

INTRODUCTION

Talking about Beauty

Why, I have seen wallpaper which must lead a boy brought up under its influence to a career of crime; you should not have such incentives to sin lying about your drawing-rooms.



A baby's a baby! It's the environimonament that molds 'em.

The first of these epigraphs comes from “The Decorative Arts,” a lecture Oscar Wilde gave on his North American tour of 1882. In a sense, the book before you does no more than elaborate some broader contexts for this witticism, asking what meanings it may have had for its utterer, what made it intelligible to its first hearers, and why it might still say something to us today. Answering these questions in depth, however, means tracking a set of ideas about environment’s work on the young through a range of appearances, on terrains as diverse as interior-decoration guides, popular child-rearing advice, juvenile-delinquency codes, innovations in public and domestic education, debates about determinism, the emergence of neurophysiology and psychology, the discourse of the unconscious, the history of aesthetics, and—centrally, in this case—some of the forms of writing we call literature. One could also say, then, that this book describes how a vast array of arguments, speculations, and practices converged, in the last part of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth, around the matter of the growing human organism’s molding by surroundings and circumstances.

Wilde’s bon mot about wallpaper was probably not, it must be said up front, the fruit of extended deliberation. Nor does it seem to have been intended as much more than a throwaway. As Wilde enthusiasts know, the lecture tour originated with Richard D’Oyly Carte, who was both a manager of lecture-circuit talent and a producer of *Patience*, the W. S. Gilbert–Arthur Sullivan operetta that debuted in London in April 1881, with a parody of Wilde named Bunthorne at its comic heart. Seizing an opportunity to combine business with business, D’Oyly Carte engaged Wilde by way of introducing Bunthorne’s original to North Americans—who could see *Patience* in New York by late 1881 and soon after at many

venues across the country. For the first weeks of his tour, in January and early February 1882, Wilde emitted epigrams, dined with luminaries, set tongues wagging with his flamboyant costume, and enjoyed massive newspaper coverage; he also gave a relatively learned lecture entitled “The English Renaissance of Art,” in which he spoke at length about the theoretical foundations of the “Aesthetic Movement” and the critics and artists who had helped, intentionally or not, to bring it to birth (John Ruskin, William Morris, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Walter Pater, James McNeill Whistler). But the response to his performances on and off stage was not altogether encouraging: attacks in print and at his lectures edged from hostile to cruel and—what was much worse—audiences sometimes seemed bored. Wilde therefore set out to tone down his outrageousness and to devise a more accessible introduction to art and beauty. The major product of the latter effort was “The Decorative Arts,” which he wrote in Chicago, drawing heavily on late additions he had made to “The English Renaissance,” and which he first gave in that city on 13 February. This offering, which dwelt less on high cultural names and more on the need to bring beauty, taste, and good design into the home, became Wilde’s most popular lecture, the one he would give when making only a single appearance in a given locale.¹

The wallpaper remark did not appear even in early versions of “The Decorative Arts”; it seems to have emerged as Wilde, making his way west, continued to revise. Nonetheless, it fits perfectly with the proselytizing mission of the tour and indeed with Wilde’s long campaign, inaugurated well before his trip to America, to shift the ground of virtue from a narrowly conceived morality to a lush aesthetics. Hearing the phrase “incentives to sin lying about your drawing-rooms,” a late Victorian would have thought first of indecent literature along the lines of the “wicked French novel” invoked by Mr. Dumby in Wilde’s 1892 play, *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (402);² that Wilde meant to exploit this commonplace is confirmed by his choice of “lying about,” which obviously suits books much better than wallpaper. By so clearly redirecting concern from immoral volumes to ugly decoration, Wilde was memorably encapsulating his claim that among distinctions between good and bad, the one that really matters is the one between things that succeed as art and things that aesthetically fail.

Yet this is not quite the whole story of the witticism. For with it, Wilde was also indicating that art has a potent effect on conduct—and lending this point a certain topical character by tapping into widespread concern about the origins of criminality and the lawlessness of youth. As social historians have shown, the early years of the nineteenth century witnessed the birth of the juvenile delinquent as a social problem, while the

later saw a further proliferation of efforts to address fears both of young people and on behalf of young people. In other words, Wilde's comment falls squarely within a period when solicitude about dangerous children and children in danger, to use the apt phrasing of Jacques Donzelot (96), was leading to unprecedented philanthropic and state-sponsored intervention in the lives of minors. Axiomatic for proponents of such action was that it must be possible to make better citizens by changing the environments in which young people mature—especially young people of the lower classes, whose ways of living appalled middle-class observers and from whose ranks the delinquent population was mainly drawn. Wilde's joke depends partly, then, upon an incongruous pairing of working-class destiny with middle-class milieu, of criminal career with drawing-room furniture.

