. As he points out, the concern was that the unrestrained discussion of religious, moral and political issues had the potential to “undermine the conventional mores and beliefs on which society rested” (4). Thus the responses that both Moses Mendelssohn and Emmanuel Kant published in the Berlinische Monatsschrift addressed not only the question of enlightenment, but also its appropriate limits. Kant’s distinction between the public and private use of reason implies that enlightenment ought to be unrestrained in scholarly speech and thought (“public”) but necessarily limited (or “private”) in one’s professional life. Similarly, Mendelssohn (who began as an advocate of unlimited enlightenment) later drew a distinction between “civil” and “human” enlightenment as a means of containing its socially destabilizing aspects. He also expressed his fear of what we would today call cynicism, a “sham enlightenment,” in which “everyone ridicules prejudices without distinguishing what is true in them from
what is false” (qtd. in Schmidt 5). As Schmidt also notes, the French Revolution effectively answered the question of enlightenment and the question of whether or not it should be contained.⁵ He observes that for those who remained sympathetic to the revolution’s ideals, enlightenment “embodied the vision of a society governed by law and reason” while for those opposed to the revolution, enlightenment was a corrosive force which destroyed tradition and authority, opening the door for chaos and terror (15).

One of the greatest opponents of revolution was Edmund Burke, who, according to Mazella, played an important role in defining cynicism for the nineteenth century. Burke’s defence of British prejudice against French enlightenment and his attack on Rousseau helped to define the idea of the modern cynic in England. Burke regarded enlightenment as a destroyer of morals, minds, and one’s “natural” feeling toward tradition. In his Reflections on the Revolution in France, he argues that the French had been sophisticated or “subtilized into savages” (127) by the philosophy of Rousseau and Voltaire and observes that the British have preserved their relationship to prejudice out of the conviction that it provides (among other things) a sounder basis for belief and action than scepticism and “the naked reason.” (130).

Burke’s attacks on enlightenment as a barbarizing influence anticipate and influence the terms of the cultural debate over modernity that develops in the nineteenth century. By mid-century we see the basic terms of the earlier debate transposed upon literature and the arts. In Matthew Arnold’s essay on Heinrich Heine, for example, many of the same

⁵ Retrospectively, the question of whether enlightenment should be limited could only be hypothetical. A growing publishing industry, lending libraries, coffee houses and other means of dissemination meant that enlightenment could not be contained. As Israel notes, excluding the common people from enlightenment ideas would have meant “restructuring the entire system of cultural relations between elites and common people on the basis of consciously, systematically, and universally propagated fraud and deceit” (6).
oppositions—and their attendant anxieties—re-emerge. Rather than enlightenment versus prejudice, however, the tension is now between the “modern spirit” and inherited structure:

Modern times find themselves with an immense system of institutions, established facts, accredited dogmas, customs, rules, which have come to them from times not modern. In this system their life has to be carried forward; yet they have a sense that this system is not of their own creation, that it by no means corresponds exactly with the wants of their actual life, that, for them, it is customary, not rational. The awakening of this sense is the awakening of the modern spirit. The modern spirit is now awake almost everywhere; the sense of want of correspondence between the forms of modern Europe and its spirit...[and] it is no longer dangerous to affirm that this want of correspondence exists; people are even beginning to be shy of denying it. To remove this want of correspondence is beginning to be the settled endeavour of most persons of good sense. Dissolvers of the old European system of dominant ideas and facts we must all be, all of us who have any power of working; what we have to study is that we may not be acrid dissolvers of it. (154-5)

Arnold’s essay is a study in ambivalence. Although he claims that Heine belongs to the master current of nineteenth-century literature and is not only more important than Byron, Keats, Scott (who all suffered from philistinism) and Goethe, he still regards him as “a half-result for want of moral balance and of nobleness of soul and character” (186). The implication is plain: Heine is an “acrid” dissolver of dominant ideas, possessing too much of the “modern spirit.” Although Arnold does not say that Heine is a cynic, others in the nineteenth century, including his English translator, are not so reserved.6

Before Arnold, however, an important development occurs in the idea of cynicism that is crucial to note: Isaac D’Israeli’s treatment of Thomas Hobbes in his Quarrels of Authors (1814). Mazella has discussed the significance of D’Israeli’s characterization of Hobbes to the semantic history of cynicism, but I would like to focus on the characterization itself, which represents a subtle innovation in the concept of cynicism.

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6 In the words of Theodore Martin: “Heine, like most poets, wrote too much; and his name would rank higher in the world of letters if many of his pieces, which are either steeped in grossness or deformed by a revolting cynicism, had never seen the light of day” (viii).
For D’Israeli, Hobbes’s cynicism resides in his transformation of self-knowledge into knowledge of mankind in general. By reducing the moral injunction to “know thyself” to a “narrow principle,” Hobbes “would infer that, by this self-inspection, we are enabled to determine on the thoughts and passions of other men; and thus he would make the taste, the feelings, the experience of the individual decide for all mankind” (487n). “This simple error,” he continues, “has produced all the dogmas of cynicism; for the cynic is one whose insulated feelings, being all of the selfish kind, can imagine no other stirrer of even our best affections, and strains even our loftiest virtues into pitiful motives.” For D’Israeli, the core of Hobbes’s cynicism is his egotism, which leads him not only to project his own consciousness upon humanity, but also to lower it at the same time:

our cynical Hobbes had no respect for his species; terrified at anarchy, he seems to have lost all fear when he flew to absolute power—a sovereign remedy unworthy of a great spirit, though convenient for a timid one like his own. Hobbes considered men merely as animals of prey, living in a state of perpetual hostility, and his solitary principle of action was self-preservation at any price. (440)

As Mazella notes, D’Israeli’s sense of cynicism preserves almost nothing of its connection to classical Cynicism and inaugurates the modern sense of the word. D’Israeli’s modern cynic preserves nothing of his independence from society; on the contrary, his actions and his philosophical system are functions of his fear of social anarchy and self-preservation while his view of humanity is essentially misanthropic, a fact which drives him toward absolutism.

Regardless of its historical accuracy, D’Israeli’s critique of Hobbes provides us with a window into the idea of cynicism and the concerns that lay behind its diagnosis. For D’Israeli, the peril of Hobbes’s cynicism is his use of reason to reduce humanity to the status of animals whose collective security can only be ensured via the power of absolute
monarchy. As Mazella notes, this view of Hobbes appears to draw upon the representations of Rousseau’s cynicism, but it has been turned against a philosopher who is in many ways Rousseau’s opposite. This reminds us that the critique of cynicism (and the slander of classical Cynicism) is not exclusive to either conservative or liberal. Shared by both is the perception that the cynic is one who lowers and degrades humanity, but precisely how this lowering occurs is the point of contention. For the conservative, cynicism corrupts the morality that separates men from beasts, while for the liberal, cynicism disparages humanity by representing it as a beast in need of direction and control.

More than half a century after D’Israeli’s essay on Hobbes, another important document in the formation of cynicism during the nineteenth century is an unsigned article entitled “Modern Cynicism” in the 1868 edition of Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine. The article is notable because it anticipates and helps to define a genre of social diagnostics existing under the rubric of modern cynicism that has endured to the present. According to the writer, modern cynicism no longer assumes the “gross and vulgar shape” it had in Diogenes:

The modern cynic has nothing of the dog about him but the snarl, and lacks the fidelity and affection of the worthy animal which has given its name to his philosophy. His cynicism is the systematic deprecation of human nature; the systematic love for himself, and the pampering of his own appetites; the systematic disregard of all that does not minister to his personal ease and enjoyment; the systematic denial of all great virtue, heroism, genius, or nobleness of character...and the systematic attribution of mean and selfish motives to the good deeds that are daily committed in the world. (63)

Despite these differences, however, modern cynicism preserves its connection to classical Cynicism by remaining contemptibly base. In literature and art, it appears as a “low and mean thing, incompatible with high purpose”; satire, the writer asserts, is compatible with poetry, but cynicism is not; the cynic may write verses, “but he can no
more ascend into the higher region of poetry, than the earthworm or the maggot can soar into the empyrean” (64). The writer identifies three types of cynicism: that which emerges from “disappointment and sorrow, like that of Lear and Timon”; that which emerges from “innate ill-nature and coarseness of mind, like that of Diogenes, Rabelais, Swift and to some extent Voltaire”; and “that which flows from the political and social corruption of a too materialistic and money-worshipping age” (69). The last of these, he asserts, “is the worst of the three, for it makes general that which in the other cases was particular and accidental” (69).

The writer warns that once cynicism has spread through modern existence “like a moral gangrene,” making life contemptible and base, “social regeneration...will have to be wrought by fire and sword, by wars and revolutions” (70). Given the choice between life in a cynical society (where the profit motive rules, where “gentlemen speak ‘slang’ and ladies are not much ashamed of anything but poverty, when nothing so surely excites laughter as a fling at the old-fashioned virtues”) and the prospect of catastrophe, the writer opts for the latter. His feeling in the matter is summed up by a passage from Abraham Cowley, which he quotes, and is worth repeating here for the insight it provides into the sentiment of his discontent: “Come the eleventh plague rather than / this should be, / Come rather sink us in the sea! / Come pestilence and mow us down, / Come God’s sword rather than our own! / Let rather Roman come again, / Or Saxon, Norman, or the Dane! / In all the bonds we ever bore, / We groaned, we sighed, we wept, we / never blushed before” (70).7

7 This stanza, originally from Cowley’s Visions and Prophecies Concerning England, Scotland, and Ireland (1660), appears to have been misremembered or mistranscribed by the writer. It usually reads: “Come the eleventh Plague, rather than this should be; / Come sink us rather in the Sea. / Come rather Pestilence, and reap us down; / Come Gods Sword rather than our own. / Let rather Roman come again, / Or Saxon, Norman, or the Dane, / In all the Bonds we ever bore, / We grieve’d, we sigh’d, we wept; we never blusht before.”
This attitude tends to confirm a point made by Sloterdijk that cultural cynicism occasionally becomes an intolerable social phenomenon, giving rise to a desire for catastrophe. As the writer of “Modern Cynicism” makes clear, annihilation is preferable to the ignominy of life in a nation in which capitalism and a vulgar enlightenment have led to a taste for base entertainment and a sneering contempt for traditional sentiment. But suicide is not precisely what is desired: catastrophe is configured as a purgative for cynical decadence and a means to restore “wholesomeness.” In the second chapter, I discuss a similar impulse in Wells, whose contempt for the irrationality of modern reality drives him not only toward fantasies of escape, but also toward fantasies of destruction.

“Modern Cynicism” is one of the earliest documents to forge the link between capitalism and cynicism. It also represents an important turn in the discourse of cynicism by explicitly associating cynicism with modernity and declaring the former to be a far-reaching moral and cultural malaise rather than the pathology of one man, as in D’Israeli’s account of Hobbes. This shift reflects growing anxiety about the degenerative effects of modern existence. And to the extent that literature contributed to the destabilization of tradition and erosion of moral confidence, it also becomes susceptible to the charge of cynicism.

One of the first explicit associations of cynicism with literature occurs in an 1884 article entitled “The Old and New Cynics.” The occasion of the article was the publication of H.D. Traill’s collection of satirical dialogues, *The New Lucian* (1884), which the writer takes as a harbinger of a pending “revival of [a] cynical tone of thought.” Traill’s dialogues are “cynical,” the writer observes, because they have “the drift of showing that almost every conceivable position can be made to look plausible by one clever man, and made to
look utterly empty by another equally clever man, so that almost all convictions can be paired off against each other, and the equal and opposite waves of light shown to result in the darkness of indifference” (408). In Traill’s work, the writer’s imagery suggests, enlightenment degenerates into the “darkness” of mere cleverness, a quality which erodes the value of knowledge altogether.

For the writer, the main difference between old Cynics and new is virtue. While the old Cynics denigrated science, the affections, beauty, and the “apparatus of government and civilization,” they did so because they regarded these things as antithetical to virtue which they defined as self-sufficiency and radical individualism (409). Modern cynics, by contrast, recognize no virtue; they not only disparage the external world, they also “take pleasure in showing the hollowness of that very inward man whom the old cynics sought to strengthen; they want to prove emptiness at the centre itself” (409). Modern cynicism is thus “deeper” than classical Cynicism because its critique—or its scepticism—goes further than the classical form, consuming the ground on which the older philosophy stood. For the writer, the reason for this change lies in Christianity and its decline. Through Christianity the western subject had come to believe that his inner being was dependent upon the Divine. This conception of the soul connected to the Divine “had gone so deep,” the writer argues, “that where that ideal of it disappears, every ideal of spiritual strength disappears with it, and the utter hollowness of life becomes the natural axiom of the sceptical intellect” (410). The modern subject is thus left with a stark choice: “either we believe in God with all our hearts, and therefore in all which God has provided for eliciting a higher order of character in man” or we become “realists...who are not disposed to live in a world of dreams” but who also “disbelieve in man with all their hearts” (410).
Although it ends by reducing the problem of modern cynicism to a rather unsubtle dilemma which seems to betray the writer’s own religious perspective, the article describes with admirable clarity the connection between metaphysics and subjectivity in the formation of modern cynicism. The writer’s observation that the essential difference resides in an outwardly versus an inwardly sanctioned self not only helps to explain modern cynicism’s association with pessimism and nihilism, but also helps to shed light on the idea of the modern cynic as a role-player or a social parasite such as Rameau’s nephew. If it is true that the modern cynic cannot achieve self-meaning or self-sufficiency to any significant degree he has no choice but to remain within society and channel his contempt into more or less acceptable forms, or (as Sloterdijk argues) become a master of a double life. His contempt is therefore internalized, emerging perhaps only as impromptu confessions or as scandalous pronouncements.

In addition to identifying the crisis of confidence in religion, morality, and society that would define the fin de siècle, the article testifies to growing concerns about mankind’s identity after enlightenment. The idea that man after God would be a “hollow” or a “blank” was in itself perhaps not so troubling since absence can also imply liberty and unlimited potential for self-definition. What was undoubtedly more worrisome was the possibility that the hollow revealed by enlightenment was neither void nor blank, but harboured a repressed and possibly distorted nature: a “cynical” nature governed by low and ultimately destructive impulses. This basic anxiety lurks behind the fiction of Conrad and Wells, but is eschewed by Shaw, who pointedly rejects the idea that cynicism, as the awareness of the absence of moral foundation, needed to be regarded pessimistically. For Shaw, reason oriented toward nature as he defined it had the potential to overcome the
despair associated with disillusionment and to interrupt the spiral into absolute meaninglessness the author of the “Old and New Cynics” sees as the defining characteristic of modern cynicism.

By the 1890s, anxieties about modern cynicism coalesce around modern developments in the arts, especially realism. In 1890, Hall Caine mounted an attack on realism on the grounds that it led to cynicism. According to Caine, the problem with realism is that the eye (unlike the imagination) is only capable of seeing the world negatively: “The physical eye sees, must see, and always has seen, an enormous preponderance of evil in the world” (480). Thus the eye that goes out into the world to describe it “comes home either blurred with tears, as Carlyle’s was when he asked himself what God could be doing in the world he had made for man, or shining with ridicule, as Voltaire’s was when he protested that there was no God in the rascally world at all” (480).

Of these two responses, the second is more likely and more detrimental because it culminates in a cynicism that “prompts no man to noble deeds...restrains no woman from impurity [and] degrades the virtues by taking all the unselfishness out of them that is their spiritual part” (480). By representing the world “as it is,” the realist destroys the values and ideals that literature has long inspired in humanity, reducing human beings to degraded, self-concerned cynics. Notably, in Caine’s view, it is not representation itself that is the source of cynicism, but reality. Realism’s crime, it seems, is its mimetic fidelity.

Caine’s characterization of the stakes in the conflict between idealism and realism reveals how the spectre of cynicism—in this case a “cynical realism”—influenced the direction of modern literature in Britain. It is not the case that Caine’s concerns were simply ignored or overruled. What Caine articulated, others suspected, and one sees in the
literature of the 1890s strategies designed to mitigate and soften the potentially
demoralizing effects of reality and realism. In Conrad, for example, impressionism and
obscurity can be regarded as the means of softening the demoralizing effects of cynical
realism. In Wells, a similar antipathy to realism gives rise to fantasies of escape but also to
grotesques. And even Shaw rejects realism as formulated by the French, preferring instead
a realism mediated by irony and humour rather than bitterness and negativity.

Many of Caine’s concerns were echoed and extended to modernism in Robert
Buchanan’s 1891 essay “The Modern Young Man as Critic.” In terms of the cultural
politics of the day, Buchanan was something of a critical gadfly who located himself (in
his own words) between “Conventionalists who assume that everything existing is right”
and “Reformers who believe that everything existing is wrong” (The Coming Terror v).
Aesthetically, he was a vigorous opponent of both naturalism and realism, which he
regarded as fatally disillusioned and contemptuous of beauty. His targets in “The Modern
Young Man as Critic” are representatives of a shift in aesthetic temperament that we would
now identify as an early wave of modernism. He dissects five “types” of the modern young
man, ranging from the “superfine” Henry James to the super-coarse: the semi-barbarous
“Bank-Holiday Young Man” as exemplified by the Irish novelist George Moore. For
Buchanan, the typical representative of this generation is “a young man who has never
dreamed a dream or been a child, [is] a young man whose days have been shadowed by the
upas-tree of modern pessimism, and who is born to the heritage of flash cynicism, and
cheap science, of literature which is less literature than criticism run to seed” (147). What
connects these five types for Buchanan is a “knowing” attitude toward life—“an
assumption of complete familiarity with the ‘facts’ of existence.” This knowingness, in
turn, prevents them from grasping the beauty and enjoyment of life either artistically or existentially (147).

In many ways Buchanan’s reaction to realism echoes the earlier debate over enlightenment. What the critical ethos of enlightenment had done to philosophy and politics, it now threatened to do also to literature. As with enlightenment, realism threatens to strip away the fragile aura of literature and replace it with an ethic of clinical analysis schooled in Schopenhauerian pessimism (170). In Buchanan’s estimation, the force behind literary realism is “cynicism, ” or the morbid fascination with exploring and exposing the most sordid details of existence. This moral disease is not limited to literature, but broadly pervades modern culture, finding a different form in each area of culture it infects. For Buchanan, the ultimate expression of social cynicism is Jack the Ripper, who is “to our lower social life what Schopenhauer is to philosophy, what Zola and his tribe are to literature … the diabolical adumbration of a disease which is slowly but surely destroying moral sentiment, and threatening to corrupt human nature altogether” (173).

Buchanan enumerates the qualities of the cynical Ripper in close detail. Because his observations record the transformation of the modern cynic into a figure of immanent evil, they are worth quoting in full:

To begin with, [the Ripper] is an instructed, not a merely ignorant, person. He is acquainted with at least the superficialities of Science. His contempt for human nature, his delight in the abominable, his calm and calculating though savage cruelty, his selection of his victims from among the socially helpless and morally corrupt, his devilish ingenuity, his supernatural pitilessness, are all indications by which we may know him as typical, whether in literature or in the slums, in Art or among the lanes of Whitechapel. Most characteristic of all is his irreverence for the human form divine, and his cynical contempt for the weaker sex. As the unknown murderer of the East-End, he desecrates and mutilates his poor street-walking victims. As Zola or De Goncourt, he seizes a living woman, and vivisects her nerve by nerve, for our instruction or our
amusement. To him and to his class there are no sanctities, physical or moral or social; no mysteries, human or superhuman. (173-4)

One of the most conspicuous features of the Ripper as modern cynic is his misogyny, a traditional feature of cynicism that is here reapplied, albeit with a difference. Whereas for most of its history, cynical misogyny was connected to the Cynics’ ideal of autonomy and their critique of vanity, the modern cynic’s misogyny becomes simply an extension of his baseless attack upon civilization. In this respect, it is worth observing that by the end of the nineteenth century the ideal of civilization had become so thoroughly conflated with the ideal of the feminine that any assault upon the sacrosanct image of female dignity became the expression of contempt for culture. Moreover, after Oscar Wilde’s 1895 trial for gross indecency, the misogyny of the cynic would be compounded with notions of homosexuality and decadence, in turn creating a version of the depraved cynic as a chimera of the nineteenth century’s cultural anxieties—one given flesh in the character of Gentleman Jones in Conrad’s Victory, which is discussed in chapter three.

Not every manifestation of the disease of social cynicism produced clinical murderers and French realists, however. At “the bottom rung of the ladder” in Buchanan’s list is George Moore whose cynicism is characterized by contempt for high culture. As a representative of the type that “hates everything—Shakespeare, Art, Poetry, Religion, Decency—everything but pipes and beer,” Moore represents for Buchanan the beginning of the corruption of literary culture by lower forms: a naturalism of the bank holiday and the music hall. Despite his scorn, Buchanan finds this low form of cynicism preferable to the duplicity he detects in men like Henry James and William Archer because its brutish honesty clearly reveals the essence of the modern movement in literature: “[Moore], at all events, is not disingenuous. He…has shown his class as it is, in all the nudity of its
cynicism, in all the plenary audacity of its unbelief. We ought not, therefore, to be very angry with him, after all” (181). Moore, in other words, not only acts the confessor for the modern masses whose taste for common entertainment represents a degraded return to nature, but also for the more fraudulent cynics whose “superfine” qualities mask an identical contempt for high culture and established institutions.

Buchanan’s critique of the modern young man represents an important moment not only in the development of the idea of modern cynicism, but also in the reception of early modernism. His reaction against his modern authors indicates that for its early critics, the most distinguishing—and disturbing—feature of early modernism was not its technical or formal properties, but its attitude. For Buchanan this attitude is “cynicism,” the product of a naturalism that runs from Schopenhauer to James via the French realists.

The next work I would like to situate within the genre of the critique of modern cynicism is Max Nordau’s 1892 book Entartung (published in English as Degeneration in 1895). Degeneration exerted a considerable influence during the fin de siècle and the early twentieth century. It was an immediate success, going through eight impressions in the first year of publication alone and was reprinted in popular editions in 1898, 1913 and 1920 (Thatcher 28). As Hans-Peter Söder has noted, the book’s popularity made it difficult to ignore; it became “de rigueur for both critics and defenders of literary modernism” well into the twentieth century (474). Ironically, although the book was written with the express purpose of warning the public against the dangers of modernism, it served as one of the most effective means of introducing the broader British public to writers who had not been well known prior to its publication (Söder 474).
According to its author, *Degeneration* is an attempt to extend Cesare Lombroso’s theory of criminal degeneracy to “modern” artists; to demonstrate that “the [fin de siècle] tendencies of the fashions in art and literature…have their source in the degeneracy of their authors, and that the enthusiasm of their admirers is for manifestations of more or less pronounced moral insanity, imbecility, and dementia” (viii). Nordau begins his analysis with a symptomatology of fin de siècle malaise. His examples of degenerate behaviour include a king who sells his title and position for money; a bishop who capitalizes on his own scandal; a policeman who has the skin of an executed criminal made into cigarette cases for himself and his friends; a public schoolboy who is aware but completely unashamed of his father’s white-collar crime; and a young lady who suggests that the best way for her friend to negotiate the dilemma of marrying for love or for money is to marry for money and then to introduce her lover to her husband (4). Surveying these symptoms, Nordau concludes that the common feature uniting them is “contempt for traditional views of custom and morality” (5). For Nordau, this contempt opens the way for the repudiation of traditional limits on behaviour:

To the voluptuary this means unbridled lewdness, the unchaining of the beast in man; to the withered heart of the egoist, disdain of all consideration for his fellow-men, the trampling under foot of all barriers which enclose brutal greed of lucre and lust of pleasure; to the contemnor of the world it means the shameless ascendancy of base impulses and motives, which were, if not virtuously suppressed, at least hypocritically hidden; to the believer it means the repudiation of dogma, the negation of a super-sensuous world, the descent into flat phenomenalism; to the sensitive nature yearning for aesthetic thrills, it means the vanishing of ideals in art, and no more power in its accepted forms to arouse emotion. And to all, it means the end of an established order, which for thousands of years has satisfied logic, fettered depravity, and in every art matured something of beauty. (5)

Even though the word “cynicism” appears only once in the text (in relation to Baudelaire), passages such as this make it abundantly clear that the pathology Nordau has diagnosed as
“degeneration” is more commonly known as cynicism. In his hands, however, what had formerly been regarded only metaphorically as a disease is now represented as an actual one.

A number of ideas familiar to the critique of cynicism reappear in *Degeneration*, such as the idea of the corrupting cynic. Nordau attributes the decline of contemporary culture to a number of influential degenerates responsible for leading the population astray. One of the defining characteristics of these degenerates is “moral insanity,” the symptoms of which are the attempt to “prove that ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ virtue and vice, are arbitrary distinctions” or the discovery of “beauties in the lowest and most repulsive things”; and the attempt to awaken interest in ...every bestiality” (18). Another trait of Nordau’s degenerate is emotionalism: “He laughs until he sheds tears, or weeps without adequate occasion,” often in the presence of “insipid” art (19). But perhaps the defining characteristic of the degenerate type is a “mental weakness and despondency” which typically manifests itself as pessimism (19). For Nordau, such degenerates are the predestined followers of Arthur Schopenhauer, Eduard von Hartmann and Buddhism (20).

Nordau’s gallery of degenerates is large, but he reserves a special category—and special scorn—for men like Max Stirner, Oscar Wilde, Henrik Ibsen, and Friedrich Nietzsche whom he identifies as types of “ego-maniacs.” These ego-maniacs are “mental invalids” who, due to faulty nerves caused in part by the stress of modernity, cannot receive the world correctly and therefore can neither “take up the right attitude toward it” nor successfully adapt to its structures (243). Ultimately, the isolated ego of the degenerate “turns in wrathful discontent against Nature, society and public institutions” and is “in a

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8 In England, Nordau’s claims (and popularity) were undoubtedly lent credence by the Oscar Wilde scandal, which erupted the same year that *Degeneration* was published. For a discussion of the characterization of Wilde as a modern cynic, see Mazella, 198-208.
constant state of revolt against all that exists, and contrives how he may destroy it” (263). In positions of influence, moreover, these ego-maniacs are Pied Pipers of destruction, leading their followers toward revolutions that do not clear the ground for reconstruction, but leave “heaps of rubbish overgrown by noxious weeds where once walls and gables reared themselves” (264).

Undoubtedly, Degeneration’s great flaw is that it was written as a scientific anatomy rather than a satirical one. Because it was not, its destiny has been to become a parody of scientism, with the pseudoscientific apparatus that once lent it authority now appearing as its most discrediting feature. However, if we look beyond its pseudoscience, we see that, like the essay “Modern Cynicism,” Degeneration is essentially a critique of cynicism—a moral polemic that adopts a sceptical attitude toward what it calls “degeneration.” But, like that earlier document, it can also be viewed as a cynical critique of cynicism because it tends to participate in the very attitude that it identifies. But for all of its distortions and rhetorical excesses, the book expresses anxieties that were not limited to cultural conservatives.9 It became a bestseller not only because it sought to define a new and ambivalent movement in the arts, but because it gave voice to anxieties concerning the health of European culture. At the root of these fears was the perception that the destabilizations of modernity created the conditions for a moral and cultural decline that only vigilance, force of will, and the preservation of a common front could avert. Whatever neurological deficiencies Nordau’s degenerates suffered, their basic illness was an inability

9 Interestingly, in spite of his attack upon modernism, Nordau was not particularly conservative. In his book The Conventional Lies of our Civilization (1887) he draws attention to the lies that still define civilization, such as religion, monarchy, politics, economics and marriage, and calls for the transformation of civilization by reason. For Nordau, however, reason, nature, and civilization were not only essentially compatible, but synonymous. He seems to have believed that the spirit of reason could flow into the hollow left by the ghosts of prejudice, transforming the social edifice from within.
to see the world properly—which for Nordau meant rationally—and their offence was to impose this vision upon civilization with the ultimate intent of tearing it down for no other reason than to wallow in the rubbish.

With Nordau’s degenerate, the transformation of the cynic into one of the great bugbears of modernity is complete. The history of the cynic from the Enlightenment to the end of the nineteenth century reveals that he is a composite monster who is in many ways the sum of the nineteenth century’s fears about modernity. His liberation from prejudice and superstition has also led to alienation and contempt. At his best, he is indifferent, self-concerned, flippant and ironic; at his worst, he is immoral, egoistic, nihilistic, degenerate, and wantonly destructive. His disposition ranges from brooding melancholy to devilish glee. His view of the world is deficient, having been affected by the pressures of modern society, philosophy, art, or the decline of religion. And because the cynic is morally and spiritually empty, he is incapable of seeing any value in society, which he regards as merely a façade concealing a meaningless and chaotic state of nature.

As I have suggested, this type of cynic is probably more often a figure of fiction (and of social theories) than of reality. But the image of the modern cynic is useful for what it tells us about the deeper cultural anxieties of an age. The postmodern discourse of cynicism, for example, often reflects contemporary anxieties about the health of democracy and the public sphere, but Victorian and early twentieth-century discourse tends to reflect anxieties about the decline of tradition, meaning and morality, and in many ways, the late Victorian cynic becomes the embodiment of a profoundly ambiguous modernity. But he was also a compelling figure because he was regarded (like any popular monster) as a portent of the future.
In contrast to this prevailing, negative view of the cynic, however, it is also worth noting the originality and significance of D’Israeli’s portrait of Hobbes. By refashioning the cynic as the slanderer of human nature rather than the enemy of society, D’Israeli not only helps to redefine cynicism for the later nineteenth century, he also contributes to the idea of a conservative cynicism. Unlike the classical Cynic who wished to overcome culture in order to reaffirm nature, this conservative cynic uses nature to affirm culture. As Mazella notes, this sense of cynicism preserves almost no connection to the classical roots of the word, and one could argue that it is in fact an “anti-cynicism” because it is an attitude that is in many ways the antithesis of the social-critical form. But it is apt that this attitude is also called cynicism since, like its antithesis, it also sees the basic animal in humanity. Rather than accepting this truth, however, the anti-cynic recoils from it, treating it as a calamity that calls for the reassertion of morality and meaning against what he sees as the forces of nihilism and degeneration.

This brings me to my final case study in the formation of modern cynicism, Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s role in the modern history of cynicism is important because he can be regarded as both a theorist and a practitioner of modern cynicism. As Niehues-Pröbsting has shown, Nietzsche came increasingly to see his philosophy as a form of modern cynicism. He notes that Nietzsche’s interest in Cynicism was both historical and recuperative: “he enquired what possibilities Cynicism could offer beyond its historical uniqueness and past: possible modes of living; moral possibilities, particularly the problematization and critique of morals;...possibilities of an enlightened personal style critical of morals; rhetorical-literary and polemical possibilities” (354). All of these
possibilities, Niehues-Pröbsting believes, Nietzsche eventually adopted, declaring in his later works such as *Ecce Homo* his allegiance to cynicism.

Niehues-Pröbsting’s original argument has since been revisited and developed by R. Bracht Branham, Anthony Jensen and Ian Cutler, but none of these writers has explored Nietzsche’s own critique of cynicism nor the extent to which his late characterizations of his work as “cynicism” suggest that he increasingly saw his work as a form of “counter cynicism,” or a cynicism pointedly opposed to a more pervasive and insidious form of cynicism in European culture. In order to define this critique of cynicism, I’d like to explore his use of the word in two of his works. The first is the early essay “The Use and Abuse of History for Life” (1874) and the second is *The Anti-Christ* (1888).

Early in “The Use and Abuse of History” Nietzsche suggests that classical Cynicism, is a shortcut to happiness, which he defines as the absence of historical knowledge. He points out that because the animal lives always in the present, it is not subject to the burden of memory or history. As Nietzsche points out, the closest humankind can get philosophically to this state of happiness is “Cynicism”:

> If happiness and the chase for new happiness keep alive in any sense the will to live, no philosophy has more truth than the Cynic’s: for the beast’s happiness, like that of the perfect cynic, is the visible proof of the truth of Cynicism. *(Thoughts Out of Season, 8)*

Cynicism in this sense stands in contrast to the cynicism that Nietzsche identifies later in the essay. The essay’s central theme, as the opening meditation helps to signal, is the enervating effect of historical knowledge. Nietzsche describes five consequences of an “excess of history.” These include an increasing sense of disjunction between inner and outer being that weakens the personality; the belief that the modern age has achieved a greater level of justice than previous times; the thwarting of individual and collective
instincts; the belief that we are “epigones” or latecomers on the historical scene; and finally, “a dangerous condition of irony...and the still more dangerous state of cynicism, when a cunning egoistic theory of action is matured that maims and at last destroys the vital strengths” (39).

Each of these consequences is worthy of examination, but I will focus only on the last. As Nietzsche explains, a “dangerous state of cynicism” appears in the belief that humanity is the product rather than the producer of history. For Nietzsche, cynicism in this sense is most evident in Eduard von Hartmann’s philosophy, which sees humanity as the expression of an indifferent “world process.” Because his fate is no longer in his own hands, modern man no longer has any responsibility for history: he “has nothing to do but to live on as he has lived, love what he has loved, hate what he has hated, and read the newspapers he has always read. The only sin is for him to live otherwise than he has lived” (79). Released from the responsibility to aspire to great things, modern man is free to develop an ingrown, world-weary egotism that aspires to petty things. Contributing to this malaise is the non-teleological and nihilistic nature of the “world process” worldview:

If we have the doctrines of the finality of “becoming,” of the flux of all ideas, types, and species, of the lack of all cardinal differences between man and beast (a true but fatal idea as I think),—if we have these thrust on the people in the usual mad way for another generation, no one need be surprised if people drown on its little miserable shoals of egoism, and petrify in its self-seeking. (84)

In contrast to the initial reflection on Cynicism that prefaces the essay, Nietzsche identifies a cynicism that returns man to nature by subjecting him to the lowering effects of pessimistic philosophies. Crushed beneath the weight of the philosophy of the world process, modern man finds no hope, no happiness, and no vitality; life becomes beastly,
reduced to selfishness and the pursuit of personal advantage over others. Cynicism, as a form of nihilism, becomes the condition of modern existence.

Nietzsche returns to the idea of negative cynicism in *The Anti-Christ*, his most forceful attack on Christianity and its legacy. Here it is used to characterize the deceptions and self-interest of Christian morality and priestcraft. It first appears in the context of his account of the original appropriation of organic religious sentiment by clerics as a means of social control. For Nietzsche, the archetypal priest is “a parasitical type of person” who “gives the name ‘kingdom of God’ to a state of affairs where the priests determine the value of things;…[and] gives the name ‘will of God’ to the means used to reach or maintain this state; he coldly and cynically measures peoples, ages, and individuals according to whether they promote or oppose the domination of the priests” (23). Later in the essay Nietzsche describes the literal reception of the Gospels as a “derision of symbols” amounting to “world historical cynicism” (31). As in his earlier use of the word in “The Use and Abuse of History,” cynicism here implies the reduction of humanity as well as conscious deception for the purpose of transforming humanity into an obedient, denatured herd. Consider the following excerpt:

*All* church concepts are known for what they are, the most malicious counterfeits that exist to *devalue* nature and natural values; the priests themselves are known for what they are, the most dangerous type of parasite, the true poisonous spiders of life…We know, our *consciences* are conscious of it these days, just what value those uncanny inventions of the priests and the church have, *how they were used* to reduce humanity to such a state of self-desecration that the sight of it fills you with disgust…. (34)

Here the cleric emerges more clearly as a cynical counterfeiter of human nature. Nietzsche suggests that cynicism, as manifest in ecclesiastical power, is the subversion of organic cultural values by a false morality directed toward control instead of life. Eventually both
culture and the subject become counterfeit—“reductions” and “self-desecrations” of a more authentic existence.

We can shed further light on Nietzsche’s use of cynicism in *The Anti-Christ* by referring to his “Problem of Socrates” in *Twilight of the Idols* where he develops the idea (first introduced in *The Birth of Tragedy*) that Socrates was the first philosophical decadent. For Nietzsche, Socrates and Plato were “symptoms of decay” and “tools of Greek disintegration” rather than the pioneers of dialectics and the practitioners of reason (162). For Nietzsche, Socrates’s classical popularity can be explained by the solution he offered to Greek culture: a means to control the most disturbing symptom of cultural decline, “uncivil” instincts, the “monstrum in animo.” Socrates’s answer to these manifestations was to place reason over instinct, but reason not only suppresses the instincts, it also arrests the cycle of cultural decline and regeneration which, for Nietzsche, leads to the renewal of vitality. Socrates’s solution enshrines decadence by defining existence as a perpetual struggle between reason and instinct. If, for Nietzsche this is the original counterfeit of human nature,\(^\text{10}\) it is also the first moment of cynicism since it begins the decadent reaction against manifestations of the animal in humanity. Ironically, those who would save man from his animal side become “evil beast tamers” (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 155) whose web of counterfeit morality enshrines decadence and enslaves humanity. What is required, then, is a cynicism with the potential to sweep away the institutionalized lies of Christianity and Platonic philosophy.

While Nietzsche expressed an appreciation of Cynicism at various points in his career, it is only in his late writings that he begins to identify his own project with it. In the

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\(^{10}\) For Nietzsche, as Hutter has pointed out, “Socrates and his followers…originated a first transvaluation of values under which ‘counternature’ gradually assumed the force of instincts and initiated the reign of lies [that] reached its full expression in Christianity” (120).
preface to *The Will to Power*, for example, he declares that “Of what is great one must either be silent or speak with greatness. With greatness—that means cynically and with innocence” (3), which implies that the work we are about to read is in some way cynical. In *Ecce Homo* he states that his best books “sometimes reach the highest elevation you will find anywhere on earth, cynicism” (103). And in a letter to Georg Brandes in 1888, he provocatively describes *Ecce Homo* as a “cynicism that will become world-historical” (qtd. in Niehues-Pröbsting, 354). But what precisely do these self-characterizations mean?

The answer seems to lie in section twenty six of *Beyond Good and Evil*, where Nietzsche praises cynicism as the “only form in which base souls touch upon that thing which is genuine honesty.” For the truth seeker, “so-called cynics” are a fortunate find because they “recognize the animal, the commonplace and ‘norm’ within themselves, and yet still have a degree of spiritedness and an urge to talk about themselves and their peers in front of witnesses” (39-40). What Nietzsche alludes to here is the form of shameless speech the Cynics associated with parrhesia. In describing his own work as “cynical” he suggests that many will find it shameless and even perverse; but there is also an implicit claim to truth in this self-characterization because (as Foucault notes) it takes both courage and conviction to speak shamelessly. Indeed, Nietzsche’s characterization of cynicism as the highest thing on earth in *Ecce Homo* can be read as a paraphrase of Diogenes’s assertion that parrhesia is the most excellent thing among men.

This leaves us with Nietzsche’s assertion in his letter to Brandes that his form of cynicism would become world-historical. This prompts the question of what shape this world-historical cynicism might assume beyond shameless free speech. Branham has described Nietzsche’s cynicism as a mode of existence and a philosophical style. He points
out that Nietzsche’s life of exile and rejection of a fatherland replicates in a modern form the Cynic ideal of independence and cosmopolitanism as the “preferred mode of living for a philosopher” (“Nietzsche’s Cynicism” 171). Branham mentions other aspects of Cynic practice replicated by Nietzsche as well, including shamelessness, asceticism and a style of philosophy that stands ambiguously between comedy and seriousness (serio-comedy or spoudogeloios); all of these, he concludes, serve to place Nietzsche’s cynicism closer to the classical rather than the modern form.

Other similarities between Nietzsche’s life and philosophical style and classical cynicism have also been noted by Anthony Jensen and Ian Cutler. Yet no one seems yet to have noticed that this claim echoes the description of Christianity as a world-historical cynicism in The Anti-Christ. This echo suggests that Nietzsche believed his own cynicism would help bring an end to the counterfeit of human nature that he thought had defined and distorted Western history for nearly two millennia. At a primary level of meaning, this claim seems to refer to Nietzsche’s parrhesia, but he appears to have had in mind a more significant role for cynicism. In the Will to Power, the cynic is named, along with the experimenter and the conqueror, as a coming generation of “new barbarians” who unite “spiritual superiority with well-being and an excess of strength” (478). Although they emerge out of decadence, these new barbarians play an important role in regeneration by tearing down the moribund structures of culture. The cynic’s precise role in the process of regeneration is suggested in another passage:

A pessimistic teaching and way of thinking, an ecstatic nihilism, can under certain conditions be indispensable precisely to the philosopher as a mighty pressure and hammer with which he breaks and removes degenerate and decaying races to make way for a new order of life, or to implant into that which is degenerate and desires to die a longing for the end. (544)
Notably, this function is more or less identical to the fruits of cynicism identified by the author of “Modern Cynicism.” The cynic’s role in regeneration is twofold: on the one hand he exposes and ridicules the old ways of life, but on the other he makes life seem intolerable. The cynic is like a symptom that triggers a violent response from the social body which ultimately leads it back to health and vitality. In this respect, Nietzsche’s cynic recovers something of the regenerative power that Bakhtin believed had been displaced from the modern idea of the grotesque.

For Nietzsche, an important aspect in this recovery is the overcoming of pessimism. Nietzsche owed a considerable intellectual debt to Schopenhauer, but he vehemently rejected his pessimism. In the passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche is very clear that the best cynics are those who speak “badly” of humanity, but do not speak “ill” of it. In describing “man as a belly with two needs and a head with one,” the beneficial cynic is not “bitter”; nor is he pessimistic or misanthropic. This enlightened attitude of the beneficial cynic stands in implicit contrast to what for Nietzsche might qualify as a bad cynic, the “indignant man” who is “continually tearing and rending himself with his teeth (or, instead of himself, the world, or God, or society)” (40).

It is worthwhile to compare Nietzsche’s view of the cynic to D’Israeli’s portrait of Hobbes. In both, the cynic is seen as one who projects his experience onto humanity and fashions a philosophy from his idiosyncratic and jaundiced perspective. The key difference is that D’Israeli’s cynical Hobbes is motivated by fear and contempt for human nature. Nietzsche’s preferred cynics, on the other hand, see humans realistically and naturalistically and find no horror in this vision. Seeing humanity as part of nature and recovering an obscured human nature were important aspects of Nietzsche’s project, and in
this respect, his cynicism is potentially salutary. But it cannot be regarded as such until the question of nature is addressed. For many of Nietzsche’s early critics, the self-apparent answer to this question was that his philosophy encouraged the worst in human nature: egotism, brutality, and a blind hatred for civilization and its institutions. Thus Nietzsche became associated with the modern, negative form of cynicism. In 1903, for example, Ludwig Stein called Nietzsche’s philosophy “neo-Cynicism”\textsuperscript{11} and attributed his growing popularity in Germany to the fact that his destructive philosophy was a “faithful reflection” of the cynicism of the times (Aschheim 38). He is seen as a corrupter of public morals and a rabble-rouser, his aphoristic style being “ideally suited to a confused mass age of newspaper production, socialist libraries, salons, and boudoirs” (qtd. in Aschheim 39). In 1904, he is again cast as a source of modern cynicism in É. Tardieu’s “psychological study” of cynicism. Tardieu sees Nietzsche as one of several “theorists” of cynicism responsible for the spread of cynicism in modern life: a list which also includes Schopenhauer, Max Stirner, Ernest Renan and Stendhal. For Tardieu, modern cynicism is an egoism that takes as its basis the “immorality of nature and life,” and turns it into a transcendent principle (14). Nietzsche, as the evangelist of egotism and immorality, contributes to modern cynicism through his valorization of passions such as lust, cruelty, and the desire for domination. For Tardieu, the danger of Nietzsche’s cynicism is summed up in his claim that “the greatest evil is necessary for the greater good of the Superman” (9).

More recently, Horst Hutter has argued that Nietzsche tends toward modern cynicism as a result of his essentialist view of nature. While Hutter agrees that Nietzsche’s project

\textsuperscript{11} I am indebted to Horst Hutter for this fact. Stein’s book is \textit{Friedrich Nietzsche’s Weltanschauung und ihre Gefahren} (1903).
recovers important elements of Cynic philosophy, he argues that this recovery is compromised by its connection to a cultural ethos “based on domination and exploitation” which Nietzsche “translates back, as ineffable constituents, into the nature of things” (124). As Hutter observes, Nietzsche tended to regard suffering and pain as essential features of existence, a belief that he projected onto nature through the image of “Dionysus-Zagreus, the destroyer God who revels in cruelty and destruction” (127). He suggests that while Nietzsche’s “psychopathology” may be partly explained by his own experience of suffering, particularly in the area of *eros*, it can also be seen as an undercurrent of sadomasochism that runs through European culture (129). For Hutter, Nietzsche’s view of existence must be recognized as an expression of the very “pneumapathology” or disease of spirit that Nietzsche himself diagnosed in European culture.

It is not necessary to agree with Hutter’s psychological view of Nietzsche to recognize the validity of his claims. Although Nietzsche succeeded in rejecting the ontological pessimism of his time, he did not clearly overcome the Hobbesian-Darwinian worldview that lay behind it. Perhaps because taming human nature became for Nietzsche the greatest crime committed against humanity, he imagined a human nature that was the very opposite of tame. In a passage from *The Anti-Christ* he offers an image of what a system of values might look like under his view of natural law:

> What is good?—Everything that enhances people’s feeling of power, the will to power, power itself.
> What is bad?—Everything stemming from weakness.
> What is happiness?—The feeling that power is growing, that some resistance is overcome.
> *Not* contentment, but more power; *not* peace, but war; *not* virtue, but prowess (virtue in the style of the Renaissance, *virtù*, morale-free virtue).
> The weak and the failures should perish: first principle of *our* love of humanity. And they should be helped to do this.
What is more harmful than any vice?—Active pity for all failures and weakness—Christianity. (4)

Passages such as these lend support to Hutter’s claim that were it realized, Nietzsche’s philosophy “would not be a real change in the human condition but would preserve some of the worst features of human history under a different sign and as sanctioned by the very nature of things” (124). Such passages also suggest the dark side of Nietzsche’s neo-cynicism, which often seems to hover uneasily between joyful wisdom and pitiless brutality. And where cynical laughter and ruthlessness combine, we arrive at the prospect of a truly modern monster. There is, after all, no more ominous image from the twentieth century than the amoral cynic laughing with “nihilistic ecstasy” as he pursues absolute power by seeking the eradication of the weak and the failures.

Hutter concludes that Nietzsche’s recovery of Cynicism is compromised by his vacillation between a Cynical recovery of nature and “a [modern] cynical affirmation of nihilism” (130), an observation which echoes the problem of reconciling the anti-foundationalist dimension of Nietzsche’s philosophy—such as perspectivism and genealogy—with essentialist ideas such as instinct, nature and the will to power. But it may be that what Hutter sees as the vacillation between nihilism and nature is not a vacillation at all, but a conflation of nature with absence that was characteristic of the period. We tend to think that the death of God leads to “nihilism” as nothingness, but after Darwin and Schopenhauer, nihilism could not be simply nothing. Nature abhors a vacuum, and it was the Hobbesian state of nature that the Victorian imagination tended to project into the hollow created by disillusionment. Perhaps more than anything else, this tendency

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12 For an account of this problem, see Cox.
to fill emptiness and negation with evil helped to transform not only Cynicism into cynicism, but realism and enlightenment into cynicism as well.

Between the conservative view of cynicism and the progressive view a number of positions are possible, and the authors I discuss in this study display various elements. Conrad is perhaps closest to the conservative type, albeit with some important differences. For Conrad, duty, morality and honour were artificial, tenuous, and endangered, and for that reason all the more in need of affirmation. Perhaps the central paradox in Conrad is his interest and participation in the disillusionment he documents and decries. Shaw, however, adopted an opposing perspective. He assumed the role of the cynical enlightener and did not fear the consequences because he did not fear human nature. He also understood that the work of enlightenment was never, in any case, complete, that new ideals and prejudices would always fill the void left by shattered idols. Wells, whom I turn to next, is perhaps the most ambivalent of the three. His cynicism combines elements of both the conservative and critical form insofar as initially he could neither embrace realism nor fully trust idealism, even after he convinced himself of the viability of utopia.
Chapter 2

It is...our first article of faith that the almighty created the ape in his own image. That he gave him a soul and a mind. That he set him apart from the beasts of the jungle and made him the lord of the planet. These sacred truths are self-evident. The proper study of apes is apes. But certain young cynics have chosen to study man. Yes! Perverted scientists who advance an insidious theory called “evolution.”

This speech from Franklin J. Schaffner’s 1968 movie *Planet of the Apes* serves as an appropriate introduction to H. G. Wells not only because Schaffner’s movie operates within the genre that Wells helped to define, but also because it continues many of the themes of Wells’s early work, including regression, supersession, and humanity’s potential dethronement as the planet’s dominant species. Like Wells’s early stories, *Planet of the Apes* uses evolution to assault the anthropocentrism of the audience with the spectre of humanity’s fall from pre-eminence as well as the fact that humanity cannot transcend its basic animal being in spite of its cultural and technological achievements.

But this speech also makes a connection between cynicism and evolution. To many religious conservatives (such as those aped in Schaffner’s movie) the cynicism of evolution is no doubt clear: it is a theory motivated by contempt for both God and man; a conspiracy intended to lower humans to the status of animals. And although this judgement is the product of ill will, it is not etymologically or philosophically false. Evolution and classical Cynicism both subvert the idea that humankind is of divine origin and both seek to re-place humanity within the animal world. The Cynics were scorned for their efforts to confront (and scandalize) the civilized ego with its suppressed animal side, and to the extent that evolutionary theory administers a similar shock to the human ego by reminding it of its connection to the animal kingdom, it can also with some justification be called cynical.
Evolution, however, also has the potential to lead to cynicism in a more modern sense of the word. As Nietzsche recognized, when God is removed as the Prime Mover of the world and replaced with an unconscious natural process, “man” also becomes an expression of that process, not in essence different from animals of the lowest order. This perspective gives rise to a number of disturbing implications: will and intellect are no longer entirely man’s own because he is influenced by a power that exists beyond himself; culture and cultivation are viewed as frail and artificial, susceptible to disruption by the return of an ineradicable nature; and morality is exposed as an artificial construct posited against nature and therefore in perpetual conflict with it.\(^\text{13}\) This truth was made all the more intolerable by the fact that there was no escape. Nature was not only external, but internal: “man” was circumscribed by his own animal being, barred from becoming substantially different from what he had always been.

Cynicism in this sense preoccupied Wells and informed his writing. From his earliest writings to his last, Wells was intensely concerned with the potential for humanity to evolve to a higher level of social organization. He was haunted by the fear that unless human evolution was spurred into action and directed into the correct channels, society would degenerate, making it vulnerable to supersession and extinction. But Wells was also affected by what might be called cynical realism, a perspective that must view humanity—and social reality—in naturalistic terms, but finds no comfort in what it sees. Cynical realism meant that for Wells, reality at its darkest was a contemptible muddle that bordered on the grotesque. In his introduction to *Seven Famous Novels*, Wells wrote “Now and then, though I rarely admit it, the universe projects itself toward me in a hideous grimace” (ix).

\(^\text{13}\) Perhaps the best-known expression of these anxieties is Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*, but much of what Freud identified was anticipated by T. H. Huxley. See, for example, *Evolution and Ethics* (1893).
This confession introduces Wells’s cynicism, but it is not complete unless we note the anthropomorphism of the grimace, which in turn signals that at the centre of Wells’s negative vision is the unimproved and unimprovable human that Wells once referred to as “the culminating ape.” In his early fiction, Wells often rendered his deepest fears in imaginative, grotesque, and even absurd ways, but these representations arguably deepened rather than purged his anthropological anxieties. Eventually he arrived at the conclusion that the only hope for humanity was a World State capable of containing, controlling, and culling man’s bestial impulses. In this chapter I read a selection of Wells’s early fiction with an eye to describing Wells’s negative vision and the tensions it creates.

The question of cynicism in Wells, however, also raises the question of pessimism, which has been one of the more enduring debates in Wellsian studies. The traditional view of Wells had placed him as an optimist whose attitude soured towards the end of his career, culminating in the pessimism of Mind at the End of its Tether (1945). Because Wells had spent more than forty years lobbying for a World State, he came to embody for many—including E. M. Forster, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell—a naïve faith in scientific progress and a facile optimism in the inevitable triumph of reason. Since the early 1960s, however, critical opinion has inclined to the perspective advanced by Wells’s son, Anthony West, who asserted that Wells “was by nature a pessimist, and he was doing violence to his intuitions and his rational perceptions alike when he asserted in his middle period [circa 1901-1940] that mankind could make a better world for itself by an effort of will” (10). In contradistinction to West’s emphasis on Wells’s own predilections, however, other critics have attributed Wells’s pessimism to his upbringing and to the tenor of the period in which he came of age intellectually. Bernard Bergonzi, for instance, notes the correspondence
between the bleakness of outlook that registers in several of Wells’s early scientific romances and the attitude of the fin de siècle, while Mark Hillegas confirms this perspective by tracing the relationship between T. H. Huxley’s evolutionary cosmology and Wells’s own early pessimism. More recently, Gorman Beauchamp has explored the relationship between the dark view of humanity offered in The Island of Dr. Moreau (1895) and the Calvinism of Wells’s mother. I believe, however, that neither Wells’s pessimism nor his optimism can be dissociated from his cynical realism. This cynicism must be regarded as the prior condition because, while Wells’s pessimism may have waned and waxed over the course of his career, the basic view of reality that inspired it never did.

As I have suggested, what makes Wells’s realism cynical in the modern sense is the anthropology that lay at its heart. For Wells, modern social reality was fashioned by human actions, but these actions were still driven by primitive impulses and emotions. Human nature was part of the problem, but so was the self-satisfied indifference of the average modern man. As I noted in the first chapter, this attitude can be understood as a cynical critique of cynicism because in it the scorn of the writer is directed against such things as the casual amorality or the blithe indifference to destiny that characterizes modern society. A representative instance of this form of cynicism appears in a parrhesiastic statement from You Can’t Be Too Careful (1941):

> for the few years that remain to me, I will be damned if I write a single propitiatory or mitigated line about our ancestry.... We are a lowly and infantile breed. There is hardly a quadruped in the zoo that is not more modified, evolved, distinguished and finished than ourselves” (58).

In his review of the book, Olaf Stapledon identifies the same passage and states that “Wells’s commendable determination to see man without rose-coloured spectacles has led him to accept a jaundiced pair instead” (205). For Stapledon, Wells’s realism goes too far,
darkening into a cynical view of humanity. But in fact the view of humanity the book articulates was a recurring feature of Wells’s writing, one which was most fully expressed in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. In his Preface to the Atlantic edition of the novel, Wells stated that “When the reader comes to the writings upon history in this collection, he will find the same idea of man as a re-shaped animal no longer in flaming caricature, but as a weighed and settled conviction” (*Works of H. G. Wells* 2:ix).

To be sure, there is often an element of the satirical in Wells’s characterization of humanity, particularly in his early fiction. The comparison of humans to “quadrupeds” in particular signals the enduring influence of Swift, an early influence of which Wells made no secret. In his preface to the Atlantic edition of *The Time Machine* he attributed the final form of the story to a “cleansing course of Swift and Sterne” (*Works* 1:xxi), and Swift’s influence also clearly registers in the reduction of humankind to animals in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. Looking back on this phase of his career from his utopian phase and from the context of the First World War, Wells wrote that “When I was a young man I imitated Swift and posed for cynicism; I will confess that now at fifty and greatly helped by this war, I have fallen in love with mankind.” (*Italy, France and Britain at War* 14). However, as the passage from *You Can’t be Too Careful* shows, this love affair did not last, and the “pose” returned late in his life.\(^\text{14}\) But this odd confession is important because it suggests that his literary cynicism (regardless of whether it is a pose or not) is in essence a satirical perspective that has lost its ability to laugh at what it sees. In this respect, we can again use

\(^{14}\) Wells’s statement echoes the assumption (also expressed by the anonymous author of “Modern Cynicism”) that war has the potential to dispel cynicism by reinvesting life with purpose. But in modernity it seems that this regenerative effect is short lived because war fails to change the basic conditions from which modern cynicism arises.
Wells against Wells by citing his remark, made in *Boon*, that “cynicism is humour in ill-health” (337).

But why is Wells’s humour in ill-health? The answer lies in his deeper anxieties about humanity and its ability to change itself and its world. In *Mankind in the Making* (1903) Wells outlines his vision for a New Republic and the progressive secular ideology that will drive it forward, but he also describes the pessimistic historical perspective this vision is designed to replace. One passage in particular is worth quoting because of what it reveals about the attitude that Wells was himself attempting to leave behind after his turn to utopianism in 1901:

So long as one believed that life span unprogressively from generation to generation, that generation followed generation unchangingly for ever, the enormous preponderance of sexual needs and emotions in life was a distressing and inexplicable fact—it was a mystery, it was sin, it was the work of the devil. One asked, why does man build houses that others may live therein; plant trees whose fruit he will never see? And all the toil and ambition, the stress and hope of existence, seemed...a mere sacrifice to this pointless reiteration of lives, this cosmic *crambe repetita*. To perceive this aspect, and to profess an entire detachment from the whole vacuous business, was considered by a large proportion of the more thoughtful people of the world the supreme achievement of philosophy. The acme of old-world wisdom...[was] to abandon costume, cleanliness, and all the decencies and dignities of life, and to crawl, as scornfully as possible...out of all these earthly shows and snares (which so obviously lead to nothing) into the nearest tub. (17-18)

For Wells, the modern philosopher of this attitude is Schopenhauer, and the reference to the “nearest tub” is a reference to cynicism as the pessimistic retreat from the world after its true nature has been understood. But the pessimistic vision it articulates was also Wells’s own: a demon must, after all, be named before it can be exorcised.

Hillegas’s 1967 study is still the authority on Wells’s pessimism. Rather than Schopenhauer, however, Hillegas identifies T. H. Huxley as the main source of Wells’s pessimism. According to Hillegas, Huxley was convinced that nature—or as he called it,
the “cosmic process”—was fundamentally incompatible with human progress and only “ethical evolution” (or human-directed evolution) could redeem humanity from its baleful influence. In *Evolution and Ethics*, Huxley suggested that the only hope for human progress was to combat the cosmic process, but as Hillegas notes, Huxley was not sanguine about the ultimate outcome of humanity’s struggle against nature. He recognized that ethical evolution is a recent development compared to nature which is “the outcome of millions of years of evolutionary training” (20). Hillegas argues that Huxley’s pessimism was affected by the recognition that regression to greater simplicity was just as common in nature as progression to greater complexity. He also saw that changes in the earth’s environment—triggered perhaps by the cooling predicted by Lord Kelvin—might spur evolutionary change, but this change would probably not be in humanity’s favour; and, in any case, it was of little ultimate importance since virtually all life on earth would end as the earth cooled even further.

With respect to Hillegas’s account, it is important to note that Huxley cannot be regarded as the only source of Wells’s pessimism. By the 1890s pessimism had become a widespread cultural phenomenon. Nevertheless, Huxley’s ontology is an important point of reference not only for Wells’s pessimism, but also for his cynical realism. Wells’s pessimism can be characterized as a mix of residual Christianity and science which tends toward the wisdom of Koheleth, but for distinctly modern reasons. It was strongly influenced by the discoveries of modern science passed on to him by his discipleship of Huxley. In the Huxleyan-Wellsian worldview, God is absent except as a transcendent order discoverable through science, but the devil is alive and well, unmasked as evolutionary
nature. For both Huxley and Wells, nature as the “cosmic process” becomes the reality of life and a synonym for evil.

The effect of this philosophy on Wells was considerable. While Huxley adopted a stoic attitude toward his deepest anthropological fears, Wells tended to make them into monsters. In “Zoological Retrogression” (1891), for example, he argues that evolution is not a gradual ascent upwards, as many of his contemporaries imagined; it contains many back-eddies and reversals. He not only suggests the possibility of the degeneration of complex species, but also advances the idea that species that were currently low on the evolutionary scale may eventually prove to be the fittest in the future. He ends his article with the ominous warning that, even now, it is possible that “Nature is, in unsuspected obscurity, equipping some now humble creature with wider possibilities of appetite, endurance, or destruction, to rise in the fullness and sweep homo away into the darkness from which his universe arose. The Coming Beast must certainly be reckoned in any anticipatory calculations regarding the Coming Man” (*Early Writings* 168).

If it is partly out of fear of the “Coming Beast” that Wells’s cynicism emerges, it was also the case that it was rooted in his fears about humanity’s inability to evolve. In “Human Evolution, An Artificial Process” (1898), he declares that man is the combination of two factors, an artificial factor and a biological factor. On the one hand he was a “highly plastic creature of tradition, suggestion, and reasoned thought,” educable and capable of self-improvement, but on the other, “a culminating ape...a type of animal more obstinately unchangeable than any other living creature” (*Early Writings* 217). That in the struggle for the fate of humanity the ape was likely to triumph over the rational side was a fear that Wells never entirely exorcised, and that humankind would run the risk of allowing it to
happen out of indifference he could not accept. His attitude toward humanity thus hovers uneasily between concern and contempt—concern, perhaps, for its fate, but also contempt for its blitheness and obduracy.

Wells’s intense dissatisfaction with post-Darwinian reality played a significant role in his fictional innovations. Without it the strain of science fiction that begins with works such as *The Time Machine* and *War of the Worlds* may not have happened. But dissatisfaction, particularly with humanity and human nature, also led him to consider radical solutions to humanity’s bondage to the cosmic process. These finally become overt in *Anticipations* (1901), where he attempts to cast off his early pessimism in order to imagine a positive future for humanity, but where he also feels obliged to point out that many of those who currently populate the planet will be unfit citizens for the New Republic. The citizens of the New Republic, he declares, will possess an ethical system “shaped primarily to favour the procreation of what is fine and efficient and beautiful in humanity...and to check the procreation of base and servile types...of all that is mean and ugly and bestial in the souls, bodies or habits of men” (257). Nor is Wells particularly vague about the means by which these aims will be achieved: “the alternative in right conduct between living fully, beautifully, and efficiently will be to die” since, for such people, “the men of the New Republic will have little pity and less benevolence” (257).

Of course, to describe this passage as optimistic is a stretch. The tone it adopts poorly conceals the attitude of one who has forced himself to confront an unpleasant task hitherto avoided. As I have suggested, Wells’s optimism and pessimism are best viewed as functions of something deeper, a cynical outlook that persists throughout his career. After 1901, however, this cynicism goes from being passive to active. He goes from merely
regarding humanity as bestial to thinking about how those who are bestial can be eliminated. In doing so, Wells does not seem to recognize that he had caricatured a similar attitude in Dr. Moreau.

As John Partington has pointed out, negative responses to Anticipations seem to have encouraged Wells to retreat from some of his more disturbing claims, including his support of eugenics (54). Nevertheless, the trajectory that Wells follows from pessimism to optimism is instructive insofar as it echoes an observation that Sloterdijk makes regarding modern cynicism. Using Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor from The Brothers Karamozov as his example, Sloterdijk identifies a nineteenth-century utopian consciousness that is divided between utopianism and realism; a consciousness which is the result of “great, realistic theories...unconcerned about good and evil” colliding with the enduring Christian impulse for social and moral perfection (192). As a disillusioned (or cynical) realist, the Inquisitor takes “the world and people as they are,” imperfect, stubborn, prone to sin, and in need of control (187). But as a utopian, he rejects the hopelessness of this perspective, and brings to bear “realistic” practices in the pursuit of utopian ends, even if these practices seem to violate the ideals of the utopia they are intended to produce. As Sloterdijk puts it, “if the end is absolutely good, its goodness must rub off even on the most horrible means that have to be employed along the way” (190). For Sloterdijk, this contradictory logic finds its ultimate expression in Fascism and Stalinism.

While it is perhaps the case that Sloterdijk takes liberties with Dostoyevsky’s character, his attempt to define the utopian consciousness of the late nineteenth century potentially casts new light on Wells, one which can help to explain his abrupt turn toward utopianism. But it can also shed light on the ambivalence of his early writings. Bergonzi
notes that it is often impossible to tell how Wells feels about the future events he describes, and he suggests that Wells’s writing from the 1890s is increasingly dominated by his intellect rather than his imagination. But Wells was also growing increasingly dissatisfied with the attitude of Victorian realism. Robert P. Weeks has identified the theme of “disentanglement” in Wells’s work, noting that Wells’s characters often attempt to “break out of the physical universe,” but once liberation is achieved they also suffer “defeat in the form of either disillusionment or death” (26). Another way of expressing this idea is to say that during his early phase Wells’s forward-looking, utopian impulses were held in check by a reality principle that was strongly influenced by Huxley’s ontology. Before proceeding to my discussion of Wells’s fiction, it will be useful to say a little more about the nature and structure of this ontology.

Huxley called himself Darwin’s bulldog for his defence of evolution against the attacks of religious conservatives, but his evolutionary outlook in many ways replicated the basic structure of Christian metaphysics, particularly its view of the world. In an 1893 letter, he described the Romanes Lecture as “a very orthodox production on the text (if there is such a one), ‘Satan the Prince of this World!’” (Life and Letters 3:248). In a letter from 1892 he had elaborated on this theme:

> It is the secret of the superiority of the best theological teachers to the majority of their opponents that they substantially recognize these realities of things, however strange the forms in which they clothe their conceptions. The doctrines of predestination, of original sin, of the innate depravity of man and the evil fate of the greater part of the race, of the primacy of Satan in this world, of the essential vileness of matter, of a malevolent Demiurgos subordinate to a benevolent Almighty, who has only lately revealed himself, faulty as they are, appear to me to be vastly nearer the truth than the “liberal” popular illusions that babies are all born good, and that the example of a corrupt society is responsible for their failure to remain so. (3:183)
This passage seems to me to represent the most concise expression of the worldview with which Wells was affected. If we look to his early fiction, it exists like background radiation, waiting to creep back into the fantasy frame. Because reality dominated by the cosmic process is an alpha and omega for Wells, his narratives always return to it, but in another sense they never leave it. The stories I examine are tales of discovery, but they are less discoveries of the fantastic than exposures of the real. In Wells, fantasy is in many ways a technique of de-familiarization that serves to estrange and illuminate hidden truths. But, owing to the nature of these truths, this discovery is invariably grotesque. As readers, our experience of this reality is often highly mediated by intradiegetic narrators eager to convey not only the details of their experiences, but also their impressions and reactions. In many of these stories, attempts to push at the boundaries of physical reality are not only treated as futile, but dangerous insofar as they threaten to expose a more disturbing reality. The Time Traveller, Moreau, and the Martians all pay a price for being too modern, which in this instance implies not only the use of science and technology to rebel against the natural order, but also hubris, egotism, and a lack of self-awareness. In mastering nature, Wells suggests, man becomes like nature: dispassionate, indifferent, and cruel. But these modern characters are also treated with a degree of sympathy because Wells himself was drawn to the possibilities that science and exploration offer. Thus, while he ultimately affirms Huxley’s pessimism in these early stories, he also explored some of the personality types that might, for better or worse, point the way out of the attitude of “cosmic crambe repetita” in which it participated.
The Time Machine

*The Time Machine* has come to be regarded as one of the great innovations of modern literature, a story that combines realism, science, and the fantastic to help define a type of fiction that is distinctly modern. But as Wells himself pointed out, *The Time Machine* and his other “scientific romances” belong essentially to a “class of writing which includes the *Golden Ass of Apuleius*, the *True Histories of Lucian*, *Peter Schlemil*, and the story of *Frankenstein*” (qtd. in Bergonzi 18). As such, these stories reflect an impulse to parody and satirize the attitudes and practices of the author’s own society. But like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, these stories also drift away from their satirical roots to evoke a mood that is more tragic than comic. *The Time Machine* is a process of discovery that follows a trajectory from social satire to the cosmic pessimism that Wells himself associated with modern cynicism in *Mankind in the Making*.

The story is structured as a frame narrative, and has three basic settings: two London scenes, the world of 802,701, and the so-called further vision. It begins with the Time Traveller describing the theory of the fourth dimension to a group of professional men. His audience, however, is sceptical, receiving his theories and demonstrations coolly. We are told that he is “one of those men who are too clever to be believed” (15), and too full of whimsy and reckless disregard to be trusted entirely. This sense of suspicion serves to cast doubt on the veracity of subsequent events, but also to set the Time Traveller apart as an advanced thinker whose methods necessarily appear strange to the average consciousness, but whose actions propel humanity out of the past into the future. Working within Huxley’s philosophy as well as the *Frankenstein* tradition, Wells feels obliged to cast him as a symbol of scientific hubris and egotism, but either his heart is not in it or he cannot
imagine the difference he suggests, since when the narrative moves to his experiences, the Time Traveller’s responses seem to be thoroughly ordinary.

To test his theories and his machine, the Time Traveller sets off into the future. His giddy journey culminates in a crash landing in the world of 802,701. His vision is initially obscured by a curtain of hail, but one of the first objects he encounters is a white, weather-worn Sphinx which prompts troubling questions about what he will find:

What might appear when that hazy curtain was altogether withdrawn? What might not have happened to men? What if cruelty had grown into a common passion? What if in this interval the race had lost its manliness, and had developed into something inhuman, unsympathetic, and overwhelmingly powerful? I might seem some old-world savage animal, only the more dreadful and disgusting for our common likeness—a foul creature to be incontinently slain. (23)

The Sphinx is an important symbol in the novel, but before saying more about it, I will say a little more about the world it represents. As the Time Traveller soon discovers, his initial anxieties are both unfounded and ironically prescient. The inhabitants of the future have indeed lost their “manliness,” but not in the manner he fears. When the curtain of hail clears, he discovers a world in which only desirable species of plant life remain. Harmful insects and disease are things of the past and domestic animals, too, have “followed the Ichthyosaurus into extinction” (28). He also discovers that this garden world is inhabited by the Eloi, the elfin descendants of humankind. The Eloi are exquisitely formed, “pretty” like dolls or “Dresden china.” In the first of several provisional hypotheses, he concludes that the Eloi and their world represent the culmination of the civilizing tendencies of his own time. Human-directed evolution has eliminated all traces of the cosmic process from the world: “The work of ameliorating the conditions of life—the true civilising process that makes life more and more secure—had gone steadily on to a
climax. One triumph of a united humanity over Nature had followed another” (39). This triumph over nature, however, has also diminished the descendants of humankind, making them child-like and incapable of sustained physical or intellectual exertion. In domesticating nature, it seems the Eloi have domesticated themselves to the point that they have also become like animals: Arcadian sheep grazing, playing and making love in a world of crumbling infrastructure.

When the Time Traveller’s machine disappears, however, he eventually discovers the subterranean world of the Morlocks and the other half of the world of 802, 701. Humankind, he realizes, has split into two species: an upper world of decadent Eloi and a world of degenerate Morlocks. This forces him to revise his theory to state that the battle against the cosmic process was not only a victory over nature, “but a triumph over Nature and the fellow-man” (64). The world of 802, 701 is not the end product of social cooperation, but the triumph of Victorian social structure. The Morlocks, he surmises, are the descendants of the poor and the urban proletariat who were eventually driven underground by the Eloi’s ancestors and condemned there to toil or to starve.

As disturbing as this discovery is, however, it is trumped by what the Time Traveller finds in the underground world of the Morlocks:

The place, by the by, was very stuffy and oppressive, and the faint halitus of freshly shed blood was in the air. Some way down the central vista was a little table of white metal, laid with what seemed a meal. The Morlocks at any rate were carnivorous! Even at the time, I remember wondering what large animal could have survived to furnish the red joint I saw. (70)

As he soon realizes, the animals who furnish the meat to the Morlocks are the Eloi, whose over-cultivation has made them the perfect cattle. The scene is remarkable because it symbolizes the transformation of enlightenment into darkness that is one of the gestures
characteristic of the pessimistic form of modern cynicism. The Time Traveller descends into the depths armed only with matches that illuminate the vile bodies of the Morlocks, the bodies of their prey, and the extent of the darkness. The scene is reminiscent of a passage from Wells’s article “The Rediscovery of the Unique” (1891):

Science is a match that man has just got alight. He thought he was in a room...and that his light would be reflected from and display walls inscribed with wonderful secrets and pillars carved with philosophical systems wrought into harmony. It is a curious sensation, now that the preliminary splutter is over and the flame burns up clear, to see his hands lit and just a glimpse of himself...and around him, in place of all that human comfort and beauty he anticipated—darkness still. (Early Writings 30-1)

The Time Traveller’s journey underground also provides a glimpse of man, but it reveals only the dark truth of his ignominious future which is also at the same time a reminder of his savage origins. As I have suggested, scientific truths are Cynical because they strip away our anthropological illusions, but when they are a received with revulsion, horror, and despair, they tend toward cynicism in the modern sense.

The narrator’s disturbing subterranean discovery brings me back to the novel’s central symbol, the Sphinx. On the one hand, the enigmatic Sphinx mirrors the mysterious face that the world of 802, 701 presents to the Time Traveller. At the same time, its animal body is also an ironic answer to his question of what has happened to man: he has become in many ways less human. But these referents do not exhaust the symbolism of the Sphinx, as the numerous attempts to interpret it testify. Bergonzi notes that the Sphinx was a familiar object in fin de siècle iconography and that it is significant to the novel, but he does not elaborate on this significance. Casey Fredericks claims that the Sphinx is symbolic of the conjunction of the upper world of the Eloi and “the subterranean world of the degenerate Morlocks” (71) while Harry Geduld suggests that Wells may have had in
mind a passage from Schopenhauer’s *Essays and Aphorisms* in which the Sphinx is regarded as the ancient symbol of the continuity and unity of the human with the animal (101). Debra Moddlemog reads the Sphinx as a symbol of the impossibility of the Time Traveller ever escaping his own subjective experience and therefore of ever fully understanding the world of 802, 701. John Huntington has also examined the symbol in some detail and has pointed out that, as an ancient symbol, the Sphinx “stands for the paradox of a progress that is a regression” (45). Like Geduld, he also sees it as a symbol of the continuity between man and beast and the challenge of clearly distinguishing between them. More interestingly, he suggests that the Sphinx may have been inspired by a passage from Huxley’s “Struggle for Existence in Human Society” (1888) in which the author suggests that the true riddle of the Sphinx is how to resolve the growth of populations and the consequent increase of competition for scarce resources. Unless this riddle is solved, he asserts, every nation “will sooner or later be devoured by the monster itself has generated” (qtd. in Huntington 177, n. 5).

This seems to me to be a plausible source for the symbol—certainly the theme of consumption resonates with the Time Traveller’s grotesque underground discovery. But it is also clear that the symbol exceeds Huxley’s use of it to acquire a broader significance. My own perspective on the Sphinx is that it is deployed as a symbol both of civilization and of its fate. As Huntington notes, the Sphinx is an ironic symbol of the future because it is manifestly a symbol of antiquity. But this is, I think, precisely the point: the Sphinx emphasizes the basic continuity of the world of 802,701 with past civilizations. But what precisely is this continuity given its decisive break from nature? The answer is repression. As a symbol of civilization, one can imagine the human-headed Sphinx representing the
victory of the rational mind over the irrational impulses that emanate from the beast in humanity. Yet at the same time (and from a different perspective), it is also a symbol of the victory of organization, hierarchy, and the subjugation of the multitude (as symbolized by the Sphinx’s great animal body) by a political and cultural elite.\textsuperscript{15} History teaches that civilizations are subject to decay, decline, and fall; they remain, in other words, bound to the cycle of nature. Through their mastery of technology, the ancestors of the Eloi have attempted to escape this cycle by eliminating every aspect of undesirable nature from the world, including the beastly proletariat. From this perspective, the Sphinx is a symbol of the final triumph of civilization as the mastery of inner and outer nature. But as Huxley emphasized, there was no outside of nature. Triumph can therefore only be displacement, repression, and (in the case of the Morlocks) an adversity which fosters evolutionary or revolutionary change. Wells had asked what Coming Beast might figure into the question of the Coming Man, and the Morlocks are a nightmarish answer to the question, but the Morlocks are also monstrous because they are conceived of the residua of the “nature” that the civilized ego—as represented by the head of the Sphinx—wants to eliminate.

This interpretation of Sphinx is in its own way cynical, but the Sphinx is in many ways the symbol of another kind of cynicism: the “master” cynicism of one part of humanity systematically repressing and dehumanizing another part. As I observed in the first chapter, Nietzsche had outlined this sense of cynicism in \textit{The Anti-Christ}, using the word to signify the world-historical counterfeit of human nature by the priesthood. In \textit{The Time Machine} a similar cynicism is suggested by the “faint shadow of a smile” that remains on the lips of the Sphinx. In the world of 802,701, however, this master cynicism has ultimately produced the low cynicism and vile laughter of the Morlocks.

\textsuperscript{15} Appropriately, the Morlocks emerge from the body of the Sphinx to seize the time machine.
It is perhaps because they are representatives of low nature that the Time Traveller finds it impossible “to feel any humanity” for the Morlocks in spite of the history of oppression he deduces. Bergonzi has observed that “Since the Morlocks on one level stand for the late nineteenth century proletariat, the Traveller’s attitude towards them symbolizes a contemporary bourgeois fear of the working class, and it is not fanciful to impute something of this attitude to Wells himself” (56). But Moddlemog points out that the Time Traveller appears to have more in common with the Morlocks than he does with the Eloi: his use of force, his taste for meat, and his interest in machinery all align him with the Morlocks. As she puts it, “The Time Traveller justifies his attacks against the Morlocks by picturing them as beasts rather than humans, but such a defence also enables him to ignore just how much he shares with them. To meet them is to meet a part of himself, the part that is often thought of as base or primitive...”(48). What she draws our attention to is the fact that Wells treats his Traveller with irony, showing him to be in many ways as “regressive” as the Morlocks he finds repulsive. This irony may reflect the influence of Swift, whose famous traveller is also a model of absent self-awareness. But Wells’s point may also be evolutionary: as the common ancestor of both the Eloi and the Morlocks, the Time Traveller is the origin—and therefore the synthesis—of both. The message, especially for Wells’s Victorian readership, is that the Eloi and the Morlocks already exist within, and that they might one day emerge if the cultural and social divisions that have defined human history continue to deepen. To put it in less fantastic terms, those who are treated cynically today—i.e. as beasts or automatons to be exploited and not seen—will at some point themselves grow dangerously cynical and consume the beautiful ideological illusion inhabited by the elite.
However, this basic message is problematized by the contempt shown the Morlocks, whose treatment has still not been fully accounted for. Bergonzi is no doubt correct in alerting us to Wells’s anti-proletarian bias, but his cynicism should also be considered a factor. Geduld has summarized the childhood experiences that have been regarded as influences on Wells’s vision of the Morlocks and their world, ranging from the subterranean kitchen of the manor houses where his mother worked to a childhood fright delivered by a fearsome picture of a gorilla in *The Boy’s Own Book of Natural History* (2). Certainly Wells’s position as the son of a domestic servant and a small tradesman gave him a sense of the worlds that existed both above and below, and if he harboured any resentment towards the world above, it was the world below that seems to have terrified him most, which is perhaps not surprising since it was into this abyss that families such as Wells’s were in constant danger of falling. These and other fears coalesce in an unshakeable contempt for lower social reality in Wells. This reality includes the proletariat, but is not limited to it. The troglodytic Morlocks are therefore more appropriately regarded as a grotesque symbol of Wells’s deepest fears regarding the nature of being. It is not surprising that the Time Traveller (and, presumably, Wells) has greater sympathy for the Eloi. In the dichotomous vision of the future the novel constructs—a vision which lacks any middle ground between the two extremes—the only viable choice is the “upper” world of the Eloi.

The world of 802,701 hovers ambiguously between social satire and a grotesque nightmare distilled from Wells’s realism. If the message of the novel is that decline and degeneration culminating in a brutish return to nature is man’s fate given his basic nature, it tends toward cynicism in the modern sense of the word. But if its core message is that
the attempt to leave behind nature and the fellow man is not only misguided but perilous, it approaches the wisdom of the classical Cynics. The book provides no alternative to the Eloi and Morlocks, only a golden age when the civilization of the Sphinx was at its prime. The Time Traveller himself sees no solutions. As his experience of the world of 802,701 begins to turn into a nightmare of resurgent natural history, he can only withdraw from it, finding refuge in the order of the cosmos, finding a “sense of friendly comfort” in the stars which “dwarfed [his] own troubles and all the gravities of terrestrial life” (79).

The Time Traveller’s narrow escape from the Morlocks allows Wells to transition from the social to the cosmic by speeding forward to the “further vision.” Here the book shifts focus from the fate of humanity to the fate of the planet and its life forms. As the Time Traveller speeds forward, the effects of terrestrial entropy become more obvious. The sun crosses the sky more slowly as the earth’s revolution begins to slow. Life begins to return to primal simplicity: a “huge white butterfly” (106) veers overhead while table-sized crabs hunt for food on the beach on which his machine now stands. The post-human world is now back firmly in the grip of evolutionary nature and the effect is both grotesque and frightening. While he witnesses the spectacle of earth’s gradual demise, the Time Traveller narrowly escapes being consumed by a table-sized crab. Nevertheless, he presses forward, “drawn on by the mystery of the earth’s fate” (107) to witness the heat death of the earth and its last inhabitant: a “tentacled,” football-sized object “hopping fitfully about” (110). Overcome with horror and nausea, he remounts his machine and returns to his own time.

Although the further vision offers one of the bleakest visions of the future available in modern fiction it is not without its compensations. The Time Traveller is offered a perspective on phenomena unavailable to human perception and these are communicated
to us. Eons pass in minutes, and geological changes occur at a visible pace, as if captured by time-lapse photography. The exhilarating description of detail is Wells’s own, but the perspective is essentially transcendent, a perspective once attributed to the gods, but now claimed by science and, more often, perhaps, by science fiction. This perspective is important because it often forms a counterpoint to, and a refuge from, cynical realism: a place where the natural forces that define terrestrial reality do not apply. In transcending time, the Time Traveller also transcends the cosmic process, achieving at the same time the detachment and objectivity idealized by science. It is only when he drops back into the cosmic process by ceasing his journey that the Time Traveller suffers the perils of embodiment, not the least of which is consumption by the grotesque products of nature.

After telling his story to his sceptical Victorian audience, the Time Traveller leaves again to bring back proof of his journey, but never returns. The question of what becomes of him preoccupies the frame narrator who imagines him either falling among “the blood-drinking, hairy savages of the Age of Unpolished Stone” or gone forward to the “manhood” of the race in which the “wearisome” problems of society have been solved (83). But if the Time Traveller’s story is true, we know that the future is determined and that the essential riddle of society is not solved, only deferred and displaced. According to the narrator, this is merely a confirmation of the Time Traveller’s view of civilization even before his flight into the future: “He, I know...thought but cheerlessly of the Advancement of Mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilization only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end” (117). Given this truth, the question of the Time Traveller’s final destination is even more intriguing. The possibilities
seem virtually endless, but still bounded by reality. Perhaps the best answer is simply that he has gone to inhabit the pseudo-transcendent perspective of time travel itself.

**The Island of Doctor Moreau**

In *The Time Machine* Wells offers the vision of a world from which all of the manifestations of the cosmic process have been eliminated or suppressed by a civilizing impulse. As I have suggested, some of the violence and master cynicism implicit in this transformation is contained in the novel’s central symbol, the Sphinx. In *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Wells’s next scientific romance, the civilizing process is revisited with a narrow anthropological perspective. The novel is often regarded as a tale of scientific egotism, but Wells himself described it in his preface to the 1924 Atlantic Edition as a “theological grotesque” based on “the reminder\(^{16}\) that humanity is but animal rough-hewn to a reasonable shape and in perpetual internal conflict between instinct and injunction” (ix). As such, it can be regarded as a “cynical” satire in the tradition of Swift’s fourth voyage, to which it bears many resemblances. But I argue that *Moreau* can also be read as a not-entirely intentional exposure of the absurdities of the process Huxley called ethical evolution.

The starting point for my approach to the novel is a passage from Nietzsche’s *The Genealogy of Morals* in which modern humans are characterized as “the inheritors of the vivisection of conscience and of animal self-torture of thousands of years” (229). It is a passage that seems uncannily apt in relation to Moreau, a scientist who vivisects to

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\(^{16}\) I.e., Oscar Wilde’s arrest and conviction on charges of gross indecency.
humanize, and this aptness prompts the question of whether there is a link between Nietzsche’s provocative idea and the genesis of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*.

Echoes of Nietzschean motifs in the novel have often been noted if seldom accounted for. Bergonzi, for example, observes that “Moreau’s superiority to conventional ethics, and his desire to make a man on his own terms, seem to reflect the influence of Nietzsche” even though (as he goes on to note) the book was written before Nietzsche’s work was generally known in England (*Early H. G. Wells* 107). In his study of Nietzsche’s reception in England, David Thatcher suggests that since Nietzsche’s works were not yet available in translation, his influence upon Wells must be only apparent—a testimony to Wells’s grasp of the “subversive implications of Darwinism” (*Nietzsche in England* 80).

While it may be the case that Wells’s exposure to Darwinism propelled him toward the post-moral perspective typically attributed to Nietzsche, it should also be noted (as neither Bergonzi nor Thatcher does) that a rough introduction to Nietzsche’s ideas almost certainly reached Wells via Max Nordau’s *Degeneration*, which was published in February of the year that Wells began writing *Moreau*. While Nordau was far from sympathetic in his interpretation of Nietzsche, his chapter on him nevertheless supplies an extensive summary of his ideas as well as a number of quotes from his work, including the passage from *Zur Genealogie der Moral*. It is therefore possible that the shape of *Moreau* owes something to Nietzsche, albeit Nietzsche as conveyed through Nordau. Although I do not wish to claim that Nietzsche (via Nordau) was a significant influence on Wells, I do believe that the echo of Nietzsche’s image in *Moreau* is sufficient grounds to approach the novel from the perspective of humanization offered in *The Genealogy of Morals*, especially since—to my knowledge—no such treatment has yet been undertaken.
It would seem that part of the reason that Moreau has not been approached in the way I propose has to do with Bergonzi’s characterization of Moreau as “Nietzschean,” which implies that Moreau is a version of the post-moral Übermensch heralded by Nietzsche. This view obscures the fact that Moreau can also be regarded as Nietzschean in a less conventional way, namely, as one of the contemnors of humanity responsible for its enslavement by a repressive morality. This is to say, if The Island of Dr. Moreau had been one of Nietzsche’s creations, Moreau certainly would not have been one of his heroes.

A seldom-considered implication of Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals is that the transformative Übermensch which is often heralded as a future figure is also necessarily a figure of the past. In The Genealogy of Morals Nietzsche implies as much when he imagines the historical transition from nomadic life to the rudiments of civilization as an act of violence that could only have been accomplished by “the most spontaneous, most unconscious artists that exist” (220). Nietzsche imagines this primal event as both abrupt and violent, one which rapidly transformed free-ranging “brutish” populations into a rooted polity. Stated in terms of Huxley’s evolutionary sociology, this moment is the point at which humanity departs most decisively from the cosmic process and begins to forge a distinct evolutionary path toward ethical evolution. For both Huxley and Nietzsche, this is the beginning of a millennial process of humanization during which the animal in humankind is systematically excised in order to create citizens. For Huxley this was ultimately a positive event, but for Nietzsche it is an “ineluctable disaster” (219) that leads ultimately to humanity’s self-vivisection and spiritual deformation by bad conscience.

Before turning to a discussion of Moreau, it will be useful to provide a brief summary of the major events of the novel. Moreau’s island is chanced upon by Edward
Prendick, a survivor of the sinking of *The Lady Vain* who is rescued and brought aboard the *Ipecacuanha* by Montgomery, Moreau’s medically skilled but morally degenerate assistant. Upon arrival on the island, Prendick is once again cast adrift, this time by the drunken captain of the *Ipecacuanha*. As Moreau’s unwelcome guest, he is puzzled by the strange appearance of the island’s inhabitants and is haunted by the increasingly humanlike screams of Moreau’s latest experiment. Becoming convinced that Moreau is transforming humans into animals, Prendick flees to the village of the island’s Beast-Folk where he hears their rudimentary laws before being cornered by Moreau who tells him that the truth is in fact the opposite of what he believes: his vivisections are attempts to humanize rather than animalize. Eventually, however, the fragile order of the island begins to break down and Moreau is killed by the puma on which he has been working. With Moreau gone, the inhabitants of the island, including Montgomery, begin to revert to a state of animal nature. Prendick finally escapes when a dinghy containing the desiccated corpse of the *Ipecacuanha*’s captain washes ashore.

Returning to Moreau, it is possible to note a number of parallels between Wells’s character and Nietzsche’s original vivisectionists. He is a man with “an artistic frame of mind” (91) who moulds animal matter into human form. His creations are not only formed but also informed by the cruelty of the process. They are submerged in a “bath of burning pain” that is designed to “burn out all the animal” (98). And, like Nietzsche’s moral vivisectionists, Moreau’s efforts are oriented towards an abrupt break from animal being as a key step in the formation of civilized beings. In Nietzsche’s view, these initial violent phases of subjugation ultimately give way to more subtle forms of self-torture as

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17 As Leon Stover has plausibly argued, Moreau probably derives his name from Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) whose paintings often took as their subject creatures that were half human and half animal. See Stover, 36.
men are forced to sublimate their innate impulses to become their own vivisectionists.

Moreau’s Beast-Folk undergo a similar process whereby the vestigial memories of the pain of humanization form the foundation of a crude theology which they memorize by rote:

“*His* is the House of Pain.
“*His* is the Hand that makes.
“*His* is the Hand that wounds.
“*His* is the Hand that heals.” (73).

From this theology flow a number of rudimentary laws designed to curb the resurgence of the animal:

Not to go on all-fours; that is the Law. Are we not Men?
Not to suck up Drink; that is the Law. Are we not Men?
Not to eat Fish or Flesh; that is the Law. Are we not Men?
Not to claw the Bark of Trees; that is the Law. Are we not Men?
Not to chase other Men; that is the Law. Are we not Men? (72)

And although Moreau is neither the author of the Beast-Folk’s theology nor of their laws (they are, we are told, the legacy of Kanaka missionaries who have since left the island) this rudimentary moral theology complements his humanizing process. Moreau, however, takes little interest in the moral development of his beast folk. In a pattern that travesties the loss of Eden in *Genesis*, each of Moreau’s animal experiments is eventually banished from his house after the sign of “the beast begins to creep back” (99). Even though his Beast-Folk can speak, reason, and sustain the rudiments of culture, he nevertheless regards them as merely the “mockery of a rational life” (99).

Moreau’s rejection of his humanized beasts can be seen as the function of an anthropology which defines the human as the absence of the animal. Like the quasi-Christian laws that complement it, Moreau’s vivisectionist method of humanization assumes that “man” is what is left after the animal is systematically excised. Something of this paradoxical anthropology is also found in *The Genealogy of Morals* which describes
humanization as a project oriented toward an ideal that is the apotheosized opposite of the animal: “[man] projected all his denials of self, nature, naturalness out of himself as affirmations, as true being, embodiment, reality, as God” (Genealogy 226). Yet, as Wells’s novel continually reminds us, any clear distinction between the human and the animal is impossible to maintain. Prendick’s experiences on the dinghy of The Lady Vain and aboard the Ipecacuanha show that the mask of humanity is easily stripped away by such things as appetite, danger, and alcohol. This basic fact, however, is lost on Moreau even though it is assumed in his practice. He tells Prendick that only beasts with a “spark of pugnacious energy to face torment” make suitable subjects for humanization (95). In other words, many of the traits that make humans most “human” are the ones that they share with the untamed beasts.

For Nietzsche, man’s vivisection as a quest for humanity finds its fullest and most detrimental expression in Christianity and Wells’s description of The Island of Doctor Moreau as a “theological grotesque” seems to suggest a similar concern with the problematic legacy of Christianity. The crude laws of the Beast-Folk are, after all, a rather transparent parody of the Christian commandments of which humans (as much as Moreau’s creations) are always running afoul; Moreau also in many ways resembles a priest or, more accurately, an inquisitor who uses torture to convert the animal (the sinner) into the human (the righteous). Moreau also uses Latin to explain to Prendick the true nature of his Beast-Folk (84). Moreover, that both Moreau and Prendick attempt to use religious morality as a means of social control over the Beast-Folk may be taken as a suggestion that institutionalized religion performs a similarly cynical function in the world of men. But I believe it is more accurate to describe The Island of Doctor Moreau as an
attack upon *theos* than an attack upon theology, and it is this distinction that sets Wells’s view of humanization most clearly apart from Nietzsche’s.

While the distinction between a critique of theology and a critique of God might seem like a fine one, it is nevertheless worth making, particularly in differentiating Wells from Nietzsche. In his reading of the novel as a theological grotesque, Gorman Beauchamp has argued that the novel’s grotesquery “stems not from Moreau’s playing God, but rather...God’s playing Moreau” (411). What Beauchamp means is that Moreau is not a caricature of the creator, but his true image. In a sense Moreau *is* God, “the archetypal ‘mad scientist’—amorally experimenting with creation, ineptly bungling the attempt at a wholly rational being, callously abandoning his failures to inhabit the island of this world, neither rational enough nor animal enough to find peace” (411). In support of his thesis, Beauchamp suggests that the genesis of the tale can be found in a childhood experience Wells recounts in his autobiography:

one night I had a dream of Hell....In an old number of *Chambers Journal* I had read of the punishment of breaking a man on the wheel. The horror of it got into my dreams and there was Our Father in a particularly malignant phase, busy basting a poor sinner rotating slowly over a fire built under the wheel. I saw no Devil in the vision, my mind in its simplicity went straight to the responsible fountain head. That dream pursued me into the day time. Never had I hated God so intensely. (qtd. in Beauchamp 412).

While Beauchamp notes Wells’s claim that this dreadful vision led him to the realization that his mother’s Calvinist God is a lie, he believes that Wells “artistically resurrected his childhood spectre of a diabolical deity and superimposed him...on the figure

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18 Beauchamp’s thesis was anticipated by an unsigned 1896 review in *The Guardian* that noted “Sometimes one is inclined to think the intention of the author has been to satirise and rebuke the presumption of science; at other times his object seems to be to parody the work of the Creator of the human race, and cast contempt upon the dealings of God with His creatures.” A year later Wells stated that, of all the initial reviews of the book, “the Guardian critic seemed to be the only one who read it aright.” See H. G. Wells: *The Critical Heritage* (Ed. Parrinder) 52-53.
of Dr. Moreau” (412). Having located the source for Moreau in a childhood nightmare, however, Beauchamp seems inclined to discredit the significance of the novel, regarding it merely as a “vent for [Wells’s] residually adolescent animus toward that childhood God” and “an imaginative act of defiance that evokes the desired emotional response but demands no intellectual assent as to its truth” (412).

Yet it is perhaps because Beauchamp regards the novel as merely the projection of an adolescent bugbear that he fails to observe the significance of Moreau’s double role as a symbol of God and as a symbol of evolutionary creation.19 By superimposing the malignant deity of his childhood upon Moreau as evolutionary nature, Wells reveals the persistence of theology in his own thought. Rather than being discarded as “a lie,” then, theology is effectively transferred to a new deity, evolutionary nature. This move is, of course, not frivolous but fundamental, reflecting broader cultural difficulties associated with the transition from a theological to an evolutionary cosmology. Thus the novel is not so much a grotesque of theology, but a grotesque of evolutionary nature as theos—an anonymous, indifferent omnipotence that bears an essential resemblance to the Demiurgos that Huxley associated with evolution.

This shift is apparent in Prendick’s view of the world as “a vast pitiless Mechanism” that seems not only “to cut and shape the fabric of existence” but to crush and tear humans and Beast-Folk alike “amid the infinite complexity of its incessant wheels” (123). This “morbid” view, he tells us, came as the result of witnessing the “painful disorder” of Moreau’s island, which appears as the microcosm of the chaos of evolutionary nature: “had Moreau had any intelligible object, I could have sympathised at least a little with him....But

19 In a footnote Beauchamp notes that both the Christian God and the evolutionary process are “fused” in Moreau, but precisely how this is accomplished and—more importantly—why it works, is not explained.
he was so irresponsible, so utterly careless! His curiosity, his mad, aimless investigations, drove him on; and the Things were thrown out to live a year or so, to struggle and blunder and suffer, and at last to die painfully” (123).

A further consequence of this altered role for nature is the reassignment of sin as an attribute of nature. As I have noted, Wells once described civilized man as the sum of two incompatible factors, “the natural man, who is the product of natural selection, the culminating ape, and a type of animal more obstinately unchangeable than any other living creature; and...artificial man, the highly plastic creature of tradition, suggestion, and reasoned thought (217). “Sin,” as he goes on to state in the same paragraph, “is the conflict of the two factors—as I have tried to convey in my Island of Dr. Moreau.” While it may seem that Wells is here making an objective statement about the origin of the idea of sin, his assertion rests on the Huxleyan assumption that every antisocial action that human beings commit is an instance of the animal breaking through the work of ethical evolution. In this respect, Wells’s description of the origin of sin re-inscribes Original Sin as the ineradicable residue of nature in man.

Like the humans they parody, Moreau’s Beast-Folk are made wretched by the quasi-religious laws that are designed to preserve their imperfect humanization, but the removal of the laws also offers no solution to their suffering. When Moreau is killed by his latest experiment, the tenuous hold of the laws upon the Beast-Folk is severed, allowing their true nature to surface. In spite of Prendick’s attempts to install Moreau as a transcendent moral concept in the minds of the Beast-Folk, the island descends into a chaos of bestial predation and sexual immorality. Reversion, however, is not limited to the Beast-Folk: Moreau’s assistant, Montgomery, also loses possession of his humanity through alcohol,
and is killed by the same Beast-Folk to whom he gives drink. As the last survivor, Prendick becomes increasingly isolated as he watches the traces of humanization gradually disappear from Moreau’s Beast-Folk: “day by day...they gave up bandagings and wrappings, abandoned at last every stitch of clothing...hair began to spread over the exposed limbs...their foreheads fell away and their faces projected” (161).

Although Wells is unquestionably exploiting anxieties concerning secularization with this grotesque parody of the imagined consequences of the death of God, the fate of Moreau’s Beast-Folk can nevertheless be taken as an accurate expression of Wells’s basic anthropology. While he recognizes that the moral strictures restraining human impulses are painfully unnatural, his view of nature also forces him to see the alternative as worse. In this regard, while Wells seems to arrive at a number of similar conclusions regarding humanization, he disagrees with Nietzsche on the question of its necessity. For Nietzsche, the solution to self-vivisection was its rejection in favour of a life-affirming morality, notwithstanding any risk of reversion. Indeed, for Nietzsche, reversion as the recovery of nature was precisely what was desired. For Wells, however, this route is made anathema by his doubts about human nature.

Nevertheless, Wells was a keen analyst and critic of a worldview he could not entirely disown. Within the story, cynicism registers in several ways. Foremost, it appears in Moreau’s attitude toward his creations. Although Moreau has established himself as an agent of evolution, he has failed to recognize the importance of culture in the process of evolution. What Moreau seeks instead is a saltus from one form of being to another. When this saltus inevitably fails, the result is a cynicism that is part misanthropy, part dehumanizing vision. As Moreau tells Prendick:
I can see through it all, see into their very souls, and see there nothing but the souls of beasts, beasts that perish, anger and the lusts to live and gratify themselves.—Yet they’re odd; complex, like everything else alive. There is a kind of upward striving in them, part vanity, part waste sexual emotion, part waste curiosity. It only mocks me. (99)

When the Beast-Folk fail to live up to Moreau’s anthropological ideal, he regards them as unimprovable failures—beasts rather than men. This engenders the modern cynical conclusion that because men are animals, they ought to be treated as such: a mass to be controlled and manipulated rather than engaged. The Beast-Folk become simply a problem to be managed, a need for which the Kanaka missionaries’ laws are adapted. At this point the connection between cynicism as anthropological contempt and cynicism as a form of ideological control appears in full relief: because the Beast-Folk have been dismissed out of hand as failed humans, the laws which might otherwise act as supplements of the humanizing process become instead mere tools of social control. Put concisely, Moreau’s cynicism resides in the fact that he has already answered the rhetorical question that punctuates each of the Beast-Folks’ laws—they are not men—but they are encouraged to believe that they are men so that (paradoxically) they do not become what they are.

As the Beast-Folk begin to regress, Prendick attempts to adopt Moreau’s methods of ideological control, but fails to achieve a comparable degree of legitimacy. His attempts to install Moreau as an omniscient deity are met with the sceptical indifference of the degenerating Beast-Folk. As their humanization falls away, their capacity for credulity goes with it. Prendick’s methods of negotiating life on the island therefore become increasingly brutal. As the society of the Beast Folks degenerates to a Hobbesian state of nature, Prendick has no choice but to degenerate with it. Eventually he and the Beast-Folk arrive at a “scale of honour...based mainly on the capacity for inflicting trenchant wounds”
(158). He watches as the war of all against all gradually consumes all of the Beast Folk, escaping it only by chance when a dinghy containing the desiccated corpse of the beastly captain of the *Ipecacuanha* arrives onshore. In the world discovered by Prendick, life is nasty, brutish and short.

Prendick survives, but not unscathed. Like his literary precursor, Gulliver, Prendick is unable to persuade himself “that the men and women I met were not also another Beast People, animals half wrought into the outward image of human souls, and that they would presently begin to revert, to show first this bestial mark and then that” (170). Prendick learns the unendurable truth that the Coming Beast lurks within. Beset by the fear of humankind’s imminent reversion, he retreats to the “down-land,” far away from the Londoners he can no longer regard as human. Here he finds solace in books, chemistry and the study of the heavens, where he finds in “the eternal laws of matter” a refuge from the “daily cares and sins and troubles of men” (172). Moreau’s experiments in humanization have proven to him that humanity is itself false. Like Moreau’s vision of his own creations, he cannot help seeing the souls of beasts in his fellow Londoners. Whereas this recognition drove Moreau back to the laboratory to find a remedy, Prendick turns to his laboratory not to change reality, but to escape from it. He immerses himself in the microcosmos of chemistry and the macrocosmos of astronomy, worlds where nature is, he believes, governed by unchanging laws. In so doing, he becomes a modern version of the Diogenes who retreats into his tub out of alienation and despair. This retreat is in many ways as absurd as the ending of *Gulliver’s Travels*, but the undercurrent of satire is nowhere near as strong; it becomes an ironic expression of a real attitude, or more appropriately Wells’s attitude, toward the real.


**War of the Worlds**

Bergonzi has noted that Wells’s early fictions participate in the “fin de globe” motif common during the last decade of the nineteenth century, reflecting the sense that “the normal life of society had continued too long in its predictable and everyday fashion, and that some radical transformation was overdue, whether by war or natural disaster” (12). As I have suggested, this is also the ultimate expression of the pessimistic form of modern cynicism that desires cultural renewal through catastrophe. *War of the Worlds* offers precisely such a catastrophe, one which can be regarded as a hybrid of both war and natural disaster: the invasion of the earth by a species whose advancement has made it into something like a force of nature. Robert Crossley has stated that the novel is one of Wells’s most forceful assaults upon humanity’s enduring anthropocentrism. He argues that Wells’s intent is to disillusion humanity with an eye to “the recovery of spiritual health” (19). But the signs of this return to spiritual health are conspicuously absent in the narrative, which affirms pessimism by ending (much like *The Time Machine* and *Moreau*) with a sense of disillusionment verging on despair. Moreover, *War of the Worlds* also registers a deepening sense of alienation and emotional distance from humanity.

As I have argued, the most significant event for Wells was humanity’s re-placement in the world as animal, and the overarching goal of *War of the Worlds* is to reassert man’s essential place in nature. But this re-placement is not celebrated: in the novel man is not merely placed back among the beasts, but among “the beasts that perish,” perhaps in

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20 Psalm 49:12: “Nevertheless man being in honour abideth not: he is like the beasts that perish,” but also the first page of *War of the Worlds*. It is a favourite line of Wells’s, one that appears in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, *War of the Worlds* and *Anticipations*. In the novels it is deployed as a reminder that in spite of its claims to exceptionalism, humanity is subject to the same laws of life and death as the animals.
order that what is bestial in him might also perish. Ironically, however, the novel also edges toward the conclusion that in order to become more than merely a beast, man must also become more ruthless and less human. The novel can therefore be regarded as testimony to Wells’s working through of the implications of evolution, reacting on the one hand to the cynicism of man’s post-Darwinian status, but tending towards the conclusions that would appear in *Anticipations*.

Wells had ended his early essay “Zoological Regression” with the ominous question of whether nature in “unsuspected obscurity” was equipping the Coming Beast as a replacement for humankind (168). In *The Time Machine* this replacement was formed in the underground caverns of the Morlocks; in *Moreau* it was discovered within; in *War of the Worlds* it takes place in the canals of Mars. Spurred on by the cooling of their own planet, the Martians arrive on earth not as refugees, but as colonizers willing to displace and eradicate if necessary earth’s current occupants in order to secure a foothold in the new world, much as European settlers had done in the age of colonial expansion. Human beings, however, are slow to grasp the meaning of the Martians’ arrival and their response to the invasion is hindered by a sense of superiority that is as unquestioned as it is unfounded. After a plucky but futile display of resistance, humans are displaced from their seat of dominance from the area around London and are forced to flee or be exterminated.

The Martians’ arrival removes humankind from the position of top predator and pushes it back among the terrestrial fauna. As Peter Kemp has observed, this displacement is reflected in the use of imagery that “constantly reclaims [man] for the animal world...men are compared to infusoria, monkeys, lemurs, sheep, dodos, cows, ants, frogs, 

In *Anticipations*, however, it is used more selectively to refer to those who will fail to take active part in the creation of the New Republic; those who, like beasts, are without intellect but have “sense alone” (292).
bees, wasps, rabbits, rats and oxen” (23). And while this displacement is superficially the result of the Martians’ technological superiority, it is also meant to indicate an intellectual superiority which is related to the Martians’ unfathomable distance from animal being. In this respect, the Martians represent not so much the invasion of a new species, but the invasion of a perspective that is not only post-human, but also super-human. This shift in perspective is introduced in the striking paragraph with which the novel opens:

No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man’s and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinised and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinise the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. With infinite complacency men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter. It is possible that the infusoria under the microscope do the same. (41)

Martin Danahay has noted the resemblance of this opening line to a passage from the essay “Through a Microscope” in which Wells imagines amoeba under the scrutiny of a human scientific dabbler:

And all the time these creatures are living their vigorous, fussy little lives in this drop of water they are being watched by a creature of whose presence they do not dream, who can wipe them all out of existence with the stroke of his thumb, and who is withal as finite and sometimes as fussy and unreasonably energetic, as themselves. He sees them, and they do not see him, because he has senses they do not possess, because he is too incredibly vast and strange to come, save as an overwhelming catastrophe, into their lives. Even so, it may be that the dabbler himself is being curiously observed….The dabbler is good enough to say that the suggestion is inconceivable. I can imagine a decent Amoeba saying the same thing. (qtd. in Danahay 217)

In both passages, Wells uses dramatic shifts in perspective to undermine anthropocentric complacency. In the passage from “Under the Microscope,” a fantasy of omniscience and omnipotence is fashioned only to be punctured by the suggestion that the human perspective might in fact be the amoebic, and that the observer might also be the observed.
But Wells does not simply unsettle mankind’s assumptions regarding its place in the cosmos, he (quite literally) belittles them. His amoebas are not anthropomorphized in order to increase our sympathy for them. He imagines a superior perspective with the intent to show that humans are themselves like amoebae. In War of the Worlds, the Martians inhabit the macrocosmic perspective, acquiring at the same time its vast perspective as well as its essential indifference. We are told that the Martians possess minds “that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic” (41). We are also told that the key to this vast intellectual superiority (which is, it should be noted, attributed rather than observed) is the Martians’ virtual elimination of the physical body. Appearing octopus-like with their overdeveloped brains and tentacular hands, the Martians, we are told, represent the successful “supression of the animal side of the organism by the intelligence” (146). Doing away with the body, it seems, has liberated the Martians from the needs and distractions that accompany it: digestion has been eliminated by their method of feeding, and the “tumultuous emotions” that result from sexual reproduction have also been displaced by a “polyp-like” form of reproduction (145).

Given the Martians’ antipathy for the animal body, it is appropriate that their arrival on earth marks the beginning of the eradication and displacement of the human animal. In contrast to Martian intelligence, humans are shown to be dominated by primitive emotions that not only slow their reaction to the Martian threat, but make them prone to irrational behaviour. When the Martians first arrive in Woking, human beings are shown to be incautious, curious, and indifferent. Once the attack begins, however, these attitudes quickly give way to panic. The general irrationality of human beings en masse forms the subject of Chapter XVI, “The Exodus from London,” in which the effect of the Martians’
advance upon London is described. This attack induces what the narrator describes as the “swift liquefaction of the social body,” people fleeing in terror, or being vaporized by the Martians’ heat rays. During the exodus, man’s inhumanity to man rises to the surface as people clamber over each other to save themselves. The purpose of the chapter (aside from offering the spectacle of showing London destroyed) is to show the fragility of the rationality that humans claim as their most defining trait. In the novel, rationality is one of the ways in which the species’ evolutionary position is judged, and it is a test that Wells believes many of his countrymen would fail.

A sampling of the state of mankind occurs as the narrator makes his way toward London through the wreckage of the Home Counties. Along the way, he encounters people slain like animals and men whose faulty characters have been laid bare by the crisis. For the most part, this becomes a study in deficiency: a curate to whom the narrator is bound by circumstance is a “spoilt child of life,” “one of those weak creatures full of shifty cunning, who face neither God nor man...[nor] even themselves, void of pride, timorous, anaemic, hateful souls” (150). When another Martian capsule destroys the house in which they are hiding, the two are confined in close quarters overlooking a pit. As the stress of the confinement wears upon the curate, his irrationality reduces him “to the level of an animal” which the narrator can only manage through coercion and violence (153). Ultimately this irrationality justifies the curate’s sacrifice: when he threatens to expose both himself and the narrator to the Martians, the narrator attacks him with a “meat chopper—a choice of weapon made appropriate, apparently, by the curate’s descent into animal irrationality. He turns the blade away at the last minute “with one last touch of humanity” (156), immobilizing the curate, but also rendering him helpless against the
Martians. Although the murder of the curate is presented as an act of self-preservation, the novel’s evolutionary subtext makes it difficult not to see it as the perfect marriage of human and natural evolution. In a perilous world, fitness once again has less to do with compassion and morality than with rationality and ruthlessness.

The tendency to revert to animal irrationality is not simply the failing of the weak-minded curate, however. The narrator also experiences the “unmanning” effect of terror, “weeping silently as a child might do” as he flees the Martian attack (59). The Time Traveller and Prendick also have similarly emotional, and even histrionic, reactions to misfortune. These are not simply nods to melodramatic convention; they serve to emphasize the ease with which the façade of human rationality is shattered by a resurgence of animal emotion. Such reminders of the fragility of human reason only contribute to the theme of humanity’s enduring bondage to animal nature through the body.

Another sort of deficiency characterizes the narrator’s next encounter: an artilleryman who convinces the narrator that the Martian arrival means that “the game” of human civilization is up. After listening to his sober assessment of humankind’s altered terrestrial situation and his plan for adaptation, the narrator declares the artilleryman a “man indeed” (169). Yet, ironically, the artilleryman’s plan involves the remainder of humanity becoming “wild” and retreating to the sewers where (like the Morlocks in their underground matrix) it can coexist with the Martians for the next “million years or so” while the evolutionary tables turn. The necessary changes to humankind, however, will require the cull not only of human stock—neither the weak nor the “silly” are to be included—but also of knowledge: what must be carried underground is “not novels and poetry swipes, but ideas, science books” (172). As Bergonzi has noted, the artilleryman
welcomes the destruction of contemporary society because it means a return to “real” life, an opportunity to be done with decadence (137). Yet as the narrator soon discovers, the artilleryman is in his own way as self-indulgent and as decadent as those he would exclude from his sewer republic.

Given the disparagement of humanity for its ties to the animal in the novel, it is somewhat ironic that humanity’s vestigial connection to nature ultimately proves to be its saving grace. Having so thoroughly severed their connection to nature through refinement of themselves and their environment, the Martians have made themselves susceptible to microbes. Bacteria thus fulfill much the same function as the Morlocks had in The Time Machine: a reserve force of nature cultivated in obscurity waiting to strike the species whose dominance and refinement leads to its downfall. Yet as Kemp has pointed out, this victory does nothing to redeem humanity’s bruised ego since it is saved neither by its intelligence nor by its technology, but (as Wells’s narrator observes) by “the humblest things...upon the earth” (181).

Crossley has argued that the displacement of humanity from its position of dominance in War of the Worlds should be seen as an expression of a “moral vision that underlies and invigorates Wellsian fiction” (18). For Crossley, this moral vision is premised on the desire to dislodge the humanist anthropocentrism that had endured the great shocks dealt to it by science. In spite of the discoveries of Copernicus and Darwin, humankind has gone on much as it had before. So Wells imagined an alien invasion to shake it out of its complacency. In this respect, Crossley believes, Wells is a “great disillusioner for the post-Copernican, post-Darwinian, post-Christian, post-humanist
world,” one who strips away illusions and “self-delusions” as part of the “dismantling that is the necessary prelude to the construction of an unsentimental utopia” (19).

While Crossley’s identification of the theme of disillusionment in *The Time Machine, The Island of Doctor Moreau* and *War of the Worlds* is essentially correct, it should be noted that the utopian solution to disillusionment is absent in them. At this stage in his career, Wells’s utopianism was still restrained by the suspicion that rousing humankind from its unconscious immersion in the cosmic process was nearly impossible. This scepticism is reflected in the melancholy ending of *War of the Worlds* which indicates that only a few years afterward, the lesson of the Martian invasion seems lost on the majority of humankind, who seem to go about their lives as blithely as before. As Crossley himself observes, “The spectators who drank ginger-beer on Horsell Common now rubberneck among the Martian relics in London. History slides toward the museum; horror becomes a tourist attraction” (50). The narrator alone remains affected by the experience of the invasion. Like Prendick at the end of *Moreau* (and Gulliver before him), he can no longer see his fellow human beings in the same way: “I go to London and see the busy multitudes in Fleet Street and the Strand, and it comes across my mind that they are but the ghosts of the past, haunting the streets that I have seen silent and wretched, going to and fro, phantasms in a dead city, the mockery of life in a galvanised body” (191).

The novel points up the paradox of Wells’s attack on humanity’s anthropocentric complacency. On the one hand, humanity must be shown that it is essentially animal, but on the other, only so much can be expected of animals. One might say that it is precisely because of humanity’s animal blitheness that the “dismantling” enacted in *War of the Worlds* does not merely involve the destruction of London and its suburbs, but also the
“liquidation” of its people. The implication is that only through violent cataclysm can attitudes and reified life patterns be changed. This is, however, the logic of the cynic-moralist who desires regeneration through catastrophe. In characterizing the destruction in War of the Worlds as a salutary clearing of illusion as a prelude to utopia, Crossley not only participates in this attitude, he also elides the violence and destruction of any utopia whose establishment depends on getting rid of people.

If the Martian invasion can be said to have a moral, it is perhaps that humanity has mistaken its global pre-eminence for exemption from the cosmic process. As the narrator observes, this belief is the product of “decadence” (190). The invasion is a reminder that humankind indulges illusions of exceptionalism at its own peril. In this regard, War of the Worlds can be seen as a challenge to Huxley’s idea of ethical evolution. If battling the cosmic process leads to weakness and decadence in a world dominated by the cosmic process, it could be a mistake. And if there can be no escape from the cosmic process, the solution is to improve one’s position within it by assuming greater control, even if doing so requires one to align oneself with evolution and embrace its ethics. Two years later, in Anticipations, Wells seems to articulate his support for this new perspective:

All things are integral in the mighty scheme, the slain builds up the slayer, the wolf grooms the horse into swiftness, and the tiger calls for wisdom and courage out of man. All things are integral, but it has been left for men to be consciously integral, to take, at last, a share in the process, to have wills that have caught a harmony with the universal will, as sand grains flash into splendour under the blaze of the sun. (252-3)

This “share in the process,” however, is not to be mistaken for a return to “lower” or animal nature, but an ascent to a higher one. The risk of ascent, however, was losing perspective on the human world, which is what occurs to the Martians; it is also the essential error committed by the ancestors of the Eloi and by Dr Moreau. But ironically
enough, it was one that Wells also veered toward in *Anticipations*. In light of Wells’s aversion to the real, however, this trajectory was perhaps inevitable: the macrocosmic perspective is, after all, not only a refuge, but it is also the perspective from which evolutionary nature appears rational. From this perspective, the pattern of what Huxley called “the mighty scheme” can be seen.

Wells knew that there was no escape from the prison of the real because he saw that the door was blocked by an ape. Humans could not change their reality because they could not change themselves. His early fictions are explorations of humanity’s entrapment by its own nature which end by affirming that entrapment, although not without reservation. He had not the disposition to assume this role indefinitely. After the death of Queen Victoria, he turns his attention to finding a way out, but his focus shifts from the individual to the collective and to bringing cosmic rationality to terrestrial chaos. If it is true that modern cynicism is defined by a disillusioned and disheartened retreat from society, Wells was never really a cynic in this sense, even though he affirmed it in his early fictions. Less appropriate still for Wells is the opposite image, the Cynic as the opponent of civilization. That Wells acted as a tireless advocate for and theorist of a World State out of the conviction that it was the only form of political organization that would save humanity from self-destruction disqualifies him for both roles. Later in life when he came to the conclusion that people were simply not as interested as he in finding a way out of the reality that they insisted upon replicating, he again adopted the attitude of the modern moralistic cynic but this time it was arguably not a pose.
Chapter 3

Joseph Conrad and H. G. Wells maintained a friendship for many years. Both had published their first novels in 1895, and both had expressed appreciation of the other’s work. The friendship became increasingly strained after 1903, however, and they eventually ceased corresponding. No letters survive that record this break, but in 1918 Conrad recounted one of their final exchanges to Hugh Walpole, saying that he had told Wells: “the difference between us, Wells, is fundamental. You don’t care for humanity but think they are to be improved. I love humanity but know they are not!” (Hart-Davis 168). This “fundamental difference” is also one of the key differences between Wells’s cynicism and Conrad’s. Whereas Wells did not care for humanity as it existed and wanted to force it out of its complacency and its cyclical history, Conrad regarded such attempts with extreme suspicion because he was, in many ways, more cynical than Wells.

In spite of Conrad’s objection, however, there are some essential similarities between his outlook and Wells’s. Conrad may have loved humanity, but he was not sanguine about human nature; he believed (or claimed to believe) that man was at core a vicious animal and asserted that this viciousness needed to be organized by society and controlled by moral codes. Yet at the same time, he also believed that these needs were not being met by modern society which, on the whole, had a pernicious influence on human nature. But (and here he departs most clearly from Wells) in spite of its deficiencies, the traditional principles and ideals of civilization had to be upheld since any attempt to make fundamental changes to the existing moral structure would be likely to make things worse.
This social philosophy found its complement in a metaphysics which, although often regarded as quintessentially modern, is firmly rooted in the pessimism of the nineteenth century. According to this philosophy, the external world was drained of the meaning and purpose that man had placed in it, and what meaning remained was foreign and inaccessible. Behind the visible world was a sort of malign flux whose relationship to physical phenomena was obscure but potent, ensuring that existence was insecure and human aspirations ultimately futile.

Cynicism in Conrad can be regarded as a response to and an embodiment of this philosophical perspective. In this chapter I utilize three approaches to the topic. In *Under Western Eyes* I examine Conrad’s own deployment of cynicism and analyze it in relation to the concerns of that work. I then turn to *Heart of Darkness* to investigate the theme of cynicism and its relation to the imperial event behind the story. Finally, I deal with *Victory*, one of Conrad’s later novels, which I read as Conrad’s ultimately inconclusive struggle with his own sceptical pessimism.

The only previous study of cynicism in Conrad I am aware of is an article by J.M. Kertzer. For Kertzer, cynicism is closely related to scepticism; it is a condition that occurs when the sceptical mind turns on itself and falls into cynicism which, Kertzer asserts, meant for Conrad “despair in thought and contempt for the powers of the human mind” (121). Yet, as Kertzer notes, Conrad was also fascinated by cynicism, and his novels can therefore be regarded as “studies in sceptical thinking that consider but guard themselves against the dangerous attractions of cynicism” (121).

While Kertzer identifies an important element of Conrad’s project, his assessment of Conrad’s understanding of cynicism is not quite accurate. Conrad’s own understanding of
the term is, at least according to usual definitions, fairly unusual, and overreliance on existing definitions can obscure what he was trying to convey in his most meaningful deployments of the word. While Kertzer’s study provides a brilliant analysis of the problem of cynicism in relation to Conrad’s work, it does not go to the heart of what Conrad himself meant by cynicism. Rather than scepticism, Conrad’s sense of cynicism was more closely associated with egotism, particularly in relation to its perceived effects on perception and judgment. It can be succinctly defined as the wilful deception of self and other, a condition in which egotistical and self-interested impulses assume control over reason and perception.

Conrad’s most sustained engagement with cynicism occurs in his 1911 novel Under Western Eyes. The novel is narrated by an “old teacher of languages,” an expatriate living in Geneva who achieves a window upon Russia’s troubled political culture through his professional association with the Haldins, a Russian family living in exile in Geneva. In his narrative, the old teacher often digresses to reflect upon the nature of Russian culture. Early in his narrative he attempts to define the “spirit” of Russia in order to aid the “moral discovery” that he believes “should be the object of every tale” (65). The word he settles upon to aid this discovery is cynicism, which he believes to be “the mark of Russian autocracy and of Russian revolt.” He goes on to say:

In its pride of numbers, in its strange pretensions of sanctity, and in the secret readiness to abase itself in suffering, the spirit of Russia is the spirit of cynicism. It informs the declarations of her statesmen, the theories of her revolutionists, and the mystic vaticinations of prophets to the point of making freedom look like a form of debauch, and the Christian virtues themselves appear actually indecent. (65)

Rather than unlocking the mysteries of the Russian mind, however, the narrator’s keyword has often had the effect of mystifying critics. Kertzer observes that the word does
not seem particularly apt since the Russians in the novel appear “illogical, emotional, talkative, fanatical, idealistic, mystical and arbitrary, but rarely cynical” (122). Jacques Berthoud, noting its connection to simplicity and childishness, understands it as a “devastating impudence or frankness” that has not yet understood the “secret conspiracy” of culture (164). Other critics, such as Eloise Knapp Hay, Ronald Schleifer and Keith Carabine have rejected the idea that the word leads to any significant moral discoveries. Hay believes that the narrator “cannot distinguish one cynic from another” and is “tarring all Russians with the same brush while whitewashing all ‘Westerners’” (“The Missing Centre,” 126). Schleifer believes that “the cynicism that the narrator sees behind Russian utterance and action is his own cynical attitude towards Russian ‘mysticism’” (Public and Private” 241). For Carabine, the keyword is the product of a narrator who is neither as objective as he claims, nor in his own way any less cynical than his Russians. He argues that to be truly “cynical” the Russians would have to “sneer and fault-find” and possess “a doubt of good motives” when in fact they tend to be naïvely idealistic, “unaware that they are less users of words than used by them” (127).

Such responses reflect the challenges posed by Conrad’s narrative style. Here as elsewhere, Conrad seems to adopt an ironic attitude to his narrator. This sense of distance is compounded by the narrator’s own lack of irony and (ironically) by his own claims to objectivity and artlessness, which tend to increase rather than dispel suspicions that he is neither as objective nor as disinterested as he claims. Even his assertions that the Russian character remains opaque to him and (he believes) to Western eyes in general, appear disingenuous in light of the number of claims he makes about it. Arguably, the net effect of these assertions is to cast a shadow of doubt over the narrative and to undercut the
assumption that the novel offers any reliable insight into the minds and motives of Russians. At best, we are left with an account filtered through multiple layers of semi-reliable perception that we must do our best to interpret with the knowledge that these interpretations will be subjective and even biased. But as it happens, these conclusions are fully compatible with the larger point that Conrad seems to be gesturing toward through the idea of cynicism, namely that our vision is never entirely clear and that our interpretations and judgments all-too-often bear the earmarks of our own prejudices and self-interest.

In total, the word “cynicism” appears a dozen times in the narrative, leaving little doubt that it is one that must be reckoned with. A brief search for the words “Russian” and “cynicism” in British publications from the period reveals that the word often appeared in relation to Russia, particularly in the discussion surrounding the events of 1905. Conrad would have been aware of these deployments because he had himself joined the discussion with “Autocracy and War” (1905), an essay which mounts an impressively vituperative attack upon Russian autocracy using virtually every negative word and image in Conrad’s considerable arsenal except cynicism. In spite of its absence, however, it is apparent that the cynicism of the autocratic regime both towards the Russian people and toward other European nations is the object of his moral outrage. But the essay is also replete with images expressing the inscrutability and moral darkness of autocracy, and it is perhaps partly for this reason that Conrad settles upon cynicism as a keyword for *Under Western Eyes*. Much like the nation to which it is applied, its meaning is obscure, multiple,

21 This finding is contrary to Saveson’s assertion that newspaper and journal articles from the period do not use cynicism in connection with Russia. See “The Moral Discovery of *Under Western Eyes*,” 38.
negative, and ultimately without a centre: the Russia that is described in “Autocracy and War.”

In the novel, the word’s native ambiguity is augmented by the uncommon link that the narrator forges among cynicism, simplicity, and mystical belief. In the passage quoted above, he associates cynicism with mysticism, but later in the book he links it to Russian simplicity, “a terrible corroding simplicity in which mystic phrases clothe a naïve and hopeless cynicism” (103). Elsewhere he observes that Russian simplicity “marches innocently on the edge of cynicism for some lofty purpose” (124). These judgements on the Russian character are also echoed by the Russian protagonist, Razumov, who declares that “we” Russians are “children; that is—sincere; that is—cynical, if you like” (205). This last deployment of the word suggests that unless we are prepared to argue that the old teacher of languages not only imposes his own perspective on events, but also invents dialogue to supplement Razumov’s diary—the “strange human document” on which the narrative is apparently founded—we cannot say confidently that the word is merely the product of an unreliable narrator.

At first glance these deployments of the word seem to dislocate it from its familiar connotative moorings and forge new connections with naïveté and idealism rather than disillusionment. It may also be that Conrad is drawing on a less common sense of the word. John E. Saveson has argued that cynicism is a deliberate choice on Conrad’s part, a “word with special meaning drawn not from popular writing or popular prejudices but from philosophical analysis” (38). Saveson detects the influence of Nietzsche in Conrad’s association of cynicism with mysticism and suggests that he applies these two concepts to the Russian people “in terms of princely master and slave populations” (38). One problem
with this argument, however, is the question of Conrad’s knowledge of Nietzsche. While Conrad was certainly familiar with the philosopher’s more popular ideas, there is nothing to suggest that his familiarity was sufficient to facilitate the extraction of the relatively obscure idea that Saveson identifies.\textsuperscript{22} Moreover, Saveson’s argument assumes an improbable level of engagement and agreement with a thinker for whom Conrad had earlier expressed only contempt.\textsuperscript{23} Nevertheless, I believe that Saveson is correct in suggesting that we need to look to philosophical rather than popular discourse for the appropriate meaning of the word. But it will be necessary to look to an earlier phase of European philosophy.

One of the notable features of \textit{Under Western Eyes} is its implicit commentary on the legacy of the Enlightenment. The decrepit mansion that forms the base of Russian revolutionary activity is located on the Boulevard des Philosophes, and it is ironic that on this street named in honour of the Enlightenment much that is not enlightened occurs. But the most prominent symbol of the Enlightenment in the novel is the bronze statue of Jean-Jacques Rousseau that stands on the tiny Isle Rousseau at the entrance to Lake Geneva. Despite this prominence, however, surprisingly little critical attention has been paid to it. More surprising is that, to my knowledge, no one has yet observed that it may shed light on the narrator’s enigmatic keyword.

The statue of Rousseau is open to a range of possible interpretations, but the description of the island on which it sits suggests that none of these can be positive: “There was something of naïve, odious, and inane simplicity about that unfrequented tiny crumb

\textsuperscript{22} Cynicism is not a particularly prominent aspect of Nietzsche’s master-slave relationship idea, and does not appear to have been seized upon by his early readers in England. Thatcher, for example, makes no mention of it in his study of Nietzsche’s reception in England from 1890 to 1914.

\textsuperscript{23} In an 1899 letter to Helen Sanderson, Conrad characterized Nietzsche’s philosophy as “mad individualism.” See the \textit{Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad}, 2:188.
of earth named after Jean Jacques Rousseau. Something pretentious and shabby, too” (286). What is notable about this characterization of the Isle is the apparent echo of the descriptions of Russian cynicism as a naïve and deplorable form of simplicity. This echo indicates that Rousseau is in some way connected to the spirit of cynicism that defines Russia and Russians. But what is the relationship of Rousseau to simplicity and cynicism? Conrad might be suggesting that the liberatory ideas of Enlightenment philosophes like Rousseau and Voltaire have been simplified and cynically appropriated by the Russian revolutionaries. This perspective seems to be supported by the description of Madame de S— whose exile in Geneva and “loud pretensions to be one of the leaders of modern thought and of modern sentiment” make her an egregious parody of Voltaire and Mme. de Stael (123). Similarly, Peter Ivanovitch becomes a parody of Rousseau’s noble savage before being reborn as a revolutionary. And yet if this is what the narrator means by cynicism, it would seem to be a distinctly unconscious form of it. Is it possible that something more is implied? Before I attempt to answer this question, it will be useful to look at the statue’s symbolic function in the novel.

Razumov finds himself on Isle Rousseau after wandering Geneva as an exile not only from his homeland but also from himself. His role as double agent requires that his inner self must remain hidden, which intensifies his feelings of isolation. The Isle Rousseau, situated apart from the rest of Geneva, mirrors Razumov’s subjective state. This mood is deepened by the figure of Rousseau who also grew isolated and alienated from humanity in his later life. Like Rousseau, Razumov has become, rather literally, a “solitary walker” who finds himself alone without brother, neighbour, friend, or society. Most importantly, however, it is under the effigy of Rousseau that Razumov begins to write the report to the
Russian police that, we are told, becomes the main source for the novel. But Razumov’s report is also treated by him as a sort of confession, and it is this detail that connects him to Rousseau.

Zdzisław Najder has noted that the only other reference to Rousseau in Conrad’s work occurs in *A Personal Record* where Conrad asserts that the confession is “a form of literary activity discredited by Jean Jacques Rousseau on account of the extreme thoroughness he brought to the work of justifying his own existence”; an intention, he notes, that was “palpably, even grossly, visible to an unprejudiced eye” (*A Personal Record* 154). Najder argues that Conrad’s objection to Rousseau was not simply the latter’s attempt to justify his morally questionable actions (the most infamous being the abandonment of his five children), but his claim to being exempt from typical moral standards because of his unique sensitivity and inherently good intentions (79). Najder believes that such a refusal to take responsibility for one’s own actions represented for Conrad a form of “moral cowardice” and he suggests that Jim and Razumov are two Rousseauvian characters who initially attempt to exonerate themselves through false confessions.

Najder’s view of Rousseau is confirmed in David Mazella’s account of the intertwined destiny of cynicism and Rousseau. According to Mazella, correspondences between Rousseau’s philosophy and classical Cynicism led to Rousseau being compared to Diogenes the Cynic, a comparison that eventually adhered. As Mazella points out, these comparisons were not all unfavourable: at the time the idea of good Cynic and bad Cynic still happily co-existed. But controversy surrounding Rousseau during his life and afterwards contributed to the transformation of the word into its negative modern form.
During his life, Rousseau’s instinct for independence and his unabashed use of free speech (Cynic traits both) helped to estrange him from his fellow philosophes; after his death and the publication of The Confessions, his reputation declined further, taking with it the reputation of modern cynicism. Henceforth, the idea of cynicism began to acquire some of Rousseau’s scandalous qualities, the most important of which for the present discussion is the view of the cynic as one who conceals his true motives or intentions through rationalization. As Mazella puts it, a portrait of the cynic emerges which casts him as a manipulator who “exerts his reason to accommodate his words and deeds to the dictates of his desires, not the other way around,” and the man who “imitates the forms of open argument, but only to evade more honest forms of (self-) assessment or deliberation” (147).

This is, I think, the essence of the “moral discovery” the narrator sees behind his keyword. The group to whom this sense of cynicism most clearly applies in the novel are the Russian revolutionaries, who are shown to be driven by motives that are less ideal than they allow even themselves to believe. Peter Ivanovitch and Madame de S— both speak in terms of a divine revolutionary purpose, but we are told they are motivated by much baser motives. Madame de S— has become a revolutionary only after being forced into exile. For her, revolution would be a means of revenge against her persecutors and a way of regaining the wealth and position that she believes have been stolen from her. Peter Ivanovitch has also endured the wrath of a brutal autocracy and has become the celebrated champion of revolt, but both the narrator and his actions suggest that he is motivated primarily by a desire for power and fame.
This form of cynicism becomes more pernicious when it is combined with mysticism. If religion is one of the ways that the Russian autocracy preserves its power and justifies its repression, mysticism is the way that the revolutionaries justify and romanticize their rebellion. Perhaps the most extreme example of revolutionary mysticism is Victor Haldin, who views his assassination of Minster de P—, the killing of innocent bystanders, and his own sacrifice in a spiritual light:

Men like me leave no posterity, but their souls are not lost. No man’s soul is ever lost. It works for itself—or else where would be the sense of self-sacrifice, of martyrdom, of conviction, of faith—the labours of the soul? What will become of my soul when I die...? It shall not perish....My spirit shall go on warring in some Russian body till all falsehood is swept out of the world. The modern civilization is false, but a new revelation shall come out of Russia. Ha! you say nothing. You are a sceptic. I respect your philosophical scepticism, Razumov, but don’t touch the soul. The Russian soul that lives in all of us. It has a future. It has a mission, I tell you, or else why should I have been moved to do this...I wouldn’t hurt a fly! (21)

In Haldin’s version of liberation theology, the revolutionary impulse is spiritualized as a transcendental soul whose goodness is beyond question. And because his own soul becomes part of a divine plan, any actions dedicated to the unfolding of that plan are also good. The connection the narrator draws between cynicism and mysticism suggests that Haldin’s belief in a revolutionary soul is an enabling philosophy rather than an essential one—revolt warrants belief rather than belief warranting revolt—and one which can be used to justify any sanguinary act. Moreover, even if it were possible to regard Haldin as a “true” believer, one would still have to contend with the implication that he is nevertheless the dupe of the sort of cynicism identified in Peter Ivanovitch and Madame de S—.

The other character that the narrator associates with cynicism and mysticism is Nathalie Haldin. Although he regards her with a great deal of sympathy, he is exasperated by her refusal to speak of the revolutionaries’ political vision in terms he finds
comprehensible. He describes this refusal as “scorn for all the practical forms of political liberty known to the western world,” but also “a terrible corroding simplicity in which mystic phrases clothe a naïve and hopeless cynicism” which he attributes to detestation for life “as it is” (103). Here the narrator’s sense of cynicism shifts toward contempt for the world, while mysticism becomes its response or its mask. The implication is that contempt for life in its material form prevents Russians from embodying their political aspirations in concrete ideas. This refusal is then apotheosized as spiritual and intellectual superiority, particularly in relation to western democratic models. Much like her brother’s idea of a transcendent Russian soul whose purpose is liberation, Nathalie believes that it is Russia’s destiny to find a political form hitherto undiscovered by other nations: “We Russians shall find some better form of national freedom than an artificial conflict of parties—which is wrong because it is a conflict and contemptible because it is artificial. It is left for us Russians to discover a better way” (104). What this “better way” is, she cannot articulate beyond the assertion that it will be distinctly “Russian,” a statement which also carries with it the implication of incomprehensibility for non-Russians. This too is part of the semantic terrain covered by the narrator’s use of cynicism: the refusal to grant to others the same intellectual, spiritual, or perceptual capacity that one possesses. For Conrad, this sense of cynicism was closely related to egotism, and as a characteristic of a culture or “race,” it tends to become exceptionalism and, in combination with power, the justification for imperialism. In “Poland Revisited” (1915), for example, he accuses German philosophers of “rearing a Tree of Cynical Wisdom” that has allowed Germany to assume in Europe “the attitude of Europeans amongst effete Asiatics or barbarous niggers; and, with a consciousness of superiority freeing their hands from all moral bonds, anxious to take
up...the ‘perfect man’s burden’” (Notes on Life and Letters 147). And in “Autocracy and War,” Conrad attributes much the same attitude to Russia, which he characterizes as a nothingness that regards (and represents) itself as everything. In Under Western Eyes, “cynicism” functions as a versatile keyword that allows him to explore this tendency at the level of individual ideology.

The narrator suggests that an important element of the Russians’ mysticism is their use of language. This is foregrounded by the old teacher’s initial reflection on the Russians’ “extraordinary” love of words:

They gather them up; they cherish them, but they don’t hoard them in their breasts; on the contrary, they are always ready to pour them out by the hour or by the night with an enthusiasm, a sweeping abundance, with such an aptness of application sometimes that, as in the case of very accomplished parrots, one can’t defend oneself from the suspicion that they really understand what they say. (12)

If the word “understand” is replaced with “believe” in the passage, the narrator’s ironic intent becomes more transparent. As I have noted, Carabine rejects the suggestion that cynicism was an appropriate keyword because Russians are “unaware that they are less users of words than used by them.” But this, I think, is the point: Russians are cynical precisely because they use language to obfuscate rather than to clarify. However, it is not quite accurate to say that Russians are used by words because they seem to use words rather self-interestedly to manipulate others or—as seems to be more often the case—to refract reality according to their ideological beliefs.

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24 Additional context to this perspective is supplied by George Santayana’s Egoism in German Philosophy (1916). As his title indicates, the central problem Santayana sees in German philosophy is its “egotism,” or “subjectivity in thought and wilfulness in morals” which has “justified prophetically that spirit of uncompromising self-assertion and metaphysical conceit which the German nation is now reducing to action” (6-7).
The theme of linguistic self-deception is introduced early in the novel by the old teacher of languages who declares that “Words...are the great foes of reality” (3). This basic idea is reinforced in a series of references to the vision of the Russian characters. In the essay “Poland Revisited,” Conrad likens cynicism to “being blind in one eye, a moral disablement” (*Notes on Life and Letters* 144); in *Under Western Eyes* he deploys a similar metaphor to signal the obscured moral vision of both sides of Russia’s political conflict. The murderous and murdered de P—has “insipid, bespectacled eyes” (14); General T—has “goggle eyes [that] could express a mortal hatred of all rebellion” (65). Peter Ivanovitch’s eyes are perpetually concealed by dark blue glasses, and the mystical Madame de—S is described as a “glassy-eyed Egeria” (139). These descriptions, applied equally to the forces of autocracy and revolt, suggest that in these characters perception is mediated or determined by their political allegiances: revolution and autocracy become the “lenses” through which they see the world. But if we consider the two examples of Razumov’s changes in vision, our view of the matter also shifts. While in the process of convincing himself to betray Haldin, Razumov pulls his cap “well forward over his eyes” (36). Later, when he assumes his role as a secret agent, he also “assumes” a green shade over his left eye (257). Both of these acts imply that moral self-blinding enables Razumov to act against his conscience. In practice, however, this self-blinding occurs through the exercise of cynical reason.

Having successfully remained aloof from the “upper and nether grindstones” of autocracy and revolt for the first twenty years of his life, Razumov suddenly finds himself drawn into them by Victor Haldin’s unexpected appearance in his room. After hearing Haldin’s confession, Razumov agrees to arrange for his escape. After failing to do so,
however, Razumov feels overwhelmed by the danger in which Haldin has placed him. The solution is to betray him to the authorities, but he must first convince himself that it is both moral and reasonable to do so. His first step is to argue away his liberal views and even to valorize their sacrifice as heroic:

He was persuaded that he was sacrificing his personal longings of [sic] liberalism—rejecting the attractive error for the stern Russian truth. “That’s patriotism,” he observed mentally, and added, “There’s no stopping midway on that road,” and then remarked to himself, “I am not a coward.” (35)

But in fact, as Najder suggests, Razumov is a coward. The idea of the “stern Russian truth,” whatever it may be, becomes an enabling fiction that will help him to escape from his dangerous situation. Razumov’s reason and his linguistic abilities rise to the challenge:

Betray. A great word. What is betrayal? They talk of a man betraying his country, his friends, his sweetheart. There must be a moral bond first. All a man can betray is his conscience. And how is my conscience engaged here; by what bond of common faith, of common conviction, am I obliged to let that fanatical idiot drag me down with him? On the contrary—every obligation of true courage is the other way. (36)

As if in protest against the violence done to it by reason, Razumov’s conscience conjures an apparition of Haldin lying prostrate and helpless before him in the snow. Using his scepticism, Razumov forces himself to “gaze far beyond” the apparition and continue to walk, dispelling the image of Haldin by treading on its breast. By denying Haldin’s humanity, Razumov is free to cut him off like a “withered member” (35).

In Russian, Razumov’s name means “man of reason,” and he prides himself on his rational superiority. Yet in deciding to betray Haldin, the narrative voice informs us, “He had simply discovered what he had meant to do all along” (39). Razumov believes his reason to be the antithesis of Haldin’s revolutionary mysticism, but the window we are offered upon it reveals it to be every bit as cynical. But are we to infer that Conrad regards
all reason as intrinsically cynical? The answer, perhaps, is in the “superior power” that drives Razumov’s thought. It is, of course, not the “cool superior reason” he believes it to be, but an impulse to self-preservation that has been triggered by the spectre of autocracy’s terrible repressive power. As the old teacher of languages points out, the danger faced by a Russian is inconceivable to an Englishman who does “not have an hereditary and personal knowledge of the means by which historical autocracy represses ideas, guards its power, and defends its existence...he might imagine himself arbitrarily thrown into prison, but it would never occur to him...that he could be beaten with whips as a practical measure either of investigation or of punishment” (25). Thus while Razumov’s reason is driven into cynicism by fear, it is inaccurate to say that his decision is irrational. From the perspective of self-preservation it is extremely rational, but it is the irrational brutality of Russian autocracy that makes it so.

This brings me to the cynicism of autocracy, which seems to be the origin of Russia’s cultural cynicism. Like Kertzer, I think that “Autocracy and War” provides crucial insight into the cynicism of Russian autocracy. As I have noted, egotism in its nationalist form (exceptionalism) is an important aspect of what Conrad means by cynicism, but a closer look at “Autocracy and War” can provide a more complete picture of its connotations and its effect on Russian culture. In the essay, Conrad considers the lessons of the Russo-Japanese war, but suggests that its real purpose has been to expose the “phantom” of Russian autocracy and to lay to rest “the ghost of Russia’s might.” The exorcism of this ghost, however, has revealed the depth of Russia’s moral decay: “Never before had the Western world the opportunity to look so deep into the black abyss which separates a soulless autocracy posing as, and even believing itself to be, the arbiter of
Europe, from the benighted, starved souls of its people” (Notes on Life and Letters 89). This image suggests that Russian autocracy is cynical in its willingness to deceive and manipulate, in the distance between its moral image and its abysmal reality, and in its policies of brutal oppression. But the quintessence of autocratic cynicism is expressed a few pages later when Conrad describes Russia as “a bottomless abyss that has swallowed up every hope of mercy, every aspiration towards personal dignity, towards freedom, towards knowledge, every ennobling desire of the heart, every redeeming whisper of conscience” (100). As Conrad describes it, the façade of imperial Russia conceals a nihilism which has stunted its people in a myriad of ways. Thus, Conrad predicts, when revolution does eventually come to Russia its “blind multitudes” will emerge not as a liberated people, but as “a monstrous full-grown child” who will suffer tyranny in “a thousand protean shapes” before finally discovering “the ways of living thought and articulate speech” (102-3).

If this view of autocracy and its effects is applied to Under Western Eyes, the link between child-like simplicity and cynicism made by the narrator becomes more transparent. After he convinces himself of the morality of placing Haldin in the hands of autocracy, Razumov takes up a blank page and scrawls five lines in a “childish” hand:

- History not Theory.
- Patriotism not Internationalism.
- Evolution not Revolution.
- Direction not Destruction.
- Unity not Disruption. (62)

The page is less a statement of belief than a statement designed to confer belief, another example, perhaps, of the Russians’ cynical use of language. But in light of the portrait of autocracy contained in “Autocracy and War,” one cannot help but see this cynicism as a
learned response, the product of an immoral regime which, almost unconsciously, distorts language and ideas to preserve its power. Razumov, however, is not yet schooled in this form of cynicism. Having opted to side with autocracy rather than revolt, he attempts to inscribe himself into the ideology he believes will be acceptable to authority. That he writes these principles out with difficulty and in a “childish” hand suggests not only his political naïveté, but also his essential misperception of the nature of autocratic power. Significantly, after his rooms are searched, it is this list of political principles that draws the suspicion of autocracy. This is not because the principles are in themselves suspicious, but because any statement of conviction will be regarded with suspicion by a regime that knows its own statements to be more strategic than heartfelt.

The longer that Razumov serves as an agent of autocracy, the more deceptively cynical he becomes. This culminates in the “hardly triumphant pleasure” he derives from deceiving the revolutionist Sophia Antonovna “out of her own mouth” (258). As he does so, he grasps the truth of the “cynical theory” that “speech has been given to us for the purpose of concealing our thoughts.” However, the point at which Razumov becomes most cynical is also the point at which he is poised to become the perfect tool of autocratic power—a secret agent who is above suspicion. This, however, would make him “a mere blind tool” which, he asserts, he “can never consent to be” (227). Because of his feelings for Nathalie, Razumov retreats from the path to complete cynicism. Befitting his realization that language is not a carrier of truth, but of misperceptions, manipulations and distortions, his confession to Nathalie regarding her brother’s betrayal comes in the form of a silent, self-implicating gesture which disallows any possibility of obfuscation or
rationalization. If the narrator is correct about the rhetorical dimension of Russian culture and its politics, his final punishment—deafening—is a form of exile.

In the foregoing analysis I have attempted to demonstrate the depth of Conrad’s sense of the word “cynicism” and have begun to sketch its relationship to some of his more familiar concerns; I have also attempted to show that what Conrad understands by cynicism has more to do with belief than with scepticism. While disillusionment or hollowness may lie at the heart of cynicism for Conrad, his cynics are not disabled or pessimistic; rather, they hold a vision of reality—fashioned out of desire or desperation—that they wish to see realized. But their vision is also unrealistic, in bad faith, or (as in the case of the Haldins) naively idealistic. For the Russian revolutionaries, mysticism is the mode by which the deeper impulses and their pursuit are ultimately expressed and justified, but through Razumov, Conrad shows that reason alone is also susceptible to manipulation by deeper impulses and prejudices. Razumov does not lack reason, but he lacks moral courage, and for Conrad this is crucial. In Conrad’s view of it—or at least one of his views of it—cynicism feeds upon moral weakness and weakens it further, allowing selfish motives to dominate. Finally, there is also cynicism as a national characteristic, a form of egotism or exceptionalism that can serve as an enabler for imperialism.

As I have suggested, Conrad’s sense of cynicism is strongly influenced by the popular image of Rousseau that develops in the nineteenth century. But rather than being communicated through Burke or any English source, Conrad’s sense of cynicism is almost certainly derived from French authors for whom the association of Rousseau (particularly the Rousseau of the Confessions) with cynicism and egotism had a more extensive history. This alternate history of cynicism accounts for differences between Conrad’s use of the
word and its use by a British author such as Wells for whom it tends to connote primarily pessimism and the retreat from society—a meaning, incidentally, which is found in English as early as John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*—or the use of biting satire. Owing to these origins and their relationship to the debate over the character of Rousseau and his legacy, Conrad’s use of the word tends to assume greater philosophical and psychological depth. Nevertheless, there are also a number of continuities between his use of the word and those I have noted already, including the idea of moral emptiness and the corrosive effect of cynicism on moral character. With these and the other senses of cynicism in mind, I will turn to *Heart of Darkness* in order to explore how Conrad’s concern with cynicism manifests itself in one of his earlier works. In particular, I would like to develop in greater detail the connections between cynicism, egotism and imperialism touched on in this section.

**Heart of Darkness**

One of the most contentious debates in the scholarship on *Heart of Darkness* is the question of its attitude toward imperialism. As Patrick Brantlinger has noted, the origin of the debate can be located in Chinua Achebe’s 1975 lecture in which the book and its author are described as racist. The charge was “vigorously” opposed by critics who read the novella as “an exposé of imperialist rapacity and violence” (*Rule of Darkness* 256). Brantlinger’s own perspective is that although the novella remains a work of “great literature,” its anti-imperialist message is not only diluted by concerns associated with the advent of modernity, including the closing of the frontier, declining opportunities for
adventure and growing commercialization, but is ultimately “undercut by its racism, by its reactionary political attitudes, by its impressionism” (274).

It is difficult not to agree with Brantlinger’s assessment. However one might view the novella’s engagement with imperialism, its essential concerns are primarily Eurocentric. In this regard, Achebe is not entirely incorrect when he accuses Conrad of reducing Africa to a prop “for the break-up of one petty European mind” (257). Here Achebe rehearses a common perspective on the novel, namely, that it is about one exceptional character. But Achebe is not quite correct in assuming that the novella is concerned with the break-up of one European mind. I believe that the novella is more rewardingly and accurately read as being concerned with the breakdown of Europe’s moral character, partly as a result of the scramble to colonize Africa. Thus while Heart of Darkness might ultimately be Eurocentric, the Congo is hardly the backdrop: it is the victim of the very cultural malaise that Conrad wishes to explore.

Behind the novella, of course, is one of the most cynical acts of nineteenth-century imperialism. In 1876, Leopold II of Belgium formed the International Association for the Suppression of Slavery and the Opening Up of Central Africa as the first move in a spectacularly cynical plan to secure the Congo for the exploitation of its resources. Nine years later, the Congo Free State was ratified as the personal property of Leopold. While this ratification initially met with optimism by opponents of the Arab slave trade, by the end of the century it had become increasingly evident that the moral language Leopold had mobilized in his bid for the Congo merely concealed ruthless colonial policies. As the accounts and evidence of atrocities accumulated, Leopold’s imperialism acquired a
different hue, transforming from simple ineptitude into the cynicism of a brutality concealing itself under the guise of moral idealism.

To characterize this cynicism, it will be useful to refer again to Sloterdijk’s idea of master cynicism. For Sloterdijk, the essence of master cynicism is an attitude of “double knowledge” which recognizes that there is one set of rules for power “and one for the norms of general consciousness” (78). But because the modern master cynic also recognizes that power must be seen as operating by its own rules in contempt of common morality, he uses morality—or moral rhetoric—to justify his actions. As Sloterdijk memorably puts it, master cynicism succeeds by using “the truth in order to lie” (191).

If one were to seek a historical exemplar of Sloterdijk’s master cynic, one would be hard-pressed to find one more apt than Leopold II. In his bid for the Congo, Leopold relied upon appeals to moral ideals such as liberty, morality, and progress. In the Congo, however, these ideals tended to become their opposites as liberty became slavery and progress reverted to barbarism. Nor were the abuses in the Congo merely the result of good intentions poorly implemented, as Leopold himself tended to represent them. His intentions regarding that territory appear, at least momentarily, transparent in an 1877 letter in which he asserts the importance of not losing the Congo, or what he called his piece of the “magnificent African cake” (qtd. in Ascherson 104). The king’s real attitude toward the Congo also appears to have been something of an open secret among his functionaries: in response to Leopold’s remark that he was “the greatest cynic in the kingdom,” Leopold’s Prime Minister Auguste Beernaert retorted that he would not “presume to take precedence over his majesty” (qtd. in Hochschild 224).
While Conrad was, of course, not privy to such information when writing *Heart of Darkness*, he was aware of the chasm between the moral rhetoric deployed in Europe and the actuality of the colonial enterprise in the Congo. Some of the outrage that Conrad must have felt for Leopold’s cynicism appears in Marlow’s preamble to the tale, but rather than merely attacking Leopold’s cynicism, Conrad uses the event to diagnose a cultural malaise that has acquired both political and ontological implications.

Before describing this treatment of cynicism, however, I will make some preliminary observations about Marlow’s attitude toward imperialism. For many modern readers, one of the more perplexing features of the novella is Marlow’s ambivalent attitude toward imperialism. The novella contains a critique of British imperialism but it is relatively mild. His response to the frame narrator’s initial reverie is less a critique of imperialism than a critique of the frame narrator’s romantic view of empire. The narrator begins his reflection by using the Thames to eulogize the British Empire:

> It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled—the great knights-errant of the sea. It had borne all the ships whose names are like jewels flashing in the night of time, from the *Golden Hind* returning with her round flanks full of treasure, to be visited by the Queen’s Highness and thus pass out of the gigantic tale, to the *Erebus* and *Terror*, bound on other conquests—and that never returned. It had known the ships and the men....Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! . . . The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires. (8)

The irony that this eulogy takes place just as the sun is setting on Britain is lost on the unreflective narrator. By pointing out that the Thames has also “been one of the dark places of the earth,” Marlow reminds his audience of Britain’s own primitive history and its colonization, deflating the narrator’s romantic illusions. The essence of this rebuke is
the reintroduction of a long historical perspective (not unlike the evolutionary perspective deployed by Wells in *The Time Machine*) that reminds his audience that empires are impermanent, and that the imperial roles of conqueror and conquered can in time be reversed.

More damaging to the romantic view of imperialism than this mild rebuke, however, is the Congo. For Marlow, it is the most deplorable example of imperialism, but less for its abuses, it seems, than for its cynicism. This idea is articulated in a passage that appears in the manuscript, but which has been omitted from the final version. It contrasts Leopold’s modern imperialism with older imperialisms that required no moral rationale for their conquests:

> The best of [the Romans] is they didn’t get up pretty fictions about it. Was there, I wonder, an association on a philanthropic basis to develop Britain, with some third rate king for a president and solemn old senators discoursing about it approvingly and philosophers with uncombed beards praising it, and men in market places crying it up. Not much! And that’s what I like.... (10 n.)

For Marlow, imperialism, whether ancient or modern, is essentially “taking [the earth] away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves” (10). The point is not that Roman imperialism was good, but that it was at least honest. Leopold’s imperialism, by contrast, is not. This may seem like a negligible difference, especially to those subject to imperialism, but it is consistent with Conrad’s anxieties surrounding cynicism. From this perspective, the greater danger of Leopold’s modern imperialism is not merely that it is not honest, but that its cynical use of altruism has the broader effect of hollowing out morality. Far better, Marlow implies, were modern imperialism open in its pursuit of immoral ends.
What has often been harder to square is the further comparison implied between Leopold’s cynical imperialism and an imperialism which is “redeemed” by an idea: “not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...” (10). What seems troubling about this claim is the inclusion of “sacrifice,” which seems to foreshadow the “unspeakable rites” that Kurtz presides over in the depths of the jungle. But Marlow’s intent is to define a form of imperialism—such as Britain’s perhaps—which, if not truly enlightened, is at least restrained by a moral idealism that prevents its worst abuses. Although such an idea finds little favour today, there is a certain pragmatism to it considering Conrad’s English audience. But this compromise also accords with the long historical perspective that Marlow adopts in his narrative: if imperialism is a historical constant, the best that one can hope for is an imperialism whose worst abuses are mitigated by an “unselfish” belief. A more deplorable turn would be toward the sort of imperialism that the Congo Free State portends—one which deploys humanitarian ideals as a shallow “pretence” for a grasping and unconstrained self-interest.

The novella’s engagement with the cynicism of Leopold’s enterprise begins in earnest when Marlow reaches the Central Station to discover a culture of suspicion, petty stratagems, and grasping self-interest. This is the common form of cynicism that exists at the core of European society, but it appears in concentrated form in the Central Station as a symptom of the corrupt falseness of Leopold’s philanthropic mission. In the novella the discrepancy between representation and reality is generally indicated by images of hollowness and decay. Brussels, the seat of Leopold’s “third-rate” empire, becomes a “whited sepulchre,” a Biblical metaphor that Conrad must have thought well-suited to
Leopold’s cynicism because of its overtones of moral decay and hollowness masked by an appealing façade. Emptiness and falsity are also the controlling images in Marlow’s description of the Central Station. Here he encounters men who are morally hollow, such as the brick-maker, a “papier-mâché Mephistopheles” who contains nothing but “a little loose dirt” (29) and the station manager who, it is implied, is without “entrails.” A similar judgment is also made of the Station itself, which Marlow declares to be “as unreal as everything else—as the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work” (27). Kertzer has argued that Marlow, repulsed by “the vulgar cynicism” of the Central Station, retreats instead to the image of Kurtz only to discover in him “a far more horrible cynicism” (126), but he does not elaborate on this more horrible cynicism. What remains, then, is to describe it and to connect it to the cultural cynicism from which it emerges before returning to the question of why Conrad regarded this form of cynicism as cause for concern.

Kurtz is one of the most compelling of Conrad’s characters, and part of what makes him so intriguing is his chimerical combination of qualities. At first glance, his list of achievements seems impressive: he is an artist, a poet, a moral idealist, and a persuasive public speaker—in many ways a modern renaissance man. Even after discovering the horrible truth about Kurtz, Marlow feels compelled to declare him a “remarkable man.” Over the years a number of real-life prototypes for the character of Kurtz have been suggested. Eloise Knapp Hay has suggested that Cecil Rhodes “in his combination of titanic idealism with daemonic egotism” is one prototype of Kurtz (113). Ian Watt also lists a number of possible prototypes, including Antoine Klein—the trader whose death Conrad witnessed—and a company official named Arthur Hodister before suggesting that “Conrad
needed no other historical model than the two founders of the Congo Free State, Leopold and Stanley” (141-2).

Yet the very number of possible sources for Kurtz’s character reminds us that Conrad’s particular talent was in his ability to draw together elements from diverse sources. In a way, Kurtz is all of these exemplars, which is more or less what is suggested by Conrad when he has Marlow declare that “All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz” (50). This statement, however, also suggests that Kurtz is to be understood as an amalgamation of recent trends, a “type” whose appearance is to be taken as portentous.

Kertzer adopts a typical approach to Kurtz when he suggests that he is Conrad’s “greatest fallen idealist” (126). But this view, I think, misses the point that Conrad is trying to make through Kurtz, which, put simply, is that he is a false idealist. While Kertzer is correct in describing Kurtz as one of Conrad’s greatest cynics, his assertion that Kurtz’s cynicism resides in his delusions of omnipotence and embrace of nihilistic freedom will have to be modified. If my claims regarding Conrad’s view of cynicism in *Under Western Eyes* are correct, one can say that Kurtz’s cynicism is in his use of language and argument to rationalize, justify, and even romanticize his participation in the brutally exploitative form of imperialism found in the Congo. This conversion is aided by Kurtz’s uniquely modern characteristics, not the least of which is an absence of moral centre, which makes him an easy subject for manipulation by cynical ideologies, but also by his self-interested desires which he conceals even from himself.

Kurtz’s many positive qualities—including his aptitude, his energy, and his decisiveness—all seem to be undercut by a basic absence of conviction. We are told that he had “faith,” but a faith described as the ability to “get himself to believe anything” (71).
This ability makes him eminently suitable to be the leader of any political party, provided it was “extreme.” Kurtz’s tendency toward extremism and his ability to persuade himself to believe anything are the essential qualities that allow him to project himself convincingly into various roles, but they are also flaws that make him susceptible to Leopold’s imperial cynicism. But Kurtz’s entry into Leopold’s imperial project should not be regarded as the mere duping of a naïf by a cynical ideology; rather, I think one should see in Kurtz an essentially “realistic” ego that recognizes the opportunity contained in the Congo but unconsciously converts self-interest to altruism as a saving fiction. Like Razumov, Kurtz manufactures reasons for what he has already decided to do. Indeed, Kurtz’s essential motives, far from being ideal, appear to be thoroughly material. As Marlow tells us, “I had heard that her engagement with Kurtz had been disapproved by her people. He wasn’t rich enough or something. And indeed I don’t know whether he had not been a pauper all his life. He had given me some reason to infer that it was his impatience of comparative poverty that drove him out there” (74).

Kurtz’s “comparative poverty” and the obstacle that it poses to the attainment of his desire—his Intended—are the all-too-human motives behind Kurtz’s engagement with imperialism. Yet these motives have been concealed beneath an elaborate façade which Kurtz creates for others and for himself. In this regard, Kurtz becomes the perfect analogue of Leopold in whom a similar combination of self-interest and (self-)deception also perhaps made it difficult for anyone, perhaps even the monarch himself, to distinguish clearly whether he was motivated entirely by self-interest. The nature of Kurtz’s cynical self-deception is contained in his report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs (a title, incidentally, that parodies Leopold’s “International Association
for the Suppression of Slavery and the Opening Up of Central Africa”). Having read it, Marlow deems it to be “eloquent,” but “too high-strung”; nevertheless, he perceives its rhetorical appeal: “The peroration was magnificent, though difficult to remember, you know. It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Beneficence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded power of eloquence—of words—of burning noble words” (50).

Like an operatic score that summons a world of images before fading away, Kurtz’s eloquence sweeps reader and writer alike into a reality fashioned entirely from “noble words.” The more eloquent the idea the more sustainable the illusion, and Kurtz’s report seems intended both to sustain Leopold’s lie and to persuade Kurtz of his own best intentions. This conversion by eloquence is not unlike Razumov’s attempt to reinscribe himself in terms of autocratic ideology. As in the later story, however, Kurtz’s attempt to impose his vision upon himself and his mission through ideological language leads to tragedy, and when reality forecloses upon his egotistic fantasy, eloquence similarly begins to fail, save for his final confession of horror.

Kurtz’s embrace of Leopold’s cynical philanthropic rhetoric is so complete that he is heralded as the remedy to the sort of muddling cynicism that has hitherto defined the operation. As the brick-maker tells Marlow, Kurtz has come to be regarded as “an emissary of pity and science and progress,” part of a new “gang of virtue” expected to deliver “guidance” and a “singleness of purpose” to the project entrusted to Leopold by Europe (28). Beneath the façade of Kurtz’s superficial virtue, however, remains an ego that serves the will by serving itself. Signs of this calculating ego surface in his report in the canny observation that white men “must necessarily appear to [Africans] in the nature of
supernatural beings’’ (50). But undoubtedly the most honest expression of this hidden ego is the final injunction to “exterminate all the brutes” (51). Ted Billy has observed that in Kurtz Conrad lays “the groundwork for the modern psychoanalytical concept of the multiplicity of the self [in which] personal identity may not be a unitary entity but merely a collection of roles that individuals play to satisfy their needs and desires” (73). But the roots of this concept can more accurately be said to lie in a naturalism formed under the influence of Schopenhauer and Darwin which sees the ego as determined by a deeper connection to nature that consciousness hides from itself. In Conrad’s moral vision, when the ego is removed from the containing influence of civilization—i.e. of “a butcher round one corner [and] a policeman round another” (49)—its ineradicable connection to primal nature comes to the fore. Hearing the throb of drums coming from shore, Marlow feels the deeper attraction the ego preserves to the primitive, but he remains in control of himself much as he remains in control of his steamboat. In the case of Kurtz, however, the removal of external restraints is matched by an internal lack of restraint that allows the primal ego to expand into unbounded, all-consuming egotism. Consequently, Kurtz acquires a “weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him” (59).

Part of Kurtz’s breakdown in the jungle is the discovery of his own self-deception, which involves the recognition of the contingency of the idealism he has used to hide his motives from himself. This discovery is recorded in Kurtz’s “small sketch in oils” that Marlow discovers at the Central Station. It depicts “a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch” against a “sombre—almost black” background (27). She is a symbol of the moral idealism that sustains European civilization, but also supports its
imperial policies. What is perhaps most suggestive and subversive about the sketch is the figure’s blindfold. Brian W. Shaffer has argued that the sketch is a critique of a culture that imagines itself to be the torch-bearer of morality and rectitude but which remains blind “to what actually transpires in the jungle” (2). In this respect, the female figure in the sketch finds its analogue in Kurtz’s Intended and Marlow’s “excellent” aunt, both of whom carry the torch of moral idealism without looking into the facts too deeply. Shaffer’s reading, however, can be augmented if we see the blindfold representing not only blindness, but the refusal to see. This, combined with the “sinister” quality of her face, suggests that the figure represents not naïve idealism, but a profound and unconscious cynicism. But the sketch is also itself “cynical,” revealing the artist’s own recognition that Europe’s moral idealism is false. The darkness of this discovery is symbolized by the “sombre, almost black” background, illuminated, as it were, by the figure’s torch. In Marlow this discovery produces pessimism, but in Kurtz it precedes and facilitates his complete abandonment of moral restraint.

After Kurtz’s death and his own struggle with a disease that appears to be as much ideological as physical, Marlow returns to Brussels weary and disillusioned. His reaction is reminiscent of Prendick’s return to England after his experiences on Moreau’s island, or Gulliver’s before him. He finds himself resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams....They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. Their bearing...was offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend. (70)
The “danger” in question is the aftermath of the cynicism that Marlow has experienced in concentrated form in Leopold’s Congo and in its most “remarkable” agent, Kurtz. What cynicism conceals is a “primitive” egotism whose recrudescence is facilitated by the decline of existing morality. The imperialism Marlow discovers in the Congo is both the product of this cynicism and an agent of its diffusion. Like an ideological virus, cynicism threatens to multiply and spread: Leopold’s master cynicism engenders Kurtz’s cynical idealism, which in turn fosters in Marlow an attitude of disillusionment that often also goes by the same name.

The peril that Conrad saw in Leopold’s cynicism was explicitly identified in *The Inheritors*, a novel Conrad wrote with Ford Madox Hueffer not long after completing *Heart of Darkness*. It describes the usurpation of traditional British political culture by a new culture associated with the “Fourth Dimensionalists.” The Dimensionalists are cool, calculating, and cynical in the political sense. They work behind the scenes to garner support from the existing regime for Duc de Mersch’s colonization of Greenland—a transparent parody of Leopold’s Congo—only to ensure its demise once the true events in Greenland are revealed. The exposé of the truth will not only destroy the credibility of the old political order, it will also sweep away the moral idealism that had characterized the politics of the past and usher in a modern culture of *Realpolitik*. The narrator is well intentioned but ideologically divided, having been drawn into the plan by one of the Fourth Dimensionalists. As a publisher, he is placed in the position of choosing whether or not to release the truth regarding de Mersch’s Greenland:

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25 Brantlinger also cites this passage in support of his argument that Conrad’s concerns lie not with imperialism per se but with the decline it represents. My argument concerning cynicism does not contradict this, but it does place greater emphasis on Conrad’s concern with the corrosive effects of cynical imperialism. For Brantlinger’s treatment of the passage, see *Rule of Darkness* 259.
I took up the proof and began to read, slanting the page to the fall of the light....There were revolting details of cruelty to the miserable, helpless, and defenceless; there were greed, and self-seeking, stripped naked; but more revolting to see without a mask was that falsehood which had been hiding under the words that for ages had spurred men to noble deeds, to self-sacrifice, to heroism. What was appalling was the sudden perception that all the traditional ideals of honour, glory, conscience, had been committed to the upholding of a gigantic and atrocious fraud. The falsehood had spread stealthily, had eaten into the very heart of creeds and convictions that we lean upon on our passage between the past and the future. (282)

Torn between the choice of the idealism of the past and the unvarnished truth of the future, the narrator ultimately opts for the latter, but it is a choice that provides him with little comfort:

the condemnation...meant ruin, as it seemed to me, for everybody I had known, worked for, seen, or heard of.... It was ruin...for the ministers, and for the men who talk in railway carriages, for shopkeepers and for the government; it was a menace to the institutions which hold us to the past, that are our guarantees for the future. The safety of everything one respected and believed in was involved in the disclosure of an atrocious fraud. (281)

In these passages, the specific threat of Leopold’s imperial cynicism and its relation to modern cynicism—as the despairing loss of faith in institutions and moral ideals—becomes explicit. By perpetrating an “atrocious fraud” involving “traditional ideals of honour, glory, conscience,” Leopold discredits those ideals, showing them to be mere rhetoric disguising a baser intent. However, it is important to note that what is regarded as most damaging is not the fraud itself, but its disclosure.

The dilemma faced by the narrator of *The Inheritors* is essentially identical to the one that Marlow faces at the end of *Heart of Darkness*, albeit with a different result. In the earlier story, Marlow opts for a lie that is designed to shield the Intended (and the moral idealism that she represents) from the details of Kurtz’s life in Africa. This truth, Marlow asserts, would have been “too dark altogether” (76), implying it would further weaken the
moral idealism that functions as a bulwark against the darkness stirring at the heart of European culture.

Arguably, it is the weight placed on the peril of negative enlightenment that accounts, at least in part, for some of the novella’s notorious obscurity. F.R. Leavis complained of it in *The Great Tradition*, stating that Conrad “is intent on making virtue out of not knowing what he means. The vague and unrealizable, he asserts with a strained impressiveness, is the profound and tremendously significant” (180). E.M. Forster mounted a broader attack on Conrad’s style in a 1923 review of *Notes on Life and Letters* when he complained of a “central obscurity” in Conrad which appears particularly problematic in his essays. According to Forster “[w]hat is so elusive about [Conrad] is that he is always promising to make some general philosophic statement about the universe, and then refraining with a gruff disclaimer” (346). This leads Forster to conclude “that the secret casket of [Conrad’s] genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel; and that we need not try to write him down philosophically, because there is, in this particular direction, nothing to write” (346). A more recent critic, Allon White, has also noted Conrad’s use of enigmatic language in *Heart of Darkness* and has read it as an attempt to preserve and intensify the “aura” of the art work described by Walter Benjamin (109).

On the one hand, Conrad’s obscurity in *Heart of Darkness* can be viewed as the product of his interest in Schopenhauerian metaphysics. Schopenhauer’s philosophy, like Kant’s, posits the existence of a noumenal reality existing beyond the senses, and which is imperfectly echoed in the phenomenal world. This basic idea is echoed in the well-known account of Marlow’s narrative style:

> The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity
to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze.... (9)

There is perhaps no more seamanlike metaphor to describe the mysterious thing-in-itself than the image of a nut inside of an impermeable shell, and yet (contra charges of obscurity) it conveys the essence of the idea very clearly. Marlow’s conviction—which one can assume is also Conrad’s—that the meaning of a tale can only be discovered “outside” corresponds to the idea that human beings inhabit a world of representation, and it is only within this representational realm that meaning can occur. Yet when a storyteller holding this belief is compelled to say something about inner nature, it is inevitable that words signifying perceptual and cognitive limitation will accumulate. This is not the same thing as saying that these words fail to signify, however: when Conrad insists on words such as “inconceivable” and “impenetrable” it is arguable that they express his philosophy exactly.

However, obscurity in *Heart of Darkness* can also be regarded as a matter of ethics. If cynicism is a darkness that contaminates through communication, obscurity is a strategy to contain its negative influence. That is to say, if light shed into darkness reveals only darkness, more light will only make matters worse. Probing the depths is not only “cynical,” but also productive of cynicism. If, like Conrad, a writer feels compelled to explore negativity in spite of the danger he knows it poses, a sensible counterstrategy is to engage without fully engaging, thereby avoiding being drawn too deeply into one’s subject. An example of this counterstrategy arguably appears in Marlow’s account of Kurtz’s activities in the jungle: “[he presided] at certain midnight dances ending with
unspeakable rites, which—as far as I reluctantly gathered from what I heard at various times—were offered up to him—do you understand?” (my italics, 50).

Leavis has suggested that Conrad’s “worse than supererogatory insistence” on such phrases as “unspeakable secrets” and “unspeakable rites” implies a greater significance he has yet to bring out (179). But in the passage above, obfuscation and reticence mount as Marlow attempts to convey the essence of the facts without the details. Here obscurity appears to be the product of a desire not to communicate fully in order not to tar himself or his audience with the sordidness of Kurtz’s rituals. The passage demonstrates that obscurity coincides with the “restraint” that differentiates Marlow from Kurtz: just as restraint allows Marlow to go to the heart of darkness and return alive, obscurity allows Conrad to chart the darkness without himself becoming “cynical.”

This brings me to the question of Conrad’s own cynicism. Until this point I have generally restricted my discussion to Conrad’s critique of cynicism. But in the context of Conrad’s 1914 novel Victory I will expand my focus to include Conrad’s own struggle with the problem. In expanding my focus, however, it will also be necessary to broaden the definition of cynicism and return to its more familiar moorings. Whereas Conrad associated cynicism with egotism and self-deception, his own cynicism can be regarded as a naturalism that occasionally darkens into pessimism and contempt. One of the more forceful expressions of this cynicism appears in a letter to Cunninghame Graham:

Man is a vicious animal. His viciousness must be organized. Crime is a necessary condition of organized existence. Society is fundamentally criminal—or it would not exist. Selfishness preserves everything—absolutely everything—everything we hate and everything we love. And everything holds together. That is precisely why I respect extreme anarchists. “I wish for general extermination”—Excellent. It is fair as well as obvious. (Letters 2:159)
Although Conrad clearly intends to provoke, the basic attitude the letter contains is not greatly exaggerated. When Conrad has his narrator declare that “man appears a mere talking animal not much more wonderful than a parrot” in *Under Western Eyes* or has Marlow characterize his audience’s professions as “monkey tricks” (36) in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad indulges a frustration with human pretensions. In saying this I am not suggesting that Conrad was “at heart” a cynic or anything like it; what I intend, rather, is to describe one face of Conrad’s negativity—in this case a nascent post-humanism that grimly asserts humanity’s ineradicable connection (and subjection) to nature.\(^{26}\)

The roots of Conrad’s cynicism can be traced to his ontology. Like Wells, Conrad was also affected by a pessimistic worldview, albeit from a different source. In *Castles in Spain and Other Screeds* John Galsworthy noted that Conrad had read a “good deal” of philosophy (although he spoke little of it), noting in particular that “Schopenhauer used to bring him satisfaction twenty years and more ago” (121).\(^{27}\) Nic Panagopoulos has usefully summarized the points of agreement between the two writers:

\(^{26}\) Both Kertzer and Mark Wollaeger have examined Conrad’s engagement with scepticism, a closely-related problem. Wollaeger has argued that scepticism should be regarded “as the prior term in any analysis of cynicism or pessimism in Conrad” (197 n.2), but I am not convinced that scepticism is able to describe the cluster of attitudes that make up Conrad’s worldview. Moreover, scepticism would seem to be fundamentally about perception and knowledge: at its most extreme it can deny that anything can be known with any certainty, eroding all meaning and leading ultimately to despair. While Conrad addresses and criticizes scepticism in his fiction, it is not clear to me that it was his affliction. As his early letters to Cunninghame Graham show, Conrad, while a sceptic, is also all-too-certain about human nature and the nature of the world. See Wollaeger, *Fictions of Skepticism*.

\(^{27}\) Some critics have questioned the extent of Conrad’s knowledge of Schopenhauer’s work. Knowles has noted that while Schopenhauer’s “more popular essays are directly echoed in Conrad’s dark letters of the 1890s,” it is another matter to claim that he was a close reader of *The World as Will and Idea* (77-8). Knowles suggests instead that Schopenhauer’s philosophy may have been received in indirect forms, such as through his contact with Ford Maddox Hueffer, whose father was the publisher of the Schopenhauerian journal *The New Quarterly* (Knowles 78, n.9). However, Ian Watt has identified echoes of *The World as Will and Idea* in Conrad’s work (*Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, 350) suggesting that Conrad’s familiarity with Schopenhauer went beyond mere second-hand knowledge. My own comparison of passages from Schopenhauer’s magnum opus and from *Victory* also supports the claim that Conrad was a reader of Schopenhauer.
Conrad shared with Schopenhauer the basic assumption that the world of the senses is devoid of substance or meaning save that which the individual projects onto it in the act of perception. All knowledge and intention is thus reduced to the level of illusion in the world-view of both writers and a world-weary pessimism attends their awareness of universal solipsism and the essential groundlessness of being. At the same time, the metaphysical force which lies behind all phenomena—in Schopenhauer this is termed “the will” while in Conrad it is “the darkness”—is seen to be neither subject to reason nor morality. Thus, the dawning of self-knowledge with the apprehension of this blind, amoral force at the heart of nature is viewed by both writers as a process which inevitably repels man from life, leading to the desire for annihilation.

(19)

Conrad’s own memorable image for the almost mechanistic irrationality at the heart of being is his cosmic knitting machine:

[The machine] evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold!—it knits....And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart...It knits us in and knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions—and nothing matters” (Letters to Graham 56-7).

This image of cosmic malice and alienation is Conrad’s own, but its worldview is essentially Schopenhauerian; however, its resemblance to Huxley’s notion of the cosmic process, or von Hartmann’s world process, should also be noted. The point is that under this withering truth the boundaries between pessimism and cynicism collapse because enlightenment (as the discovery of ultimate truth) leads ultimately to darkness and retreat from the world into a tub of solipsism and despair. As Panagopoulos notes, Conrad resists this conclusion in his fiction, attempting instead to “redeem and re-affirm existence” even while he remains sceptical of its success (20). Put another way, Conrad resists the cynicism of the tub, but a more fundamental certainty regarding inner and outer nature ensures that his re-affirmations will inevitably be tentative and even unpersuasive.
Although Schopenhauer’s influence can be detected in Conrad’s earliest works, it is only in Victory that his philosophy becomes an explicit concern. More than merely a Schopenhauerian novel, however, Victory is his engagement with a philosophy from which he derived satisfaction, but which he also experienced as a burden. The precise nature of this attraction-repulsion was expressed by one of Conrad’s favourite authors, Guy de Maupassant—also a Schopenhauerian—in his short story “The Dead Man”:

Let us protest and let us be angry, let us be indignant, or let us be enthusiastic, Schopenhauer has marked humanity with the seal of his disdain and of his disenchantment. A disabused pleasure-seeker, he overthrew beliefs, hopes, poetic ideals and chimeras, destroyed the aspirations, ravaged the confidence of souls, killed love, dragged down the chivalrous worship of women, crushed the illusions of hearts, and accomplished the most gigantic task ever attempted by scepticism. He spared nothing with his mocking spirit, and exhausted everything. And even to-day those who execrate him seem to carry in their own souls particles of his thought. (138)

The brief story from which this passage is taken relates a tale told by a consumptive disciple of Schopenhauer who spends his days rereading his master’s annotated copy of The World as Will and Idea, growing thinner and more frail all the while. The implication, of course, is that it is less tuberculosis than Schopenhauer’s philosophy that is causing the disciple’s decline. Indeed, the basic similarity between Maupassant’s story and Victory may suggest that the short story may be the Ur-text to the novel, particularly given Conrad’s knowledge and appreciation of its author. That Conrad strongly identified with “The Dead Man” is suggested by the repetition of essentially the same master-disciple relationship in Victory in the relationship between son and father.

The novel presents us with a world that is modelled in the image of Schopenhauer’s pessimistic philosophy. On the one hand we are presented with a colonial society

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28 I was introduced to this story by Knowles’s essay “Who’s Afraid of Arthur Schopenhauer?”
characterized by competition, gossip, desire and bestial behaviour. Outside this outpost of civilization is a world of becoming and impermanence where the labour of men ultimately comes to nothing. Indeed, if one were to suggest a keyword to stand behind the moral discovery of *Vic* or ty, “vanity” might be the most appropriate. As a theme, it is announced on the first page of the novel with an opening reflection on the relationship between coal and diamonds. Both represent wealth, but, as the narrator points out, coal is much less portable and suffers from a “deplorable lack of concentration” (3). Playful as it seems, this point reminds us not only that matter is mutable, but also that it is (like wealth) ephemeral. Coal and diamonds represent opposite ends of the spectrum of durable commodities. Coal is the least durable; in fact it is valued for the ease with which it can be transformed into heat and dust. On the other hand, much of the value of a diamond derives from its hardness and perceived durability. But this is in fact an illusion: diamonds, “bearing a very close chemical relation” (3) to coal, will also combust, leaving only vapour.

This meditation serves as an introduction to the “very unnatural physics” of the liquidation of the Tropical Belt Coal Company: “First the capital evaporates and then the company goes into liquidation” (3). In contrast to Marx’s famous formulation in which capitalism is regarded as the transformative, liquidating force of modernity, here it is capital itself that melts into air. At the centre of the defunct Tropical Belt Coal Company (T.B.C.C.) is Axel Heyst, the company’s “manager in the tropics” and the son of a philosopher of vanity cast in the mould of Schopenhauer. Following his father’s wisdom, Heyst had attempted to make his life a “masterpiece of aloofness.” But rather than maintaining a contemplative disengagement on the bank of the “river of becoming,” Heyst instead chooses to float through the world while avoiding its many attachments. Eventually
he drifts to the Malay Archipelago where, becoming “enchanted” by the islands, he floats like an “enigmatical” and “insignificant” ghost (23).

As these adjectives indicate, Heyst too suffers from a lack of concentration. His transience has made him appear less than real to the Archipelago’s expatriate community. This insubstantiality is reflected in the series of names applied to him by the expatriates, including “Enchanted Heyst,” “Heyst the Spider,” “Heyst the Enemy,” and “utopist.”

Throughout the novel, he is named by other characters (his proper name suggests the German heiβt, “is called”) but these names do not stick. He seems too immaterial to retain them, eluding identity as well as attachment.

If Heyst’s aloofness prevents him from settling into a stable identity, it is nevertheless insufficient to provide him with perfect detachment. Despite his intention to drift through the world, he falls prey to its “barbed hook” (164) when drifting inevitably brings him into contact and involvement with other human beings. The first of these involvements occurs after a chance meeting with the trader Morrison initiates a series of events leading to the creation of the T.B.C.C. with Morrison as his partner. After Morrison dies in England, Heyst becomes the company’s manager in the tropics. When he enters the world of business he acquires a greater degree of substance. As the narrator comments, Heyst becomes “very concrete, very visible...rushing all over the Archipelago, jumping in and out of local mail-packets as if they had been tram-cars, here, there, and everywhere—organizing with all his might. This was no mooning about. This was business” (23).

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29 Although “utopist” may seem at first to be the least appropriate name for the sceptically afflicted Heyst, it becomes more appropriate if it is taken both literally and ironically: his father’s liquidation of the objective world has left him a citizen of nowhere.

30 Tanner notes this connotation, but connects it to Heyst’s characterization with Adam, the biblical namer of things. The problem with this interpretation, however, is that heiβt is (appropriately) the passive form of the verb. See Tanner, 110.
The idea that Heyst becomes more substantial as a result of his engagement in the world may be inspired by the Schopenhauerian idea that objects rely on perceiving subjects for existence: thus as Heyst is more often perceived, he becomes more real. However, Conrad might also be toying with another of Schopenhauer’s ideas, the doctrine that matter only becomes perceptible (or as Schopenhauer puts it, “substantial”) through action.

According to Schopenhauer, pure matter belongs to thought only—is noumenal—and relies upon action to make it visible. “Therefore,” as he puts it, “wherever there is action there is matter, and the material is the active in general” (WWI 3:49).

By linking Heyst’s existence to his engagement in business, however, Conrad also references the assumption that business is somehow the most “real” of human activities—an assumption which is of course discredited by the ultimate dissolution of the company by the “unnatural physics” of bankruptcy. Indeed, there is some irony in the fact that Heyst’s most concrete attempt to leave his mark on the world turns out to be one of the most ephemeral forms of inscription. But what is most interesting about the T.B.C.C. is the prodigious amount of writing that is required to summon it into being in the first place. We are told that thousands of company prospectuses were printed, and in each, the name Samburan is “engraved in enormous capitals” as the centre of company operations. Heyst writes “pages and pages” of letters to Europe describing coal outcroppings. Meanwhile, on the island a gigantic blackboard bearing the company’s initials is erected (5). But the fact that these letters are on a “blackboard,” suggests that the company’s durability was from the start comparable to chalk on a blank slate.
Critics have noted the echoes of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in the novel, and this inter-textual connection prompts the idea that the printed word assumes the role of a spell in the novel, calling into being a business empire within the “enchanted” circle of Heyst’s Eastern world. These conjuring words work for a time—the T.B.C.C. comes into being and produces some coal before its capital evaporates—but they are not sufficient to prevent the concern from returning to its natural state. As the power of the printed words fades, so too does the T.B.C.C. itself, which, by the time we encounter it, is gradually being reclaimed by the jungle.

In many ways this spell is intended to counter a more powerful one cast by Heyst’s father whose philosophical rewriting of the world dominates not only the younger Heyst, but the novel itself. We are told that Heyst’s father regarded the phenomenal world as a river of becoming where “men and women go by thick as dust, revolving and jostling one another like figures cut out of cork and weighted with lead just sufficiently to keep them in their proudly upright posture” (165), but a more accurate analogy in the context of *Victory* might be an intertidal zone where human efforts seem effective—the sand can be shaped and inscribed—but these efforts are inevitably effaced by tides of becoming. In searching for “hard facts” and becoming the Manager in the Tropics for the T.B.C.C., Heyst tries to go against his father’s teaching by attempting to impose identity, permanence and purpose on reality, but these efforts ultimately culminate in nothing. After the failure of his attempts, Heyst returns to his father’s council, choosing to “look on—make no sound” (164) and attempting to adopt “a full and equable contempt” that is intended to preserve him from the snares of existence.

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31 For more on the connections between *Victory* and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, see Dike.
The elder Heyst’s world-denying philosophy and his son’s application of it echo a number of passages in *The World as Will and Idea*, but there is one that Conrad may have had in mind when formulating the elder Heyst’s advice to his son. It appears in Schopenhauer’s chapter “On the Vanity and Suffering of Life.” Here Schopenhauer observes that two strategies are generally attempted for dealing with the misfortunes of life. The first is “prudence, foresight, cunning” which “does not fully instruct us, is insufficient, and leads to defeat.” The second is “stoical equanimity which seeks to arm us against all misfortunes by preparedness for everything and contempt of all” (3:388). In practice, however, stoical equanimity “becomes cynical renunciation, which prefers once and for all to reject all means of relief and all alleviations—it reduces us to the position of dogs, like Diogenes in his tub.” Does Schopenhauer suggest a third way? The answer is no: “The truth is, we ought to be wretched and we are so” (3:388).

Schopenhauer’s idea of “cynical renunciation” describes Heyst’s state after his failure to leave his mark upon the phenomenal world. After the company’s liquidation he remains on the island as its sole occupant except for his Chinese servant. Rather than becoming the outpost of commerce and progress he imagined, Samburan becomes for Heyst a sphere of solipsistic isolation. Although Heyst appears to be indifferent to his reduced condition, the external perspective supplied by Captain Davidson suggests he has become wretched in his isolation:

The loneliness, the ruins of the spot, had impressed Davidson’s simple soul. They were incompatible with the frivolous comments of people who had not seen it. That black jetty, sticking out of the jungle into the empty sea; these roof-ridges of deserted houses peeping dismally above the long grass! Ough! The gigantic and funereal blackboard sign of the Tropical Belt Coal Company, still emerging from a wild growth of bushes like an inscription stuck above a grave figured by the tall heap of unsold coal at the shore end of the wharf, added to the general desolation. (41)
Like the rest of the Tropical Belt Coal Company, Heyst, in his isolation and alienation, appears to be returning to inanimate nature. His most “animated” companions, we are told, are “shadows of clouds” and “an indolent volcano which smoked faintly all day,” much like Heyst himself (4). Heyst becomes like a lily of the field, neither spinning nor toiling, but merely “reflecting.”

Heyst’s renewed commitment to worldly detachment, however, proves to be no more successful than his earlier attempts to remain aloof, and is ended by his liberation of Lena from Schomberg and the Zangiacomo’s Ladies’ Orchestra. Heyst’s flaw, it seems, is his inability to extract himself completely from humanity via the “full and equable contempt” his father recommends. Having recognized this failing in his son, the elder Heyst had advised him “to cultivate that form of contempt which is called pity” (164), but pity is also the snare by which Heyst is caught by the world: it is the sentiment behind his rescue of Morrison and Lena. The last of these attachments ultimately brings the worst elements of the world that Heyst has denied to his island retreat. Heyst tells Lena that the world is also a “bad dog [that] will bite you if you give it a chance” (55), but neither the natural world nor the “primitive” world of the Alfuros on the other side of Samburan is a source of malignity. Instead, danger emerges from the world of European expatriates and exiles in the form of Jones and his gang.

Debra Romanick has noted that Heyst has a number of “mirrors” in the novel, from the bestial Schomberg to the sprite-like Wang (235). However, the true antitypical double to Heyst is Jones, the other character who is most frequently identified as a “gentleman.”

Heyst, through his compassion and his demeanour, seems to have the most right to the

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32 As Tanner notes, Conrad’s use of the word—more than sixty times in the novel—is generally ironic. For a more detailed treatment of its significance, see his “Joseph Conrad and the Last Gentleman.”
name. In the case of Jones, the title seems less justified. According to the English class
system he is a gentleman, but he is also a “gentleman at large,” a criminal wanted by the
authorities. But in the case of both men, the word cannot escape irony since they are
merely the highest products of a civilization in decline. The same sophistication that makes
them “gentlemen” also makes them world-weary and decadent.

Jones’s decadence is signalled by his “uncanny” thinness, suggestive of a disease that
is more spiritual than physical in origin, not unlike Maupassant’s disciple. His moral ennui
is further indicated by a state of perpetual languor that occasionally gives way to extended
“fits” of boredom that render movement impossible. Although Heyst attributes Jones’s
illness to “tropical fever,” an earlier passage makes clear that Jones’s ailment has more to
do with suppressed homosexual desire than a virus. We are told that during one of his
recent “fits,” Jones lay on a mat, “morning to night,” singing *tristes* to a “ragged, bare-
legged boy he had picked up in the street” (151). This suggestion of homosexuality is
reinforced by Jones’s paralyzing gynophobia and his attachment to his “secretary” Ricardo.
The most concrete indicator of Jones’s homosexuality, however, is the suggestion that he
was forced to leave England because of his sexual activities: Jones prods Heyst with the
suggestion that Heyst—like himself—was forced into exile for social deviancy. He says,
“something has driven you out—the originality of your ideas, perhaps. Or your tastes”
(378). In the manuscript the nature of Jones’s “tastes” is less subtly suggested in a deleted
sentence that follows the one quoted above: “It was the case with me; only I wasn’t going
to go to prison for it and weep publicly over my sins” (qtd. in Purdy 95).

Elaine Showalter notes that decadence “was the pejorative label applied by the
bourgeoisie to everything that seemed unnatural, artificial and perverse, from Art Nouveau
to homosexuality, a sickness with symptoms associated with cultural degeneration and decay” (169). Similarly, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points to the basic association between homosexuality and the concept of decadence and the frequency with which “decadence” was used as a simple euphemism for homosexuality (222 n.8). That this cultural stereotype is exploited by Conrad in the creation of Jones’s character is difficult to deny. Dwight Purdy has argued that a deleted line from the manuscript indicating Jones was driven from England for his sexual tastes summons an image of Oscar Wilde’s post-incarceration exile, and he suggests that Conrad may have had the author in mind while composing Jones’s character (95).

My intent in highlighting this aspect of Jones’s character is not to argue that Wilde is the personality behind Jones, but rather to peel away the layers of cultural prejudice and popular social theory that contribute to the construction of Jones as a cynic and a figure of modern evil. In this respect, the possible link between Wilde with Jones may in fact point to Nordau’s *Degeneration*, which presents Oscar Wilde as a case study in artistic degeneracy. By conflating the “perversion” of homosexuality with criminality, Conrad echoes the view of perversion advanced by Nordau who regarded perversion as “desires which are directly contrary to the purpose of the instinct, *i.e.* the preservation of the species” (260). Perversion becomes sinister for Nordau when it is combined with ego-mania. The perverted ego-maniac “is no longer merely insensible to good and evil, and incapable of discriminating between them, but he has a decided predilection for evil” (260). For those of this type who are ill-suited for evil actions, this evil disposition will channel itself into imagination and the composition of “Decadent” literature (261).

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33 For a discussion of Conrad’s reception of Nordau, see Ray.
Nordau’s theories regarding degeneration also explain Jones’s “fits” of ennui and the debilitating philosophical contempt that afflicts Heyst. Describing the symptoms of degeneracy, Nordau claims that along with the “ennui” of the degenerate “there is combined, as a rule, a disinclination to action of any kind, attaining possibly to abhorrence of activity and powerlessness to will (aboulia)” (20). This “disinclination,” however, is concealed from the degenerate, who “deceives himself into believing that he despises action from free determination and…constructs a philosophy of renunciation and of contempt for the world and men” (20). Not surprisingly, perhaps, Nordau names Schopenhauer as the patron philosopher of this kind of degenerate.

These echoes of Nordau in Victory suggest that Conrad may have found a resource for his problematization of Schopenhauer’s philosophy in Degeneration. This should not be surprising since Nordau and Conrad are both concerned with the problem of egotism in a world where traditional notions of propriety and duty have begun to collapse. Indeed, Jones and Heyst, each in his own way, represent a retreat from the social world into egotism. Whereas Heyst retreats into asceticism, scepticism and solipsism, Jones retreats into sensualism, perversion and ennui. The key difference, however, is that Jones’s retreat is incomplete. As Kertzer correctly notes, Jones’s cynicism—or degeneracy—is expressed in his desire to see his vision of the world written upon it.

If Conrad’s intention was on some level to use Jones and Heyst to illustrate the subjective dangers of the Schopenhauerian worldview, however, he nevertheless affirms its basic validity throughout the novel. Schopenhauer’s basic philosophy is reflected in the vision of the world as a river of becoming upon which human efforts ultimately leave no mark, but it is also reflected in the view of the human world as a bestial one determined by
the will to life. Heyst’s second engagement with the world is with this aspect of it, and the beginning of his encounter is announced by the music of the Zangiacomo’s Ladies’ Orchestra.

Entering the “barn-like” structure of Schomberg’s hotel, Heyst is confronted with “an instrumental uproar” which he finds both “awful” and attractive:
screaming, grunting, whining, sobbing, scraping, squeaking some kind of lively air; while a grand piano, operated upon by a bony, red-faced woman with bad-tempered nostrils, rained hard notes like hail through the tempest of fiddles....In the quick time of that music, in the varied, piercing clamour of the strings, in the movements of the bare arms, in the low dresses, the coarse faces, the stony eyes of the executants, there was a suggestion of brutality—something cruel, sensual and repulsive. (66)

Schopenhauer regarded music as a direct copy of the will, the only art form not subject to what he called the principle of individuation. In the music of the ladies choir, Heyst encounters the sublime chaos of the will. But while music is not subject to the principle of individuation, it does not escape the hierarchy of objectification that Schopenhauer sees as a defining characteristic of being. Tones nearer the bass are associated with the inorganic world, whereas those higher on the scale represent the “plant and animal worlds” (WWI 1:334). Equally important for Schopenhauer, however, are the intervals, which when “pure,” parallel “the definite species in nature.” The screeching music of the Zangiacomo’s Ladies’ Orchestra is played at the high end of the scale, reflecting the orchestra’s primal, scarcely-concealed sexuality. Between pieces, the women are forced to circulate among the male clientele to rouse and exploit sexual desire for the benefit of Zangiacomo and Schomberg. The women of the orchestra not only produce animaline sounds, they are also treated like animals—flesh exploited for profit.
Of course the intervals of the ladies’ music—like the motives behind it—are anything but “pure.” Schopenhauer likens such impure discords “to the monstrous abortions between two species of animals, or between man and animal” (WWI 1:334). This reflects not only the grotesquely sensual nature of the Zangiacomo’s Ladies’ Orchestra, it also foreshadows the entry into the action of the novel of Jones and his gang, the degenerate emissaries of a “renounced world” (Victory 225).

If Gentleman Jones is a higher form of degenerate cynic, his associates—the feline Ricardo, and the ape-like Pedro—are of a lower order. Each, we are told, has the morals appropriate to his form and each governs himself “as if the world were still one great, wild jungle without law” (108). Indeed, the scraps of personal philosophy articulated by Jones and Ricardo suggest that these “emissaries of the world” are also in some ways caricatures of Nietzschean Übermenschen. This is particularly true of Ricardo, who disparages the majority of people as “tame ones,...common ‘yporcrits” and who displays “the aggressiveness of a beast of prey looking upon all the tame creatures of the earth as its natural victim” (252-3). Such echoes suggest that these characters are in part Conrad’s response to his contemporaries’ fascination with Nietzsche, implying that the moral liberation he preaches would not lead humanity to renewed vitality and freedom, but back to a morality of the jungle. Moreover, by placing these fragments in the mouths of Jones and his gang, Conrad implies that Nietzsche’s philosophy of power is likely to find disciples among the depraved and ill-intentioned rather than among the noble of spirit.

If Jones and his gang represent an openly malicious form of cynicism, Schomberg represents a more covert and diffuse form of it. While the word most frequently applied to Heyst is “gentleman,” the one that is most consistently applied to Schomberg is “beast.”
Schomberg, however, is not a caricature of Nietzsche’s predatory beast of prey. As Ricardo points out, he is a “tame” one, a “common ‘yporcrite” whose animal impulses are held in check by socialized cowardice. Although Schomberg’s animal nature has been tamed by the civilizing process, however, it has not been eradicated. Gary Geddes has noted that Schomberg “represents those appetites of the flesh which Heyst...has eschewed” (71), but his appetites are not only of the flesh, but of the basely material: gossip, wealth, sexual vitality and dominance over competitors are all included in Schomberg’s inventory of desires. He is a perfect symbol of the persistence of the animal in *l’homme moyen sensual*. However, with his petty self-interest, his hostility to difference, and his penchant for slanderous speech, Schomberg also represents the worst qualities of the middle class: a “beastly bourgeois”34 whose ubiquity and power determines the character of modernity. He is the keeper of various establishments which the expatriate community has little choice but to patronize. This role as the keeper of hotels from which there is no escape connects Schomberg to the narrative’s initial characterization of the modern age as one “in which we are camped like bewildered travellers in a garish, unrestful hotel” (3). It is an age, in other words, that is determined by men like Schomberg who assert control not only over production and distribution, but also over tastes, opinions and appetites: men who turn the world into a “garish” abode characterized by unwholesome food, unwholesome gossip and unwholesome company. Schomberg’s penchant for gossip reflects a desire to control representation and his distorted view of the world arrives as a mandatory component of his table d’hôte.

34 The phrase is familiar from D. H. Lawrence’s poem “How Beastly the Bourgeois Is,” but Conrad uses it in an 1897 letter to Edward Garnett. See *Letters From Joseph Conrad*, 111.
Schomberg and his gossip are also responsible for Heyst’s undoing. Threatened by Heyst’s reserve and slighted by his refusal to eat his food, Schomberg attempts to turn public opinion against him, and it is his calumnious representations of Heyst that ultimately determine the latter’s fate. Motivated by Schomberg’s lie about a secret cache of money, Jones and his gang arrive on the island setting in motion the events that will culminate in the death of Lena, Heyst, and the fugitives. During the island’s siege, Heyst remains in the thrall of his father’s idealist philosophy, which not only prevents him from acting, but also from grasping the reality of the situation. As he tells Lena, “Think what it was to me to see them land in the dusk, fantasms from the sea—apparitions, chimeras! And they persist. That’s the worst of it—they persist. They have no right to be—but they are. They ought to have aroused my fury. But I have refined everything away by this time—anger, indignation, scorn itself. Nothing’s left but disgust” (308).

Heyst has dispensed with the world, but it has not done with him. Daphne Erdinast-Vulcan has read Victory as a symptom of Conrad’s increasing scepticism. Symptomatic of this growing scepticism, she argues, is a transition in Conrad’s writing from a “mythical mode” to a “textual mode.” In the mythical mode, “the word is endowed with the power to create a world” whereas in the textual mode “the ‘world’ has been reduced to a ‘mere word’” (144). She believes that this transition corresponds to Conrad’s “surrender to the radical scepticism of the Nietzschean outlook which he had managed to keep at bay throughout the best part of his creative career” (145).

One problem with this argument, however, is that it posits in Conrad’s early fiction a belief in the power of myth that is difficult to locate. While it is true that Conrad’s earlier fictions provide for the mythic construction of romantic realms offering characters a
temporary refuge from reality, it is also true that these fictions invariably stage the collapse of those worlds as a violent reassertion of reality. In *Lord Jim*, for example, the protagonist’s romantic life in Patusan is destroyed by an emissary from the outside world in the form of Gentleman Brown, while in *Nostromo* the isolated community of Sulaco also falls victim to invasion from without. This same pattern also recurs in *Victory* in the invasion of the island by Jones and his gang. In each case, these invasions stage the foreclosure of an idealistic or romantic enclave, implying that Conrad consistently regarded such enclaves—and the “mythic mode”—not only as untenable, but also as dangerously naïve. In *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad shows that idealism becomes mysticism and reason cynicism with the aid of language. In *Victory*, he extends this critique to explore how Schopenhauer’s philosophy can become a misleading representation of the world, blinding its victims to the material realities and dangers of the phenomenal world.

Heyst’s worldview is not his own, but his father’s. We are told that the elder Heyst “had written of everything in many books—of space and of time, of animals and of stars; analysing ideas and actions, the laughter and the frowns of men, and the grimaces of their agony” (218). These writings convey the dispiriting truth of a world without value or meaning. But in spite of its negativity, his father’s philosophy also becomes for Heyst a mythology as inclusive and as hallowed as a religious narrative. Consider the scene where, after consummating his relationship with Lena and discovering Schomberg’s calumny, Heyst retreats to the study he has re-created with his father’s books and furniture to reflect. In this eastern parody of his father’s western world, the weight of his father’s influence is palpable as he reads a small book entitled “Storm and Dust.” As he does so, he “shrink[s]
into himself, composing his face as if under the author’s eye, with a vivid consciousness of
the portrait on his right hand, a little above his head; a wonderful presence in its heavy
frame”; he experiences the sensation of “hearing his father’s voice, speaking and ceasing to
speak again” and abandons himself “to the half-belief that something of his father dwelt
yet on earth—a ghostly voice, audible to the ear of his own flesh and blood” (218-19).

Nowhere in the novel is the power of the text to fashion reality made more evident.
Although its purpose is to render the world as illusion, his father’s text becomes for Heyst
a “living word” that defines his view of the world and his relation to it. Naïveté is a theme
in Conrad’s fiction and perhaps the best-known of Conrad’s naïfs is Lord Jim. In that
novel, Jim is diagnosed as a “romantic” whose bovarysme prevents him from knowing
himself; in Victory an identical judgement is made by the narrator whose insight into
Heyst’s character is that he is also a “romantic,” “tingeing the world to the hue of [his]
temperament” (49). But it is clear that Heyst’s “temperament” has as much to do with his
father’s sceptical pessimism as it does with any innate proclivity. Heyst (to use one of his
many names) is “enchanted,” but his enchantment is with disenchantment, making Heyst a
paradoxical creature indeed.

This perspective on the novel aligns Heyst with Conrad’s other self-deceiving
characters, such as Razumov and Kurtz. Like these earlier protagonists, Heyst is seduced
by language—his father’s “enigmatical...and sometimes eloquent” phrases (218)—but this
language is not his own. Conrad’s romantics, like Heyst and Jim, are the well-intentioned
dupes of narratives authored by others. Cynics, on the other hand, are those who use
language and ideas self-interestedly, either to justify their own desires or to refashion the
world to their own advantage.
Perhaps because he has come to inhabit a world of sceptical illusion, the invasion of Heyst’s retreat has the quality of the interruption of a fantasy by a spectral nightmare. This nightmare, however, is a reality that cannot be denied when it surfaces. As Jones tells Heyst, “I am the world itself, come to pay you a visit” (355). As such, the invasion of the island is also an expulsion. After taking Lena to the island, Heyst realizes that there is much of the “old Adam” in him, a reference to his inability to resist her sexually. But Heyst is also, like Adam, destined to be expelled from his solipsistic Eden by Jones, who not only identifies himself as the representative of the world, but also as “he who is” (296), implying that he is both Yahweh and Satan in (spectral) human form—a figure of immanent evil after the death of God.

Finding their quasi-Edenic fantasy compromised, Lena and Heyst attempt to escape to the tribal village of the Alfuros only to find the way back to the idyll of primitivism it represents closed to them. Forced to confront the actuality of Jones and his gang, Heyst remains paralyzed by his sceptical contempt while Lena succeeds in parting Ricardo from the knife that he would use on Heyst. By failing to act when the opportunity presents itself, Heyst also fails to prevent Lena’s death, although her actions save him. This she declares a “victory” over the forces of death as she lay dying, wounded by Jones’s bullet. Heyst, meanwhile, remains trapped in his solipsistic intellectuality, not daring to touch her out of an “infernal mistrust of all life” (380). His final despairing act is to consign Lena’s body and himself to an all-consuming blaze.

Given the persistent bleakness of Victory, it is worth asking whether Conrad ultimately breaks free of Schopenhauer’s pessimistic worldview. Tony Tanner has argued that Lena’s actions represent a rejection of Schopenhauer’s claim that the will to life is the
determining force in human affairs as well as his ethics of disengagement. For Tanner, Lena’s actions demonstrate the capacity of a “love that can entirely dedicate itself to the life and existence of an other” (129), thereby triumphing over the view of a world ruled only by egotism and self-preservation. For this reason, he argues, Lena does in fact achieve a “victory,” the only victory in the novel.

A very different perspective is offered by William W. Bonney who argues that *Victory* is “consistently and viciously” ironic, and rejects the idea that Lena’s actions culminate in any form of victory as “absurd.”35 Conrad, he believes, has “contrived the novel to mislead both those readers whose view of reality is as romantically naïve as Lena’s and those who would assert that...the naïve gesture of ‘getting involved,’...is inherently valuable and praiseworthy” (129). For Bonney, the real tragedy of the novel “is not that Axel Heyst cannot commit himself, but rather that Axel Heyst cannot preserve his pose of detachment” (130). He believes that more viable versions of detachment are represented by other characters, including the elder Heyst, Wang, and by the ironic expatriate who narrates the first half of the novel. All of these characters, Bonney suggests, exemplify styles of detachment which do not become forms of cynical disablement.

In regard to Tanner’s argument, I have some doubt about the genuineness of the victory. Consider Lena’s death scene:

Exulting, she saw herself extended on the bed, in a black dress, and profoundly at peace; while, stooping over her with a kindly, playful smile, he was ready to lift her up in his firm arms and take her into the sanctuary of his innermost heart—for ever! The flush of rapture flooding her whole being broke out in a smile of innocent, girlish happiness; and with that divine radiance on her lips she breathed her last, triumphant, seeking for his glance in the shades of death. (380)

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35 A similar argument is also made by Geddes.
Given effusion like this, it is difficult not to suspect, with Bonney, that Conrad is being ironic to some degree. The language of penny romance seems to imply that Lena has fashioned a romantic narrative in order to fortify her courage. Does she love Heyst or the idea of loving him? Moreover, we are distanced from the idea that this victory is a lasting one by the statement that she “clung to her triumph convinced of the reality of her victory over death” (380), which seems to imply that victory is an illusion that will expire with her.

On the other hand, it is difficult to agree with the claim that the novel is thoroughly ironic. My own perspective on the matter lies somewhere in between the positions adopted by Tanner and Bonney. I believe that the final victory that Conrad slots into the narrative remains unconvincing because he was not convinced by it himself. Conrad once referred to himself as a “homo duplex,” a writer whose ways of thinking were always multiple. Nowhere does this statement seem more appropriately applied than to the end of *Victory*. Clearly some part of Conrad wanted Lena’s victory to be genuine, something to escape the vortex of becoming, but this part was ultimately overruled by his all-too-certain knowledge. Perhaps the clearest expression of his ambivalence is his Author’s Note to the novel which states that “The last word of this novel was written on 29 May 1914. And that last word was the single word of the title” (lii). The last word of the novel as published, however, is not “Victory,” but “Nothing.” In many ways Conrad’s statement is a riddle—is the last written word also the last word of the novel?—but it is difficult not to see the last word of the novel as his final word on the reality of Lena’s victory. As the beginning and end of the novel indicate, *vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas* is its ultimate moral. The victory, in other words, is Schopenhauer’s.
One of the central problems with *Victory* (but also its brilliance) is that it puts us in the place of its protagonist by asking us to contend with a world that is indifferent to our desires and aspirations but also determined by an irrationality that goes to the core of being. It asks us to accept this view of the world, but to reject Heyst’s response to it without offering us sufficient reason to do so. It thus threatens to turn us into precisely the sort of reader that Heyst was, “enchanted” by disenchantment with no clear indication that the spell has been broken. People should act and not “reflect”—that much is clear—but how and for what remain profoundly indeterminate. The only redeeming possibility is that the last word in the novel reflects a textual pessimism rather than an ontological one: if it is an assertion that the novel’s own Schopenhauerian world view is no more authoritative than any other textual or philosophical descriptions of the world, and that it is necessary to look beyond—or see through—our enculturated views of the world in order to live more fulfilling, less tragic lives, then the novel ends on a Cynical note. But if it implies that we are ultimately imprisoned in a representation and inhabit a world that is unknowable and hostile, its cynicism is modern.

As I have tried to show, cynicism is one of Conrad’s major concerns. He associated it with misguided perception, egotism, amorality, and the desire to impose one’s misguided views upon the world. His modern cynic is in some ways a misreader and a profligate author, one who cannot adopt the correct attitude toward the world and wishes to see his vision realized. Cynicism is also, however, a malaise that is enabled by and participates in the erosion of certain fundamentals, such as our basic regard and responsibility for one another. When this basic connection erodes, Conrad implies, the path is cleared for man to become a wolf to man. Insofar as modernity’s emphasis on individualism weakens these
bonds and fosters egotism, it contributes to cynicism in this sense. But in identifying this
cynicism and suggesting its inevitability, Conrad’s fictions participate in and help to define
a cynicism that is both modern and modernist. As I have tried to show, this sense of
cynicism is characterized by an ontological pessimism which not only affirms nature’s
indifference to human values and aspirations, but construes nature as hostile and alien.
This sense of alienation is also internal: man is apt to misread his nature and be duped by
it, thereby adopting the wrong course of action. Insofar as Conrad’s fictions deflate human
hubris and warn against overreliance on reason or blind trust in the goodness of our will,
they may be salutary, but if they contribute to an attitude whereby reason and the will are
dismissed out of hand, they may also contribute to the very problem they identify.
Chapter 4

I have reserved my discussion of Bernard Shaw for last because it seems to me that of the fin de siècle writers I examine, Shaw comes the closest to articulating a style of cynicism that avoids the pessimism, dehumanization, and alienation to which both Wells and Conrad were disposed. Like Wells and Conrad, Shaw well understood humanity’s altered existential status in the world after Darwin and Schopenhauer, but he refused to mourn this change or regard it pessimistically. Shaw noted that cynicism was the name given to the power of accurate observation by those that did not have it. He believed he did have it, and he made a career out of showing how people were fettered by beliefs based on false perception. In his introduction to *Plays Unpleasant*, he wryly attributed his failure as a novelist to a normal vision which, despite being “normal,” was enjoyed by only a small percentage of the population. Yet it was also this same vision combined with a unique talent for rhetoric that made him successful as a new type of playwright capable of infusing traditional drama with a subversive political stance. As a reward for his attempts to improve his audience’s vision, Shaw was duly designated “cynical” by both friend and foe. Archibald Henderson, Shaw’s early biographer, records that Shaw once responded to the charge of cynicism by joking that it “must be accepted as the primary and original product of his own genius” but also said “I am not a cynic at all....if by cynic is meant one who disbelieves in the inherent goodness of man. Nor am I a pessimist, if by pessimist is meant one who despairs of human virtue or the worth of living” (508).

Shaw’s early critics were right, but for the wrong reasons. As G. K. Chesterton astutely perceived, Shaw’s cynicism was of a more salutary kind. In his book on Shaw he
wrote that Shaw “has obliterated the mere cynic. He has been so much more cynical than anyone else for the public good that no one has dared since to be really cynical for anything smaller. The Chinese crackers of the frivolous cynics fail to excite us after the dynamite of the serious and aspiring cynic” (246).

Chesterton identifies one of the main features that sets Shaw apart from “mere” cynics: his humour is neither frivolous nor born of a deeper despair; it is “serious” humour that asserts the existence of a social truth that is not only real, but realizable. In this respect and others, Shaw’s critical project retains a strong connection to the classical form of Cynicism. It can be regarded as a critical stance that is oriented toward both nature and reason without falling too far into either; a double vision that is more ambidextrous than ambivalent; and a perspective that eschews blithe optimism without, as a consequence, falling into pessimism.

Shaw’s own account of his critical role illustrates the parallel between himself and the classical Cynics: “I am by profession what is called an original thinker, my business being to question and test all the established creeds and codes to see how far they are still valid and how far worn out or superseded, and even to draft new codes and creeds” (qtd. in Bentley, *Bernard Shaw* 61). This is, of course, the archetypal role of Diogenes, who (at least according to sympathetic interpretation) assayed the *nomos* of civilization and struck out of circulation morals that had become false or corrupt. But Shaw’s project, like that of the Cynics, also goes further—at least in theory—than merely winnowing social morals: he also argued for the overthrow of systems of morality in their entirety in favour of an individual moral autonomy achieved through the radical repudiation of individual duty to society.
While Shaw’s critical project recovers some key aspects of classical Cynicism, however, it can also be viewed as a challenge to the sort of cynicism that he explicitly rejected. As I have noted, this is the cynicism that despairs of humanity or the value of living, which Shaw regarded not only as harmful to life itself, but also as complicit in perpetuating the social and political status quo. Shaw recognized that idealism could appear as a response to cynicism, a means of “papering over” a reality that one suspects to be without order and purpose. But Shaw also perceived that idealism could be productive of cynicism insofar as its failure in the face of reality could lead to even greater depths of contempt. Conscious that his own efforts to force people back to reality could foster cynicism, Shaw often employed a comedic approach to enlightenment that was designed not only to minimize the discomfort of disillusionment, but also to show that the opposite of idealism need not be cynical despair. Aside from Charles A. Carpenter’s *Bernard Shaw and the Art of Destroying Ideals*, few studies have reflected on the importance of this aspect of Shaw’s project, and none, as far as I know, have approached it from the perspective of cynicism.

In addition to being oriented against the cynicism that was implicit in (and deriving from) idealism, however, Shaw’s project was also oriented against the gap between awareness and action that Sloterdijk and others have identified as a key feature of modern cynicism. That this aspect of Shaw’s project has not been sufficiently recognized is shown by a recent article by Charles Grimes, which adopts as its starting point the assumption that the tradition of political theatre that begins with Shaw has been a historical failure. For Grimes, this failure is the result of a shortcoming in Shaw’s theory of theatre, which, he argues, is premised upon exposing social evils and showing our own complicity in them.
before pointing the way toward salvation (118). According to Grimes, Shaw did not realize that modern subjects are already “immunized” against this form of critique by a pre-existing understanding of our own complicity, and a “double self in which acceptance of social criticism exists alongside an accommodation with those very same social evils” (119).

It should be noted that Grimes’s claim that Shaw’s political theatre has been a “failure” assumes a very limited view of his objectives; moreover, it ignores what Shaw’s theatre achieved in very few years—for example, the expansion of what is acceptable to dramatize and discuss—but also the social prejudices his plays helped to expose, including the social role of women, sexuality, marriage, class, crime and the economic roots of prostitution. Indeed, the very fact that many of Shaw’s attacks on convention in his early plays now seem to be thoroughly commonsensical can be taken as evidence of a certain success. However, it must also be admitted that many of the larger injustices that Shaw attacked more than a century ago still remain firmly in place, and if we view his project from the perspective of his own philosophical and political objectives—namely, a socialism founded on vital principles—we must also concede that it has indeed fallen short. In this regard, Grimes’s assumption is warranted, and it directs us toward the larger problem of the practical limits of enlightenment.

While I think that Grimes’s description of a critically buffered modern subject that has internalized rituals of guilt and self-forgiveness adds depth to the concept of cynicism that has been outlined by Sloterdijk, I also think Grimes’s claims regarding Shaw’s naïveté represent a misunderstanding of his project. I would suggest that Shaw was not only aware of what Sloterdijk calls “enlightened false consciousness,” but also that his project was
directed as much toward overcoming an audience’s tendency to neutralize or reject unpleasant truths as it was toward revealing systemic injustices. But this is not to say that Shaw ever resolved the problem. Indeed, his interest in such things as the superman and primitive bioengineering (eugenics and breeding), as well as his later provocative statements about fascism and Stalinism indicate that Shaw was not at all illusioned about the power of mere consciousness raising, and many of these doubts, including his doubts about human nature, are reflected in his plays.

Shaw’s professional writing career extended over sixty years, and a complete account of the trajectory of his thought and attitudes would encompass all of them; but a sufficient account of his engagement with cynicism can also be achieved by focusing on his writings from the first decade and a half of this career. During this time, Shaw transformed himself from an obscure theatre critic into one of Britain’s most discussed playwrights and became one of its sharpest social critics. In doing so, he had not only to overcome resistance to his form of cynicism in the theatre, but also grapple with his deepening awareness of cynicism as a barrier to social change. Beginning with The Quintessence of Ibsenism and moving through Arms and the Man, and Man and Superman, I highlight the critique of cynicism that occurs in each and attempt to show how Shaw’s view of the problem and his response to it alters, culminating in what might be called a crisis of cynicism in Major Barbara.

The Quintessence of Ibsenism

Referring to The Quintessence of Ibsenism in a letter to a friend, Shaw declared that he had “opened fire from the depths of my innermost soul against [the] confounded ideals of Truth, Duty, Self-Sacrifice, Virtue, Reason and so on” (qtd. in Carpenter 7). This view of
*The Quintessence* as a declaration of battle was appropriate enough, because it marked the beginning of Shaw’s attack on the moral and ideological conservatism of his times. *The Quintessence*, however, also represents one of the most concise expressions of the philosophy that underpinned Shaw’s critique; it can also, however, be read as a defence of a vital form of cynicism against its opposite: the cynicism of life negation and moral rigidity.

Shaw begins his essay with the metaphor of two “pioneers” who represent opposite perspectives on the path forward for humankind. The second pioneer has eyes in the back of his head and “declares that it is wrong to do something that no one has hitherto seen any harm in” (*Non-Dramatic Writings* 209). For adopting this moral position, he is treated with great respect, named a good man, and hated “like the devil.” The first pioneer, on the other hand, has eyes “that are very longsighted and in the usual place” and “declares that it is right to do something hitherto regarded as infamous.” For holding this view he is “stoned and shrieked at” and called “all manner of opprobrious names,” but is secretly adored as a “saviour from utter despair.” As Shaw explains in the second essay of *The Quintessence*, the second pioneer is the idealist, a person who holds to recognized virtues as a matter of principle rather than as a matter of personal conviction. For such people, morality is not to be tampered with, but must be unquestionably observed and tirelessly affirmed. The second pioneer is the realist, an agent of social progress who has the temerity to question morality in order to keep social progress moving, but one who is also initially stigmatized as a “cynic” and a creator of paradoxes. Shaw’s description implies that the opprobrious name is misplaced because it is the idealist who hinders social progress through his
mistrust of human nature and his belief that the worst in man can only be kept in check by a rigid moral system.

Shaw answers fears about moral enlightenment by observing that the critique of religion in the Enlightenment did not result in the social anarchy many believe it did; rather, he asserts, reason assumed the role of the moral oppressor:

No sooner has [the man of reason] triumphed over the theologian than he forthwith sets up as binding on all men the duty of acting logically with the object of securing the greatest good of the greatest number, with the result that he is presently landed in vivisection, Contagious Diseases Acts, dynamite conspiracies, and other grotesque but strictly reasonable abominations. (Writings 213)

For Shaw, the substitution of syllogisms for doctrine only repeats the error of worshipping a reified moral system. As the passage above suggests, he believes that the monstrous inversions and “rites of human sacrifice” (Writings 213) that followed in the wake of Enlightenment had more to do with the idealization of reason than with the liberation of the individual from traditional moral strictures. He asserts that reason (as calculation) cannot account for the value of life; rather, it tends to attach value to efficiency and necessity, thereby denying the real value and purpose of life. The “logical” consequence of this ethic of rational necessity is the guillotine, a device constructed for the express purpose of subtracting that portion of humankind whose role in the republic could not be justified rationally.

Shaw’s solution to escaping the tyranny of systematized ideals is to recognize that the will, rather than God or Reason, is the engine of life. Like Nietzsche, Shaw accepts Schopenhauer’s basic metaphysics but rejects his pessimistic philosophy. Whereas many of his contemporaries saw in Schopenhauerian metaphysics the threat of unrestrained egotism and irrationality, Shaw saw in it the opportunity to bring reason into line with
nature as expressed in the individual will. In his view, the will has been obscured and
denied by the idealizations of God and Reason and must once again be recognized as the
prime mover of existence. A concomitant of this restoration is not only to accept the truth
that reason is necessarily subordinate to the will, but to embrace it. But as Shaw also points
out, reason still plays an important role in life. Even though life is once again discovered to
be driven by the will, the “Ability to reason accurately is as desirable as ever; for by
accurate reasoning only can we calculate our actions so as to do what we intend to do: that
is, to fulfil our will” (*Writings* 215).

While the rejection of established social morality and institutions as essentially
unnatural can be regarded as sufficient to qualify Shaw as something of a neo-Cynic,
perhaps the most Cynical aspect of Shaw’s project is his belief that in order to restore the
human will to its proper place in the organization of society, the individual’s bond of duty
to society must be severed. As he explains in *The Quintessence*, duty to the ideal of society
leads to self-sacrifice, but also to the sacrifice of others, and it is dangerous for that reason.
But duty also stands in the way of the self-development of the individual, which is a
crucial element of Shaw’s ethics. One of the clichés often applied to Shaw is that he was a
worshipper of the Life Force, but this expresses his vitalism imprecisely if it is taken to
imply that he worshipped something beyond the self. For Shaw, the will to life can only be
genuinely expressed through the development of the self, a process which can only be
achieved once the bond of individual duty to society has been broken. At the point at
which man’s duty to himself is total, i.e. “his God is himself; and he, self-satisfied at last,
ceases to be selfish” (*Writings* 217), the way is cleared for the emergence of a just and
equitable society composed of responsible, autonomous individuals.
The argument, as Shaw admits, will seem paradoxical for those who mistrust the will. For conservative minds, the idea that the individual must be liberated from the bond of duty to society and given free reign would seem to open the door for egotism on a grand scale. For Shaw, these fears are unfounded because true duty to oneself would make it abhorrent for the self-worshipper to despoil himself through harmful actions. In *A Degenerate’s View of Nordau* (republished in 1907 as *The Sanity of Art*) Shaw’s advice to a hypothetical young woman in search of a code of conduct outside the norm is to

> Try how wicked you can be; it is precisely the same experiment as trying how good you can be. At worst, you will only find out what sort of person you really are. At best you will find that your passions, if you really and honestly let them all loose impartially, will discipline you with a severity which your conventional friends, abandoning themselves to the mechanical routine of fashion, could not stand for a day. (*Writings* 356)

For Shaw, moral codes have an effect opposite to their intent because they relieve people from responsibility for their own actions (*Writings* 358). The only way to make people truly moral, then, is not to force them into systems, but to encourage them to be as autonomous, as self-aware and as enlightened as possible. Yet at the same time, he is also aware that people are terrified by the prospect of this sort of liberation since they would no longer be able to rely on external authority, either for guidance, or as an excuse for their own transgressions: “Nothing is left but the frank avowal: ‘I did it because I am built that way’” (*Writings* 360).

Shaw recognizes that such parrhesiastic admissions are not only difficult for the individual, they are also difficult socially because they are disparaged as “cynicism.” He illustrates this fact via the story of an uncle who made it a policy to offer work to tramps who begged from him: “naturally he very soon became familiar with every excuse that human ingenuity can invent for not working. But he lost his temper only once; and that
was with a tramp who frankly replied that he was too lazy. This my uncle described with
disgust as ‘cynicism’” (Writings 360). The uncle, like most, would prefer to hear excuses
that preserve the illusion that people, although fallible, are essentially well-intentioned.
Where parrhesia appears as an unapologetic confession of a “common” impulse or
inclination, it is rejected and stigmatized as cynicism. Most people are uncomfortable with
the idea that human nature is neither inherently good nor intractable because it means that
humans must be accepted as they are. From this perspective, denial of self-knowledge is
the mother of all idealism.

Shaw’s anecdote clearly illustrates his view of cynicism and the role it plays in his
critical project. “Cynicism” is the stigmatizing label assigned to parrhesiastic realism by
moral idealists who believe that civility and civilization are maintained through moral
abstractions. But for Shaw, this attitude only creates a false world where hopeful illusions
reign, leaving the real suppressed but unchanged. Shaw does not explicitly call living by
ideals cynicism, but he saw that failed idealism too easily culminated in cynicism as
contempt for existence. As I have suggested, his desire to avoid this outcome helps to
contextualize his use of humour in his theatre, insofar as it can be used not only to satirize
and expose untenable moral principles, but also (if used properly) to ease the process of
enlightenment by showing that the loss of moral ideas is not tragic or a cause for despair.
This is a strategy and philosophy that finds expression in one of Shaw’s earliest plays,
Arms and the Man.
**Arms and the Man**

The play is set during the brief Bulgarian-Serbian war of 1885. Shaw chose this setting for his play because, as he explains in “A Dramatic Realist,” Bulgarians had only just been redeemed from centuries of miserable bondage to the Turks, and were, therefore, but beginning to work out their own redemption from barbarism—or, if you prefer it, beginning to contract the disease of civilization—they were very ignorant heroes, with boundless courage and patriotic enthusiasm, but with so little military skill that they had to place themselves under the command of Russian officers. And their attempts at Western civilisation were much the same as their attempts at war—instructive, romantic, ignorant. (Writings 326)

In other words, Shaw wants to seize upon a case study at the point at which the fall into idealism begins, a fall which Shaw regards as synonymous with acquiring the values of western European civilization. The play opens in a bedchamber, where Raina Petkoff and her mother receive news of a battle in which Raina’s fiancé, Sergius, has emerged as the victorious hero. Raina is relieved by the news because it appears to confirm the romantic ideas she had begun to doubt. She admits to her mother “it came into my head…that perhaps we only had our heroic ideas because we are so fond of reading Byron and Pushkin, and because we were so delighted with the opera that season at Bucharest. Real life is so seldom like that—indeed never, as far as I knew it then” (21).

While the news of Sergius’s heroic victory allows Raina to bury her doubt, her declaration that “the world is really a glorious world for women who can see its glory and men who can act its romance” sounds more willed than heartfelt, signalling that her doubt of idealism drives her all the more firmly into it. This affirmation of her idealism, however, is interrupted by the arrival of Bluntschli, who acts as the foil to Raina’s romantic notions. As a professional soldier and a pragmatist, Bluntschli appears to Raina as the embodiment of cynicism. His account of the battle provides the realist counterpoint to her romantic
illusions. Driven in part by her bovaryism, however, Raina chooses to conceal him from his pursuers and, with the assistance of her mother, helps him to escape.

In the second act, the war has concluded and Raina’s father and Sergius return. Sergius is a nascent cynic as Shaw defined it: a man whose romantic idealism has begun to sour in the air of experience. Shaw explains the psychology of the type in a stage note that is worth quoting at length:

By his brooding on the perpetual failure, not only of others, but of himself, to live up to his imaginative ideals, his consequent cynical scorn for humanity, the jejune credulity as to the absolute validity of his ideals and the unworthiness of the world in disregarding them, his wincings and mockeries under the sting of the petty disillusionments which every hour spent among men brings to his infallibly quick observation, he has acquired the half tragic, half ironic air, the mysterious moodiness, the suggestion of a strange and terrible history that has left him nothing but undying remorse, by which Childe Harold fascinated the grandmothers of his English contemporaries. (44)

When his ideals fail to mesh with reality, Sergius blames reality rather than his ideals, growing “cynical” as a result. Perhaps because Shaw assumed that many in his audience were in a position similar to that of Sergius, one of his major concerns is to demonstrate that cynicism in this sense of the word is not the inevitable consequence of disillusionment. He referred to the play as a “comedy of disillusionment,” implying that his purpose in it (as well as in his other “pleasant” plays) was to redeem the idea of disillusionment from pessimism and reassert it as enlightenment.

Nevertheless, Sergius becomes disillusioned by the prosaic reality of war and vows to resign his commission. Having grown “cynical” about war, Sergius nevertheless attempts to remain faithful to his idealistic love with Raina but this also fails as soon as he catches a glimpse of the Petkoffs’ maid:

SERGIUS...Louka: do you know what the higher love is?
LOUKA (astonished). No, sir.
SERGIUS. Very fatiguing thing to keep up for any length of time, Louka. One feels the need of some relief after it.

Shaw’s point in having Sergius attempt to seduce the maid immediately after his fiancée has left the scene is not to indicate that he is a philanderer, but that people are not reducible to their idealistic self-conceptions. In pursuing the ideal concept of love with Raina, Sergius has gone against his own basic desires, becoming, as a result, an actor who must perpetually inhabit a false role. For Shaw, this is not only the product of idealism, but a product of the concept of identity itself. In “How to Become a Man of Genius” he questions the concept by asking, “Is it yourself as you are with people you like or as you are with people who rub you the wrong way? Is it yourself before dinner or after it? Is it yourself saying your prayers or driving a bargain?...” (Writings 342). One’s identity then must be situated elsewhere, perhaps in the contingent desires and impulses that define existence. Thus, as Sergius embraces Louka, he remarks, “I am surprised at myself....What would Sergius, the hero of Slivnitza, say if he saw me now? What would Sergius, the apostle of the higher love, say if he saw me now? What would the half dozen Sergiuses who keep popping in and out of this handsome figure of mine say if they caught us here?” (50).

The problem with a morality based on artificial ideals, Shaw implies, is that it is based on a single aspect of self when in fact the subject is actually composed of semi-autonomous selves produced by competing passions. Shaw exploits the comedy of errors this creates: on one level Sergius is aware of the falseness of his idealism, but he remains devoted to it largely out of his conviction that Raina is a paragon of romantic idealism; meanwhile Raina has begun to suspect her own idealism but remains committed to the belief that Sergius is a faultless idealist. By the end of the second act the unstable structure
created by illusion is poised for comedic refutation, which is triggered by the reappearance of the pragmatic Bluntschli.

As his name suggests, Bluntschli is Shaw’s parrhesiastic realist. His role in the drama is to act as the reality principle that shatters the imaginary ideals of the other characters. In the first scene this involves challenging Raina’s romantic preconceptions regarding war. In the final act, his return sets in motion the final phase of the Romanian characters’ disillusionment by refusing to take seriously their romantic pronouncements. Having for the most part exploded the illusions of military idealism in the first and second acts, Shaw devotes the third to the destruction of the characters’ rarefied notions of love. When Raina testifies that having to lie to Sergius to protect Bluntschli caused her great pain because her relationship with Sergius is the “one really noble and beautiful part of my life” (65), she is exposed as a liar enthralled by false idealism.

Much of the dramatic force of the play derives not from Raina’s disillusionment, but from Sergius’s struggle with his idealism and his more fundamental desires. Still refusing to admit the possibility that Raina is less than perfect in her fidelity, he excoriates himself for his inability to conform to his ideals. Nevertheless, he continues to misidentify the source of the problem, locating it not in ideals based on false conceptions, but in himself and the world. Catching himself again succumbing to his passion for Louka, he exclaims, “Mockery! Mockery everywhere! everything I think is mocked by everything I do!” (75). When he discovers that Raina has feelings for Bluntschli, he declares love a “hollow sham,” and when his affair with Louka is made public, he concludes that life itself is a “farce” (78). But as Bluntschli points out to him, it is not life that is the farce, but rather the ideals that have usurped life. Once the burden of false ideology is removed, the way is
cleared for real life to begin. As Bluntschli puts it, “now you’ve found out that life isn’t a farce, but something quite sensible and serious, what further obstacle is there to your happiness?” (79).

Sergius’s transformation is not immediate. Following the shattering of his illusions, his cynicism modulates from contempt to cynical humour. Finding out that Louka is engaged to the manservant, Nicola, Sergius says, “Ah, well, Bluntschli, you are right to take this huge imposture of a world coolly” (80). Although Sergius adopts a more comedic view of the situation, he still remains in the grasp of negative cynicism because he still regards the world, rather than his perceptions of it, as the imposture. Nevertheless, his journey to the correct perspective has begun, and is tacitly achieved with the attainment of his true object of desire, Louka. Raina also experiences a similar attainment of desire—Bluntschli—as the reward for surrendering her own idealism.

The central argument of *Arms and the Man* is that the loss of illusion can liberate people not only from hypocrisy and the burden of keeping up appearances, but also from the cynicism that views reality from the vantage point of shattered ideals. Crucial to this second aim is the mode of disillusionment the play enacts. Because violent disillusionment may lead to increased rather than decreased cynicism, Shaw uses humour and a light touch to demonstrate his belief that disabusing people of their illusions need not be abusive. In his preface to the *Plays Pleasant*, he states that the attitude of the actors in his plays should be of good-humoured contempt or profound pity toward the ideals they are expected to discredit. This attitude of pity is written into the character of Bluntschli, who, (as Charles Carpenter has observed) although “blunt,” is also not unsympathetic toward the characters who are forced to relinquish their romantic illusions (93). Shaw’s strategy is most clearly
demonstrated in his treatment of Sergius, who is humanely urged toward the positive disillusionment that Shaw called realism.

For Shaw, the cynicism outlined in *Arms and the Man* was not merely a subjective phenomenon, but a trajectory of Western thought in the process of secularization. In *Fabian Essays in Socialism* (1889) he argues that “utilitarian questioning and scientific answering” have transformed the blithe optimism of the early nineteenth century into the “blackest pessimism” by resituating mankind within nature while at the same time finding no proof of that “other world” in which the wrongs of this one would be redressed (27-8). An important aspect of this shift was a negative view of nature: “proof after proof came that what we called Nature knew and cared no more about our pains and pleasures than we know or care about the tiny creatures we crush underfoot as we walk through the fields” (28). For Shaw, however, the alienation and pessimism that arise from this discovery is a mistake:

> Instead of at once perceiving that this meant no more than that Nature was unmoral and indifferent, we relapsed into a gross form of devil worship, and conceived Nature as a remorselessly malignant power. This was no better than the old optimism, and infinitely gloomier. It kept our eyes still shut to the truth that there is no cruelty and selfishness outside Man himself. (28)

Here it is important to pay attention to Shaw’s careful use of “unmoral” as opposed to “immoral” lest his readers assume that he participates in the attitude he describes.\(^\text{36}\) For Shaw, nature’s moral indifference does not mean that it must either be combated or regarded pessimistically as a spoiler of human ideals, but rather that humanity has greater agency in its own affairs than it has hitherto been willing to admit. Indeed, Shaw implies,

\(^{36}\) Alfred Turco, citing this essay, has claimed that Shaw viewed nature as “an indifferent, tyrannical presence against which man must wage constant battle for survival” (*Shaw’s Moral Vision* 129, n.). This, however, is a misreading of Shaw’s purpose, which (as this passage clearly demonstrates) is to show that the pessimists’ view of nature is false.
the quasi-diabolical view of nature functions as simply another excuse for humanity not to take responsibility for itself and for the society it creates. Modern contempt for nature is “cynical” not only because it “finds the world an eternal and unimprovable doghole” (29), but also because it is an illusion perpetuated—consciously or not—as a means of preserving the social status quo.37

*Man and Superman*

Shaw’s essay in *Fabian Essays in Socialism* shows that Shaw was, from early on, profoundly concerned with the social and political implications of cynicism as a self-indulgent and politically disabling form of *contemptus mundi*. In *Man and Superman*, he returns to the problem, exploring both its social and theatrical aspects. In the preface to *Back to Methuselah*, Shaw described the play as his first attempt to write a parable of the “religion” of creative evolution. The play, however, is more than a showcase for Shaw’s vitalist philosophy, it is also an attack upon what he considers its opposite: attitudes which implicitly reject the possibility of social progress and which therefore retreat into life-denying illusion. As such, it also becomes Shaw’s most sustained engagement with the profoundly negative attitudes he felt lay beneath modern culture, which are described in the play as “the forces of Death and Degeneration” (148).

The play is subtitled a comedy and a philosophy. The philosophy is, for the most part, contained in the dialogue of the dream sequence of the third act, Don Juan in Hell, but this is not to say that the comedy of the play is unphilosophical. Before I turn to act three, I

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37 As Shaw puts it a page earlier, “if we have got as far as an intellectual conviction that the source of our social misery is no eternal well-spring of confusion and evil, but only an artificial system susceptible of almost infinite modification and readjustment...then a terrible weight will be lifted from the minds of all except those who are, whether avowedly to themselves or not, clinging to the present state of things out of base motives” (27).
will begin with a contextualizing discussion of the main comedy which attempts to sketch its import to Shaw’s vitalism, and its relationship to cynicism.

The initial action of the play centres upon the settling of affairs following the death of Mr Whitefield, Ann’s father. Roebuck Ramsden (a middle-class reformer who now represents the establishment) and Tanner (a revolutionist and apostle of the Life Force) have been named as co-guardians of Ann and her sister. As we soon discover, however, Ann is in little need of guardians since she is a master of manipulation who generally achieves her will through proxy. It also becomes apparent that Ann’s will is directed toward making Tanner her husband. “Will” is a particularly appropriate word to use here because Ann is cast as the embodiment of the Life Force, a woman who is driven not only by her reproductive impulses, but also by her instinctive awareness of which mate best serves the evolutionary interests of the species. As the parrhesiastic speaker of the Life Force, Tanner is an appropriate mate for her, but much of the comedy of the first two acts derives from his blithe ignorance of Ann’s intentions and his equally blithe assumption that Ann wishes the sentimental artist Octavius to be her husband. When Tanner finds out that he, and not Octavius, is Ann’s real “prey,” the discovery initiates what is perhaps the earliest international car chase scene in the theatre as Ann pursues Tanner to the Sierra Nevada.

As farcical as this scenario sounds, Shaw manages to infuse his melodrama with deeper philosophical meaning. His dramatic approach can in many ways be compared to the Fabian idea of “permeation,” which espouses the infiltration and dismantling of existing political institutions from within (Carpenter 26). A similar principle animates Shaw’s theatre. In his Epistle Dedicatory to the play, Shaw describes the main comedy as
essentially “a trumpery story of modern London life” (16), but this “trumpery” masks a vitalist drama of regeneration and evolution. The move is more subversive than at first it seems: by reinvesting a theatrical form which is often regarded as a trifle, Shaw makes the point (much as he had Bluntschli make it in *Arms and the Man*) that life is not a farce, but is instead a serious business. Shaw’s dialogue, similarly, masks a deeper meaning, which is worth touching upon.

An example of levity masking depth is demonstrated by Tanner’s “cynical,” misogynistic statement that “It is a woman’s business to get married as soon as possible, and a man’s to keep unmarried as long as he can” (91), a statement which would not be at all out of place in a stock marriage comedy. But Shaw infuses this cliché with new depth when he has Tanner explain that the Life Force works differently through men and women, and that women’s connection to it compels them towards marriage as a step in the creative activity of birth. Men, on the other hand, are peripheral to this basic engagement with the Life Force and therefore resist as long as they can subordination to its expression through the feminine. This idea is repeated in Act Three when Shaw has Don Juan argue that civilization “is an attempt on Man’s part to make himself something more than the mere instrument of Woman’s purpose” (148). Again, although the statement sounds superficial, it reflects Shaw’s view of the masculine engagement with the Life Force. Because man’s role in the work of reproduction is minor, he must find other ways to serve the Life Force in order to be creative. On the one hand, this means fashioning an environment favourable to the continuation of the species, but on the other, it means engagement with the Life Force through the creation of art and philosophy (148). In his capacity as father and provider, man supports the female expression of creative evolution, but as philosopher,
artist and builder, he brings representation and self-awareness to the sublimely unconscious Life Force. These two expressions of the Life Force are, however, essentially incompatible: Tanner flees from Ann because her expression of the Life Force (being an embodiment that is only conscious to the extent that it is strategic) threatens to subordinate and even negate his intellectual creativity. But while man’s engagement with the Life Force is intellectual, he remains largely blind to its true operation, as Shaw comically shows by Tanner’s complete inability to perceive its operation through Ann until it is pointed out to him.

In spite of the depth that Shaw’s vitalism introduces, however, it cannot be denied that traditional gender roles tend to be reinscribed. Men are still pursued by women who are motivated by irrational motives, while the characterization of women as the unconscious agents of the Life Force and men as its means of consciousness recapitulates the traditional association of the female with nature and the body while men are (with equal conventionality) associated with the intellect. Sally Peters Vogt has attempted to defend this reinscription by noting that while women in the play continue to operate within traditionally defined social and biological roles, they nevertheless “exert a powerful, though always decorous force” which in turn defines the roles and actions of the men (48).

In other words, although the men believe that they are free agents with a duty to act as guardians to women (an illusion foregrounded in the election of Ramsden and Tanner as Ann’s guardians), the truth is the reverse: men are subject to women, who are the true agents of the Life Force.

But while this inversion may subvert the assumed primacy of masculine power, it arguably does little to subvert man’s privileged place in the order of being since the
cultivation of the intellect (which is consistently associated with masculinity) is posited as the end game of the Life Force. As Don Juan puts it, “I sing, not arms and the hero, but the philosophic man: he who seeks in contemplation to discover the inner will of the world, in invention to discover the means of fulfilling that will, and in action to do that will by the so-discovered means” (151). What is ultimately desired, in other words, is not the procreative superwoman but the intellectual superman, and in this regard it is instructive to note the absence of “woman” in the play’s title. It betrays the fact that woman remains essentially a bridge from “man” to “superman,” which is itself an ideal of masculine self-realization, even if that self-realization ostensibly no longer belongs to man, but to the Life Force.38

Regardless of which gender is in charge, however, men are responsible for the civilization that has pushed the Life Force underground. Women’s mistake has been to invent man, “a separate creature for her own impregnation,” who not only rivals her in number and exceeds her in physical strength, but who has also “created civilization without consulting her” (148). As Vogt notes, Ann’s expressions of power are always “decorous,” but in Shavian terms, this means only that they are not allowed to be shown for what they are. Because the moral codes of civilization run at “cross purposes with Nature” (66), the Life Force must find indirect routes to its reproductive ends. As I have pointed out, Ann is not conscious of the Life Force that she embodies. We can assume this is partly because the corporeal, reproductive dimension of the Life Force has been suppressed as obscene by a male-dominated culture. Its open expression has been stigmatized and is often regarded as “cynical” or beastly, which is demonstrated by the names that Tanner (or Shaw for that

38 Of course this is not always the case in Shaw. In other plays, most famously Saint Joan, he creates female characters whose expressions of will are more than merely biological.
matter) is called when he speaks from this lower perspective. In order to execute the
imperatives of the will in a culture that suppresses nature via artificial morality, Ann is
obliged to become a different sort of cynic, one who uses the moral codes of her society as
a means to her own self-interested ends. This form of cynicism appears in Conrad as a
moral flaw, but in Shaw it is valorized as a vital imperative.

For Shaw, the suppression of natural functions by the moral idealist is not merely a
matter of squeamishness, it is rooted in the idealist’s basic contempt for life. This contempt
explains why everything associated with uncontrolled conception becomes taboo. This is
highlighted in the first act by the news of Violet’s pregnancy, which arrives as an
unspeakable tragedy because of its assumed illegitimacy:

RAMSDEN. ... the news concerns your sister, and...it is terrible news.
OCTAVIUS. Violet! What has happened? Is she—dead?
RAMSDEN. I am not sure that it is not even worse than that.
OCTAVIUS. Is she badly hurt? Has there been an accident?
RAMSDEN. No: nothing of that sort.
TANNER. Ann: will you have the common humanity to tell us what the matter
is?
ANN. [half whispering] I can’t. Violet has done something dreadful. We shall
have to get her away somewhere.... (63)

Ann “can’t” say what the matter is because of a misguided sense of social propriety
which makes the truth unspeakable. But, theatrically, Ann also cannot say what is the
matter for the more immediate reason that the Lord Chamberlain had the power to
withhold licence to any play deemed to be an assault on public morality, including the
discussion of an illegitimate pregnancy. That Violet’s condition can only be indicated
through circumlocution reflects the violence done to life by moral idealism. As the Life
Force parrhesiast, Tanner condemns this absurd logic:

TANNER. [with angry sarcasm] Dreadful. Appalling. Worse than death, as
Ramsden says. [He comes to Octavius]. What would you not give, Tavy, to
turn it into a railway accident, with all her bones broken or something equally respectable and deserving of sympathy? (64)

For Tanner, Violet is only fulfilling her biological destiny. His sarcasm drives home the irony that conception is more scandalous and disturbing than the death of Ann’s father: “instead of admiring [Violet’s] courage and rejoicing in her instinct; instead of crowning the completed womanhood and raising the triumphal strain of ‘Unto us a child is born: unto us a son is given,’ here you are—you who have been as merry as grigs in your mourning for the dead—all pulling long faces and looking as ashamed and disgraced as if the girl had committed the vilest of crimes” (64). In order to preserve the comedic structure of the play, perhaps, it is soon revealed that Violet is married, but Shaw’s point has been made: Western culture has become so estranged from life that it has become more comfortable dealing with death. This is an idea that Shaw will return to in the third act.

The main action of the play follows the comedic structure to its conclusion with Tanner being (and allowing himself to be) caught by Ann in the fourth act. His assertions that he will not participate in the obligatory marriage rituals associated with his capture are met with a “universal laughter” that seems to hover between comedy and tragedy. If Tanner’s independence and his desire to act as agent and advocate of the Life Force without falling into its machinery is viewed as a desirable outcome, the laughter is tragic. Eric Bentley tends toward this perspective when he observes that Ann rather than the “gasbag” Tanner is described as the “vital genius” and suggests that Shaw, against his intentions, presents us with a “lower biological comedy” which enacts the absorption of one vital force by a greater one (“Biological Comedy” 43).

This view of the play is not satisfactory, however. As much as Tanner is made into a “gasbag,” the ideas and arguments he is inflated with are generally Shaw’s own. Unless
Shaw is engaging in self-parody, it is unlikely that Tanner’s ensnarement by the Life Force is simply the victory of the embodied will over the intellectualized will. It is more likely that synthesis rather than subsumption is what Shaw intends. The marriage of Ann and Tanner represents the creative combination of his intellect with her instinct, a synthesis which is, presumably, productive of an offspring who will combine the best traits of both. In this respect, Ann’s mother’s assertion that Tanner is a “match” for Ann seems to represent the voice of a vital truth rather than merely conventional wisdom. The ending is not only biological, but symbolic: by bringing Ann and Tanner together, Shaw dramatizes his belief, articulated in The Quintessence, that the intellect must serve the will.

On one level, however, Shaw probably regarded Tanner’s ensnarement as tragic, and it is perhaps for this reason that the third act offers an alternative ending. In it, Tanner’s avatar, Don Juan, is able to follow his intellectual desire, leaving both Ana (Ann’s avatar) and hell behind. But it is significant that this alternate ending is located within the dream sequence: by cordonning it off, Shaw signals that the dream of perfect intellectual disengagement is precisely that—a dream that is not entirely available to embodied beings. In this regard, it is also appropriate that the dream sequence is post-mortem: the body with its demands and appetites has been left behind, leaving only intellect, which is, perhaps, Shaw’s preferred territory: a disembodied intellectual realm where the characters are allowed to confess their essential philosophies.

The third act opens with Don Juan sitting “on nothing” in a place which seems to be located just outside of hell. As punishment for his libertinage, Mozart’s romantic hero has been consigned to a hell populated by people who, in their own way, are as selfishly indifferent to the suffering of others as he was. But Shaw’s ironic twist on eternal
punishment is to give the denizens of hell precisely the sort of world that they have always desired, one where abstract ideals reign supreme. Being Shaw’s hero rather than Mozart’s, however, Don Juan has grown contemptuously disillusioned with a hell that many would regard as a heaven and has retreated to its perimeter, preferring isolation to hell’s artificiality.

Shaw’s Heaven is the antithesis of illusion: the “home of the masters of reality,” where responsibility is taken seriously and where they “live and work instead of playing and pretending” (140). As Louis Crompton has observed, heaven in many ways resembles a “cross between a Fabian committee room and a town council session” (97). Shaw seems to imagine it as a place of complete intellectual and political engagement, a place where tasks are pursued diligently and honestly with the sort of indefatigability that Shaw himself often displayed. For those not constitutionally designed for such a high level of engagement, or earnestness, heaven is (as the Statue points out) “the most angelically dull place in all creation” (136). That the population of heaven is said to be merely a fraction of hell’s seems to reflect Shaw’s opinion of the capacity of the majority of humanity to inhabit reality as he understood it.

On the one hand, the third act can be viewed as a statement of aesthetic position and a further sally in Shaw’s battle against the idealism and escapism of the established theatre. On this level of reference, hell is the conventional theatre with its emphasis on morality and sentiment extended indefinitely, while heaven, on the other hand, is the emerging tradition of realism (or naturalism) in the theatre of which Shaw saw himself a part. In this regard, Shaw’s devil is much the same idealist-critic and arbiter of taste and morals he had attacked in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* a decade earlier. This said, however, Shaw’s hell
is not only a critique of those who value theatre as an alternative to reality, it is also a critique of a cultural attitude that aids and abets the abuses and injustices of the social status quo. Crompton accurately expresses—and updates—Shaw’s vision of hell by describing it as a world in which “everything is make-believe: any woman may, like any actress in make-up, be any age she likes, and any male may, like a vain actor, parade with a padded figure more statuesque than any nature has provided for him. The hell-dwellers are obsessed with glamour, and with youth, beauty, and love. Those were the preoccupations of the London stage in the nineties, and they remain the preoccupations of Hollywood and television in our own day” (95).

Written four decades ago, Crompton’s account would now of course have to contend with a much expanded hell in which the obsessions and role-playing of popular culture have become more pervasive and much less refined. But for Shaw the problem with this sort of hell is not simply that it lacks substance and purpose, but that it functions as a refuge from both reality and responsibility. The typical denizen of hell is not simply a self-indulgent seeker of sensual or aesthetic pleasure, but is what Shaw characterized in the preface to *Mrs Warren’s Profession* as “a hopelessly Private Person (Plays Unpleasant 202): someone who is incapable of perceiving that both society and nature represent a whole of which he is a part. The Private Person not only fails to see himself as part of social reality, he also fails to perceive his role in constructing and preserving the social reality that he wishes to transcend.

Crompton has identified hell’s residents as “happiness-seekers, despairing cynics, and the self-indulgent” (94), and it is evident that for Shaw the most diabolical of the three is the cynic, whose intelligence makes him not only the appropriate spokesman and
philosopher of hell, but also an adversary worthy of Don Juan. As the architect of worldly sorrows, the devil’s methods are strikingly mild: his desire is not to incite the world to evil deeds, but to incite it to “sympathize with joy, with love, with happiness, with beauty” (134). But because Shaw regarded self-immersion in romantic fantasy to be an irresponsible retreat from reality and society, the devil’s call is a siren song that threatens to lead democracy onto the rocks.

Aside from his penchant for sentimental entertainment, the devil’s most pronounced trait is his contemptuous indifference. Unlike Milton’s Satan, Shaw’s devil is not the exiled leader of a failed rebellion, but an escapist who has “simply left” heaven to establish hell as the antithesis of the “intolerable” reality he found in heaven. For someone like the Commander, the heavenly work of nudging society forward one reform at a time is simply tedious, but for the devil it is contumaciously futile. The structure of this cynicism emerges in the two main arguments he brings to bear in his own defence.

The first of these arguments concerns human nature. While Don Juan argues that the purpose of existence is to give form and consciousness to the Life Force, the devil argues that what governs history is not the force of life, but the forces of death. He points out that it is death rather than life that captures mankind’s imagination and fuels its passion. No drama is held in higher esteem than tragedies in which all the characters die, family magazines depict men killing one another, and real-life widows spend their last penny to bury their husbands while their children go without food and shelter. Worst of all, most of man’s energy and inventiveness goes toward creating ever more ingenious and efficient methods of killing rather than improving the general welfare of humankind. In this regard
only, he believes, has mankind been truly successful—to the point, in fact, that his powers of annihilation now surpass the destructive capacity of nature.

Juan’s response to the devil is that man is not as terrible or as destructive as he likes to believe he is, and that much of his bravado and activity, including the building of civilization, is founded on cowardice. Were this not the case, how else to explain the abjection and suffering of his own creation that mankind is willing to endure? But if the right idea can be put in his head, man’s innate cowardice can be transformed into courage and his love of death transformed into the willingness to sacrifice and kill for a better life.

Undeterred, the devil proceeds to his second argument, which reveals the core of his cynicism. Asking Don Juan if he can be “frank,” the devil assumes the role of parrhesiast to speak the pessimism that Shaw believes runs through Western literature from Koheleth to Shakespeare to the aestheticism of his day: the conviction that mankind’s imagined progress is but a pendulum swing between heaven and hell, “an infinite comedy of illusion” (168). This pessimism forms the ultimate justification for hell as a place of escape: after all, if the world is but a meaningless illusion, why not carve out an alternate world and furnish it with the decorations and the meanings one wishes?

Juan’s response to the devil’s pessimism is to argue that even if history is cyclical, it does not imply that it is without meaning or change. Whereas the devil suggests that humanity’s anthropomorphism leads it to assign a purpose to nature, Juan argues that humanity itself can be taken as evidence of nature’s essential purposiveness. From this perspective, nature has created the human intellect so that it can become conscious and not simply directed by random mutation and accident, but by active intelligence. And because
he is closest to nature, the philosopher of the Life Force—known to idealists as the cynic—is its most suitable steersman.

Given that the devil and Don Juan represent opposite perspectives, it is not surprising that their argument ends without either being converted. Juan departs hell seeking an eternity contemplating the Life Force while the devil and the Commander return to hell. Doña Ana, for her part, becomes possessed by the idea of giving birth to the superman and disappears into the void in search of a father for it. Of course, the question is not whether one character is swayed to the other’s position or not, but whether we, as readers or audience members, are. Although a number of critics have assumed that Shaw’s perspective is aligned with Juan’s, it is also apparent that a great deal of Shaw has also gone into the devil, who is neither a straw man nor simply a mouthpiece for the artistic sensibility Juan attacks. But if this is the case, is it justifiable to regard Juan as a mouthpiece for Shaw? While Shaw was never averse to shocking his audiences with radicalism or his defence of extremism, several of the devil’s statements seem to stand as important counterpoints to Juan’s revolutionary rhetoric. The devil’s warning that Juan’s pursuit of radical reforms is likely to lead to perverse inversions in practice seems to echo (although certainly more crudely) Shaw’s attack upon systematizers in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*. But perhaps the most important last word on Don Juan’s philosophy belongs to the devil:

Beware of the pursuit of the Superhuman: it leads to an indiscriminate contempt for the Human. To a man, horses and dogs and cats are mere species, outside the moral world. Well, to the Superman, men and women are a mere species too, also outside the moral world. This Don Juan was kind to women and courteous to men as your daughter here was kind to her pet cats and dogs; but such kindness is a denial of the exclusively human character of the soul.

(171)

39 These include Frederick McDowell, Charles E. Berst and Nicholas Grene.
Although the devil’s warning is tinged with humanist sentimentalism, it forewarns of the sort of dehumanizing cynicism that was manifest in Nazism. If Juan’s philosophy is as intemperate as it seems—and in this regard one must remember that Shaw adopts as his hero a famously immoderate libertine—the devil’s perspective may be intended as a tempering one. Juan himself admits that there is much to be learned from a cynical devil. Is it possible that a synthesis of divine and diabolical perspectives is what the third act points toward? Perhaps. After all, if Juan’s revolutionary extremism is combined with the devil’s suspicion of revolution, are we not left with something approximating the Fabian marriage of revolutionary idealism and political pragmatism?

At this point I would like to revisit Grimes’s claim that Shaw’s theatre did not take into account the ways in which the modern and postmodern self immunizes itself against critique. By now it should be apparent that Shaw was aware of the ways in which the subject immunized itself against critique and of the sleights of mind people use to avoid social responsibilities that would require considerable effort and sacrifice. For Shaw, perhaps the most pervasive of these strategies was the trick of absolving oneself of social guilt by imagining oneself to be outside of society, as in the case of Shaw’s devil. But another strategy is to regard oneself as a progressive without committing to continual change, which is the position that Shaw limns in Roebuck Ramsden. The busts of Richard Cobden and Herbert Spencer, the engravings and the photographs that adorn Ramsden’s study, are all objects meant to reflect his political progressiveness. For Ramsden, the great political battles are a thing of the past, and progressive ideas have triumphed. This claim to progressiveness is, of course, belied by a moral conservatism that reveals his hypocrisy. But the items that adorn his office can also be taken to symbolize the way in which
progressive ideas are disabled through mere acceptance. Ramsden’s political and philosophical thinkers have become monuments—objects of blind worship or markers of destabilizing philosophies that have simply been absorbed by middle-class culture. It is thus appropriate that Ramsden’s avatar in the hell scene is a monument, and it is appropriate that he is given the observation that “there is something statuesque” about the idea of the Superman (172), which suggests that it is destined to suffer a similar fate as those which have preceded it.

However, if monumentalization is one way in which radical ideas are absorbed and defused, language is another. Man and Superman is one of Shaw’s most rhetorical plays, particularly when the Epistle Dedicatory and the Revolutionist’s Handbook are included. Yet the translatability of language into action is profoundly questioned. As Bentley has put it, Tanner is a “gasbag” whose revolutionary ideology is in many ways as disembodied as the aesthetic idealism that is criticized in the hell scene. The difference, Shaw would assert, is that Tanner’s ideas are capable of embodiment, while the devil’s are not. Nevertheless, a note of pessimism is sounded in Act Three when the devil dismisses Juan’s argument as “mere talk” and Juan is bound to agree, although not because his argument is mere talk, but because the moral language has been appropriated (“turned inside out”) to the extent that it has become a mere tool for “duping barbarians into adopting civilization, or the civilized poor into submitting to be robbed and enslaved” (167). Here Juan’s critique becomes more explicitly a Cynical critique of false moral currency as well as a critique of the cynicism of the governing classes for whom false morality is a “family secret of the governing caste” (167).
The point that I wish to make in drawing attention to this line of thought in *Man and Superman* is to show that, contrary to Grimes’s claims, Shaw was fully aware of the ways in which people, including his audiences, immunized themselves against critique. Not the least of these strategies was accepting truth in principle but doing nothing about it. Shaw’s word for this stratagem, however, was not enlightened false consciousness, but cowardice. In the preface to *Major Barbara*, he admits that critique can in fact be counterproductive insofar as the raising of consciousness gives people the illusion of doing something without actually taking action. He writes, “we paper apostles and artist-magicians have succeeded only in giving cowards all the sensations of heroes whilst they tolerate every abomination, accept every plunder, and submit to every oppression” (29). Here Shaw seems to acknowledge that critique can itself become an idealism and a refuge from action. As I have suggested, it was precisely the ability of the subject to absorb both injustice and critique and go on as before that compelled Shaw to look for a solution that went beyond consciousness raising. In *Man and Superman*, that solution is the possibility of breeding a superman able to combine both the intelligence and the will; in *Major Barbara* he looks to more extreme solutions.

*Major Barbara*

*Major Barbara* marks a continuation of Shaw’s project of enlightenment, which includes exposing the injustices and perversions of capitalism, as well as showing our collective complicity in them. In this respect *Major Barbara* revisits territory similar to *Mrs Warren’s Profession* (Shaw’s initial title for the play was *Andrew Undershaft’s Profession*) but *Major Barbara* registers Shaw’s increasing impatience with mere social critique and attacks on false consciousness. Although these continue to represent important components
in the play, it also assails the ways that people tend to absolve themselves of social responsibility and social guilt. It excoriates what can be called illusions of social engagement: actions that offer the impression of meliorating social conditions, but which are trivial or worse.

Shaw’s symbolic target in this regard is the Salvation Army, which encourages the poor to surrender to their situation, and his means of attack is the monstrous but effective Andrew Undershaft. But through Undershaft, Shaw also revisits a problem he had raised in *Man and Superman* but never adequately addressed. This problem arises from the devil’s charge that the “force of Life” that Juan valorizes becomes in practice a force of death when men seek to extend their claims to life at the expense of others. Juan’s response to the charge that the forces of death and degeneration are in the service of the Life Force is consistent with Shaw’s vitalist philosophy, but it is also potentially problematic because it seems to lead to the conclusion that since nothing (including the forces of degeneration and death) escapes the compass of the life force, it is impossible to state that laissez-faire capitalism is not also a valid—perhaps the most valid—expression of the Life Force. In *Major Barbara* this side of the argument is given its due through the character of Andrew Undershaft, Shaw’s parrhesiast of the life force in capitalism.

Margery M. Morgan has persuasively argued that (in spite of Shaw’s protests to the contrary) *Major Barbara* owes a debt to Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*. For Morgan, this is particularly evident in the character of Undershaft who is on several occasions identified with Nietzsche’s mythical representative of the will to life, Dionysus (139). But if Shaw had *Birth of Tragedy* in mind while creating Undershaft, he may also have had in mind section 26 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, where Nietzsche asserts the value of cynics who are

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40 The other major influence identified by Morgan is Blake. See Morgan 134.
willing to speak parrhesiastically about the “commonness and the rule” in themselves and others. Shaw claims a similar significance for the cynic in his preface to the play:

If a man cannot look evil in the face without illusion, he will never know what it really is, or combat it effectually. The few men who have been able (relatively) to do this have been called cynics, and have sometimes had an abnormal share of evil in themselves, corresponding to the abnormal strength of their minds; but they have never done mischief unless they intended to do it. (48)

In Undershaft, Shaw fashions precisely such a cynic, one who not only “looks evil in the face,” but presses his perspective upon others, often against the conventions of decorum. His parrhesiastic role is highlighted by the Undershaft motto: “Unashamed.” As Morgan has put it, Undershaft’s dramatic function is to articulate the creed implicit in his pursuit (135). But Undershaft is more than simply a representative of his profession; he is the voice of a system of beliefs and practices—a realism—that has been disowned by social consciousness in word but not in deed. Shaw deploys Undershaft’s “cynical” perspective to disrupt the mental shell game that people use to conceal their own culpability and self-interest in cultural practices of which they ostensibly disapprove.

In the first act, the Salvation Army becomes the symbol of the false moral positions created by the tendency to view society as a collection of disconnected practices. By offering basic relief to the urban poor, the Salvation Army eases social suffering, but it also serves to mitigate the anger and desperation that might otherwise spur the poor to action. Shaw underscores this role in the dialogue between Mrs Baines, the Salvation Army Commissioner, and Undershaft:

MRS BAINES. Have you been shown over the shelter, Mr Undershaft? You know the work we’re doing, of course.
UNDERSHAFT [very civilly] The whole nation knows it, Mrs Baines.
MRS BAINES. No, Sir: the whole nation does not know it, or we should not be crippled as we are for want of money to carry our work through the length and
breadth of the land. Let me tell you that there would have been rioting this
winter in London but for us.
UNDERSHAFT. You really think so?
MRS BAINES. I know it. I remember 1886, when you rich gentlemen hardened
your hearts against the cry of the poor. They broke the windows of your clubs
in Pall Mall.
UNDERSHAFT [gleaming with approval of their method] And the Mansion
House Fund went up next day from thirty thousand pounds to seventy-nine
thousand! I remember quite well.

Here the complicity between the Army and the industrialists takes the form of an
open secret that exists just below the level of open acknowledgment in the conversation
between the Commissioner and Undershaft. This tacit relationship is later formalized by
Undershaft’s gift of five thousand pounds to the Army, an agreement that Mrs Baines is
willing to accept as long as the truth of the transaction is not made explicit. Her saving
illusion is that industrialists such as Undershaft or the distiller Bodger donate money to the
Salvation Army so that they may eventually be put out of business. But Undershaft’s
parrhesiastic role dictates that what is implicit must be made explicit, however briefly:

UNDERSHAFT [tearing out the cheque and pocketing the book as he rises and
goes past Cusins to Mrs Baines] I also, Mrs Baines, may claim a little
disinterestedness. Think of my business! think of the widows and orphans! the
men and lads torn to pieces with shrapnel and poisoned with lyddite [Mrs
Baines shrinks; but he goes on remorselessly]! the oceans of blood, not one
drop of which is shed in a really just cause! the ravaged crops! The peaceful
peasants forced, women and men, to till their fields under the fire of opposing
armies on pain of starvation! the bad blood of the fierce little cowards at home
who egg on others to fight for the gratification of their national vanity! All this
makes money for me: I am never richer, never busier than when the papers are
full of it. Well, it is your work to preach peace on earth and goodwill to men.
[Mrs Baines’s face lights up again]. Every convert you make is a vote against
war. [Her lips move in prayer]. Yet I give you this money to help you to hasten
my own commercial ruin. [He gives her the cheque].

By the time this speech occurs, of course, Undershaft has already made clear in his
dialogue with Cusins that, far from helping to put him out of business, the Salvation Army
plays an important role in the creation of an industrious and docile workforce. But
Undershaft’s conversation with Mrs Baines is an ironic masterpiece that relies on the (cynical) assumption that people do not want to hear truths that challenge their own moral positions and that they will take any opportunity to pretend that such a challenge never occurred.

The exchange is also cynical because it is a coded agreement between a moral arbiter and immoral power in which special dispensations are offered and accepted. Shaw emphasizes the hypocrisy of this transaction by refracting it through the character of Bill Walker, whose cynicism is deepened by the spectacle of an institution that has refused his bid to purchase absolution but grants it to men like Undershaft and Bodger whose guilt far exceeds its five-thousand pound ransom. The burden of guilt, however, falls less on the industrialists than on institutions like the Salvation Army whose hypocrisy is shown to be the product of a well-intentioned but simplistic idealism warped by an undeniable economic realism. Simply put, in order to survive, the Army must compromise, and in compromising it becomes complicit. As Shaw states in his preface, such complicity is unavoidable: in a morally corrupt economic system, no source of wealth is without taint.

The dismissal of the Salvation Army as an institution of effective reform is part of a broader repudiation of moral consciousness in the first two acts of the play. Gradually the audience is edged, along with Barbara and Cusins, toward the conclusion that Undershaft’s cynical realism is undeniable. But what is the philosophy at the core of this realism? Undershaft states that the “true faith” of the armourer is “to give arms to all men who offer an honest price for them, without respect of persons or principles: to aristocrat and republican, to Nihilist and Tsar, to Capitalist and Socialist, to Protestant and Catholic, to burglar and policeman, to black man white man and yellow man, to all sorts and
conditions, all nationalities, all faiths, all follies, all causes and all crimes” (138). Although the armourer’s faith appears at first glance to be a philosophy of self-interest, it is in fact an ethics of power which has political and metaphysical dimensions. This philosophy is contained in the mottoes of the seven Undershafts:

1. IF GOD GAVE THE HAND, LET NOT MAN WITHHOLD THE SWORD.
2. ALL HAVE THE RIGHT TO FIGHT: NONE HAVE THE RIGHT TO JUDGE.
3. TO MAN THE WEAPON: TO HEAVEN THE VICTORY.
4. The fourth had no literary turn; so he did not write up anything; but he sold cannons to Napoleon under the nose of George the Third.
5. PEACE SHALL NOT PREVAIL SAVE WITH A SWORD IN HER HAND.
6. NOTHING IS EVER DONE IN THIS WORLD UNTIL MEN ARE PREPARED TO KILL ONE ANOTHER IF IT IS NOT DONE.
7. UNASHAMED. (138)

In the Undershft philosophy, power is the ultimate arbiter of right, but everybody has a right to power, provided they can offer an “honest price” for the weapons to secure it.

Politically, the assumption is that universal armament would lead to a true test of ideologies since the ideology that attracted the most followers most committed to the cause will prevail. However, such a radical solution is also prompted by the failure of politics in the traditional sense. For Undershaft, neither words nor votes have the power to effect real change: change will only occur when people stop arguing for the world they want and start fighting for it. He tells Barbara, “Poverty and slavery have stood up for centuries to your sermons and leading articles: they will not stand up to my machine guns. Don’t preach at them: don’t reason with them. Kill them” (143). Power determines history, and in order to wage a war against its woeful history, humankind will require equal access to weapons, a need which only the armourer can fill.

Of course, Undershft’s philosophy also has a moral dimension. If, as Nietzsche argued, the will seeks fulfillment in the increase of power, weapons provide the most
immediate means to life, even though—as Shaw’s devil had observed—their actual power is that of death. Yet if the man who is powerless is less regarded and therefore less existent than a man with power, an armed man has the power of ensuring that neither his existence nor his will are denied. In this respect, the Salvation Army only deepens the injury done by inequalities in wealth by encouraging the poor to relinquish their anger, which is both an expression of their will and a means to power. The result is not more moral humans, but contemptible hypocrites like Snobby Price and Rummy Mitchens who learn to parrot Christian morality in exchange for food. As Shaw states in the preface, an institution like the Salvation Army would be of greater service—and would be in a less morally compromised position—if it were true to its military persona and led its patrons to war against the roots of poverty.

Because it does not, men like Undershaw become the most moral alternative because they, at least, express their will. Undershaw’s life philosophy, we are told, is the product of his own experience. As a poor east-ender, he too “moralized and starved” like those in the Salvation Army until his desire to be a “full-fed free man at all costs” propelled him out of poverty. What moralizing and charity failed to accomplish, the amoral will to power achieves: “I swore...that nothing would stop me except a bullet, neither reason nor morals nor the lives of other men” (143). To be precise, what Undershaw has escaped is a system of false morality that is designed to protect the wealthy against the poor. The true ethics of capitalism—which are expressed by the ways in which capitalists become successful and respected—has little to do with professed morality and has more in common with the ethics of the brigand. But for Shaw there are no real brigands, only people like Undershaw
who will have their will regardless of morality. What makes people more dangerous is the frustration of that will.

The argument of the play seems to force the audience toward a choice of cynicisms: does one choose to be cynical by admitting the truth of Undershaft’s amoral perspective or cynical by maintaining (against evidence to the contrary) that morality is universal regardless of class or income? Shaw would point out that this is a false dilemma since in both cases cynicism is simply the product of a moral code that does not fit the facts: the answer is to become entirely “cynical” insofar as that implies recognizing without shame what every capitalist already knows: that individuals are fundamentally driven by self-interest. For Shaw, this is just another way of saying that people desire their share of life and power, and to suppress it among the poor while lauding it among the wealthy is disingenuous in the extreme.

If Undershaft’s cynicism is a fulminate designed to explode the illusory morality that conceals real relations, the question then becomes, what remains? In Undershaft, Shaw seems to create such an impressive representative of the power of capitalism and force that one may wonder—as some have⁴¹—whether his perspective does not ultimately overshadow the playwright’s socialist ideas. By the end of the play, to be sure, the idea Shaw has in mind is clear enough: as the future Undershaft, Cusins is expected to bring the productive-destructive power of Undershaft industries under the control of the enlightened intellect of a Greek scholar and deploy it against capitalist hegemony by putting in the

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⁴¹ In his book on Shaw, Chesterton noted the weaknesses of Cusins’s responses to Undershaft (130-131). Bentley has also suggested that Shaw fashions in Undershaft a “monster so impressive” that his intentions for the play are overruled (Bernard Shaw 167). Bernard Dukore has also remarked on the persistence of this belief among critics, readers, and directors who “still conclude that Undershaft, whose views they sometimes consider to be Shaw’s, dazzles his older daughter and the young man who will become his adopted son, who agree to his moral views and consent to carry on his ways” (“Father Undershaft” and the Kids” 97).
hands of the many weapons that are currently held by the few. In this regard, Cusins seems poised to continue the destruction of false morality begun by Undershaft insofar as power (as both knowledge and weapons) will no longer be controlled exclusively by the wealthy:

As a teacher of Greek I gave the intellectual man weapons against the common man. I now want to give the common man weapons against the intellectual man. I love the common people. I want to arm them against the lawyer, the doctor, the priest, the literary man, the professor, the artist, and the politician, who, once in authority, are the most dangerous, disastrous, and tyrannical of all the fools, rascals, and impostors. I want a democratic power strong enough to force the intellectual oligarchy to use its genius for the general good. (150)

As Bernard Dukore has noted, Cusins’s philosophy is a rejection of the current Undershaft’s contempt for the common man (66). For Undershaft, the common man must be shown that there is no dignity in poverty and he must be given the opportunity to purchase the tools—the weapons—necessary to compete for power. But his social philosophy goes no further, suggesting that it is at base a social Darwinism which would require the common man to drag himself up through competition and conflict with others.

Cusins’s plan, on the other hand, involves relocating the base of power among the common people as a collective entity which would in turn compel the intellectual elite to work in good faith toward the betterment of all rather than the few. His chances of success, however, depend on his ability not only to preserve his own will, but to impose it upon a system that has for too long been driven by base passions, or what he calls the “rascally part of society, the money hunters, the pleasure hunters, the military promotion hunters” (150). This is the face of the will that had earned the devil’s contempt in Man and Superman because it favours in practice those who have been most proficient in killing. The current Undershaft has fulfilled his own will by aligning it with the will to death, but in so doing he has also become its servant. Cusins scorns Undershaft for allowing his will
to be subsumed by this will, vowing that because his will is greater than that of his predecessors, he can avoid becoming a “rascal.” Yet Cusins’s boast seems to be belied by the ease with which he becomes intoxicated by Undershaft’s Dionysian power in the second act. His negotiations with Undershaft over the terms of the apprenticeship only serve to secure him better compensation for his capitulation. More ominously, the last line of the play is Undershaft’s demand that Cusins begin at six o’clock in the morning, suggesting that Cusins will not be able to maintain autonomy, and that—as Undershaft vows—he will soon be so consumed by work at the armoury that he will have to be turned out in the evenings. In other words, there seems little to suggest, let alone guarantee, that Cusins’s bargain will turn out to be any less Faustian than the current Undershaft’s.

It may be that the profound ambivalence of the ending is intended not to highlight the risk of Cusins’s gamble with power, but to show the audience the error of placing too much emphasis on the transformative power of either Cusins or Barbara. Certainly, if this is an error, it is one that critics have fallen into repeatedly by asking (as I have done) whether Cusins will prevail or fail against the long-established power of death and destruction. Clearly the question is not entirely misguided since it is one which the play urges us toward. But the error seems to occur when one assumes that the hopes of society can be pinned on any character, especially one as ambivalent as Cusins. Indeed, the point of the final scene in which Cusins surrenders to the will of the infernal machine with the intention of turning it inside out while Barbara descends into infancy may well be that if we allow Cusins’s gamble to be our gamble, we are not only likely to be disappointed, we are also once again relinquishing control over our own future. Morgan comes close to this point when she notes that the undercutting that takes place at the end of the play “implies a
recognition (that Bertolt Brecht later shared) that the true resolution of socialist drama belongs not in the work of art but outside it in society” (157).

If it is the case that the final resolution is a false one, the actual moral of the play would seem to be the disclaimer delivered by Undershaft well in advance of its apparent resolution: “Remember the Armourer’s Faith. I will take an order from a good man as cheerfully as from a bad one. If you good people prefer preaching and shirking to buying my weapons and fighting the rascals, don’t blame me. I can make cannons: I cannot make courage and conviction” (139). Just as we cannot shirk our responsibility for “fighting the rascals,” we cannot expect Cusins to be our proxy in the difficult work of re-ordering society. The productive capacity of capitalism generates the means of its own destruction, but destruction only becomes a possibility if this power is grasped. In this respect, the Armourer’s creed is identical to the Shavian creed, not for its worship of power, but for its insistence on individual responsibility. As a caveat, it can be extended not only to Shaw’s opus, but to the tradition of radical theatre he helped to found: like the armourer, the trade of the radical playwright is to supply the explosives, not to use them. If the audience accepts the truth of what is offered, but refuses to take action or, worse, allows the theatre to create the illusion of taking action, Shaw cannot be held responsible. That he did not give up writing political plays even though he began to suspect that the path to revolution did not pass through the theatre cannot be taken either as a sign of him labouring under a false impression or a flaw in his theory of theatre, but simply the doggedness of one who saw that the alternative was the illusion of idealism or the cynicism of despair.

Shaw fashioned a positive cynicism which accepted human beings as they are, but rejected the pessimism that generally attends upon that knowledge. In *Arms and the Man*,
this cynicism was manifest not only in unmasking hypocrisy, but in exposing human
nature. This is done not to expose humanity’s shortcomings or its grotesquely bestial
nature as it had in Wells’s scientific romances, but in order to show that human nature was
nothing to be afraid of. And because human nature hid no monsters, as it did for Wells and
Conrad, there was no reason to view enlightenment as darkness. Shaw admitted that human
nature was essentially wilful, but he also held that it was the frustration of the will’s
impulses rather than the impulses themselves that caused people to act badly. By liberating
people and providing for their needs and desires, he believed, humanity would be free to
embrace a higher nature that would eventually eclipse its lower nature. In *Man and
Superman* this belief is tested against the diabolical-cynical view that, given the choice
between acting according to its higher and lower nature, humanity will choose the latter
because it is more engaging of the will. The devil’s cynicism is only overcome through the
idea of a superman who combines the intelligence of higher nature with the vitality of the
lower. A greater impasse occurs in *Major Barbara* where Shaw articulates cynical truths
that he cannot entirely counter. The most powerful is the Cynical truth that neither human
nature nor reason is a match for the power of established systems, but in the play this truth
has been appropriated by power. What makes this truth most difficult is its contradiction of
Shaw’s Fabian principles. The play ends by affirming these principles—the wager is
accepted with the hope that the outcome will be different—but the realism spoken through
Undershaft suggests that it will not.
Conclusion

In tracing a genealogy of cynicism from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth, I have attempted to conduct an open-minded, comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon and its possibilities. Because cynicism cannot be regarded as a unified idea, I have not attempted to impose one on it, but have instead attempted to embrace its abundance of meaning and deploy it as a flexible mediatory code to cast new light on the works of Wells, Shaw and Conrad. In this respect, the search for cynicism can be viewed as a means rather than an end, one which is capable of revealing more about Victorian—and our own—cultural anxieties than a narrower definition would allow.

That the modern idea of cynicism is primarily a monster fashioned out of cultural and anthropological anxieties is indicated by the fact that in seeking it, one is time and again led to other negative phenomena such as pessimism, nihilism, and misanthropy, none of which has any relation to classical Cynicism. One of the questions that I have attempted to explore in this study is why cynicism becomes a synonym for infamy, and the answer, I think, is that it has come to signify many of the West’s deepest anthropological and ontological fears. What often stands behind the reaction against cynicism is the ingrained belief that the cynic degrades us by exposing a side of humanity that the civilized self would rather not see. Typically this is the part that we have suppressed as antisocial, undesirable, and savage: what we have been conditioned to regard as “lower nature.” This assumption, however, is a slur not only on human nature, but on animal nature, and if the essence of modern cynicism is contempt for humanity and the world, then perhaps we need to ask whether the real cynics are not those who fear what lies beneath (and beyond) culture.
One of the ways that I seek to problematize the idea of cynicism and recover a more positive sense of it is to accept that what is deemed cynicism may in fact be cynicism, but not necessarily for the reason the writer claims. This was certainly the case with Shaw, but it is also true of the reaction against the cynicism of modern art in Caine and Buchanan. In several ways, the association of the currents of early modernism with cynicism was correct, but not always for the reasons identified. When modern art claims moral and aesthetic autonomy from mainstream culture, when it chooses to focus on aspects of human life that have been suppressed or denigrated, when it becomes critical, contemptuous, or mocking of contemporary society and culture, it participates in an attitude that has a strong connection to classical Cynicism. But the Cynicism of modern art is perhaps even more fundamental, and can be located in its impulse to arrive at truth through unmasking rather than affirming, and its desire to throw into question our unexamined assumptions about life without offering ready solutions. Here the relationship between modern art, enlightenment, and cynicism comes into full relief: each of them serves the impulse to keep culture moving by working against the formation of prejudice and empty rituals. But this impulse can also contribute to the emptying of meaning from existence, affirming in the end only the impossibility of ultimate affirmation.

To the nineteenth-century author of “The Old and New Cynics,” this is cynicism itself, but it is not yet the condition of ideological and existential disablement it would come to signify. A crucial event for the history of cynicism was its conflation with ontological pessimism after Darwin and Schopenhauer. The discovery that man was an animal subject to evolutionary nature tempered critique and turned it toward despair and hopelessness. It also gave rise to an ambivalence about critique and modernity because it
suggested that the erosion of moral and social structure that took place under both could lead to new forms of savagery. This fear is reflected in Wells’s *Island of Doctor Moreau* and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, both of which contain the idea that, outside of culture, man would degenerate into a savage egotist. Such fears were, of course, exacerbated by the influence of Nordau’s *Degeneration*. However, the turn to pessimism can be regarded as both an ethical and an affective response, adopting a melancholy attitude toward the knowledge that man is at base an animal, which in turn acts as a limiter of egotism. As John Lucas has observed, this is the conclusion that George Gissing arrives at in his 1882 essay the “Hope of Pessimism” in which he asserts that pessimism is “the final triumph of mind, the highest reach of human morality, the only hope for the destruction of egotism” (qtd. in Lucas 137). In this respect, pessimism reflects fears about the nature of mankind, but it also allays these fears through the belief that if man were to embrace his deeper animal nature and his egotistic desires, they would soon destroy him. But as Lucas notes, by the 1890s pessimism as a moral response was passing into a simple pessimism toward history (138). Nevertheless, its legacy can be seen in both Wells and Conrad, both of whom compose fictions of self-destructive egotism which culminate in anthropological pessimism. While Wells eventually rejects this perspective, however, Conrad does not. His most interesting but most self-destructive characters are those who allow themselves to be led by their selfish instincts rather than by their consciences. Much the same is true of Wells’s early fiction where egotism and hubris—which are clearly aligned with the future—also come to bad ends.

Post-Darwinian pessimism also affects the image of the cynic. Because social and moral structure are the only things standing between man and his suppressed nature, the
cynic’s attack on society and morality becomes all the more hateful. Rather than a rigorous moralist or the winnower of morals, the cynic becomes a misanthrope whose attack on civilization is motivated by his desire to reduce humanity to a chaotic state of nature. But iron...diagnosis. Nordau takes evident delight in his pathological discoveries, and it would be naïve not to note the pleasure that Wells and Conrad take in fashioning their fictional environments and populating them with egotistical, bestial, or degenerate characters, and in this respect one might propose that when pessimism becomes fascinated by what it is supposed to fear, it tends toward cynicism.

That a different approach to cynicism is possible is demonstrated by Nietzsche and Shaw, both of whom accepted Schopenhauer’s idea of the will, but rejected his pessimism. Both associated modern cynicism with pessimism, and both recovered important elements of the classical form, not the least of which was an emphasis on the recovery of nature. But while Nietzsche remained bound to the Hobbesian view of nature that underpinned Schopenhauer’s system, Shaw rejected it, opting instead for the idea of the will as a quasi-Lamarckian life force. From the perspective of the history of cynicism, this is an important difference since Nietzsche’s project gestures toward the recovery of a nature of which the classical Cynics never conceived, one which had the potential to lead to a dangerous form of modern cynicism. Shaw also toyed with extreme ideas and made claims that were intended to shock, but these were contradicted by a philosophy and by a politics which favoured evolution rather than revolution. While he may not be a perfect cynic—a concept which is any case absurd—in the search for a salutary form of modern cynicism, one could do worse than to look to Shaw.
Perhaps Shaw’s real value is not as cynic, however, but as a critic of cynicism as it appeared at the end of the nineteenth century. He recognized that moral idealism was often motivated by a conditioned fear of human nature which created resistance to social change; he also recognized that the alter ego of idealism was pessimism, an attitude which also contributed to the flight from the real and the abnegation of social responsibility. He established himself as a proponent of a realism that refused to take seriously—and therefore easily overcame—the moral prejudices of a moribund idealism. He also recognized that much of what is scorned as cynicism are truths about themselves that people would rather not admit. He took seriously the motto “know thyself,” and used it as a fulcrum to break the bonds of duty that held Victorian morality in place. But this victory revealed a more formidable enemy in the form of competing realisms. If in one sense the modern cynic is the alter ego of the enlightenment, Shaw’s cynics are in many ways the alter egos of his version of realism. His cynical devil sees all too clearly the nature of the world and sees nothing to be done for it, while Undershaft sees the world through the realism of power. Neither of these perspectives is susceptible to further enlightenment because each is already “realistic.” In this respect, Shaw anticipates, but does not resolve, the postmodern critical impasse that Sloterdijk would theorize under the sign of cynicism more than eight decades later.
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