Yet the main source of humor in the wallpaper remark is neither an inversion of values nor a collision of classes. It is, rather, a disproportion between large result and trivial cause. The motor of the epigram (which places it within a tradition, still very much alive, of jokes turning on the outsize portentousness of decoration, clothing, and other ephemera) is the suggestion that something as trivial as wallpaper could exert the kind of influence more usually attributed to drunken parents, thieving peers, or the deprivations of slum life. A mere domestic covering, an affair of surface by definition, wallpaper seems the very antithesis of profundity, as Wilde would recall again in his last great line, "My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go" (Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* 581). In the lecture auditorium as at the edge of the grave, however, the joke is much more than a joke, for Wilde's 1882 audience would have seen how it condensed the thesis of "The Decorative Arts" as a whole: that aesthetic environments (represented especially neatly by wallpaper, a furnishing that literally surrounds) have enormous power to shape the character and intellect of the young. Indeed many of Wilde's hearers would have been prepared to admit a truthfulness to the bon mot even without help from the rest of the lecture, since the thesis Wilde was staging in comic terms had been central to a discourse of moralized decoration already several decades old, quite respectable, and foundational to movements for artistic education and the beautification of schools.

Some of the specifics of that discourse will claim our attention further on, but for now we will do best to linger with this matter of small causes and large consequences. A little earlier in the text of "The Decorative Arts," Wilde observes that "the good we get from art is not what we derive directly, but what improvement is made in us by being accustomed to the sight of all comely and gracious things" ("Decorative" 161–62). What is important about art, in other words, is not the moral lesson we might

draw from the narratives it represents (per a dominant nineteenth-century view), nor is it intense experience in the presence of the thing (as many theorists of the aesthetic, not excluding Wilde at other moments, would argue). What counts is something more nearly like a developed *inattention* to beauty—a taking of graciousness for granted, a becoming “accustomed” to the comely—that somehow improves our very selves. From this suggestion, Wilde moves to some thoughts on art in education, and it is here that our epigraph resides:

Consider how susceptible children are to the influence of beauty, for they are easily impressed and are pretty much what their surroundings make them. How can you expect them, then, to tell the truth if everything about them is telling lies, like the paper in the hall declaring itself marble? Why, I have seen wallpaper which must lead a boy brought up under its influence to a career of crime; you should not have such incentives to sin lying about your drawing-rooms. (“Decorative” 162)

“How can you expect them, then, to tell the truth if everything about them is telling lies . . . ?” The ideal of truthfulness in materials did not begin or end with Wilde, certainly. Ruskin, to whom we will return in chapter 1, decried architectural elements that misrepresent structural needs and, drawing upon the ideas of the Cambridge professor Robert Willis, made “The Lamp of Truth” one of his *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (Hill 223–24). The American architect Andrew Jackson Downing, to whom we will also return, took as his great principle “the simple and obvious one that the material should *appear* to be what it is” (35). Charles Eastlake, author of the best-selling *Hints on Household Taste* (1872), stressed honesty in materials generally and specifically warned against covering “the walls with a paper stained and varnished in imitation of marble” (52). And the theorists and practitioners of architectural modernism would make correspondence of form to function one of the least contestable premises of building in the age of concrete and steel. Read in this tradition, Wilde’s allusion to truthfulness can seem to explain the influence of domestic furnishings by way of a kind of moral allegory after all: false wallpaper might encourage lying by suggesting that untruths go unpunished even when in plain sight.

Yet it is not clear that the young person meeting such wallpaper would draw this kind of lesson consciously. In his previous sentence, we might notice, Wilde intimates that the sensuous environment works not by the pointing of a moral explicit to thought but in a gentler, quieter, more continuous fashion. Children are generally “susceptible . . . to the influence of beauty” and become “what their surroundings make them”; like the rest of us, only perhaps more so, they are improved not by specific

lessons depicted in specific objects but by a kind of contagious loveliness in the ambience of lovely things. As he nears the end of the lecture, Wilde makes this point yet more sharply. If “all the decorative arts” are given “enormous importance” in the current “English renaissance” of art, this is so because

we want children to grow up in England in the simple atmosphere of all fair things so that they will love what is beautiful and good, and hate what is evil and ugly, *long before they know the reason why*. If you go into a house where everything is coarse and you find the common cups chipped and saucers cracked, it will often be because the children have an utter contempt for them, but if everything is dainty and delicate, you teach them practically what beauty is, and gentleness and refinement of manner *are unconsciously acquired*. (“Decorative” 163, emphasis added)

Beautiful things work on the young, then, in a manner prior to precept and beneath the level of consciousness. The tedious and readily resisted inculcation of morals can be replaced, as a parent might be pleased to learn, by the more pleasant, efficacious, and sly technique of providing tasteful china. What lends beauty its special influence over the soul is precisely its capacity to slip in and improve the child without the child’s being aware of it at all.

One main argument of this book is that from the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth, the scarcely registered workings of environment on the developing human being were a preoccupation of many kinds of people, from artists to scientists, from writers of fiction to crafters of policy, from experts pondering national problems raised by juveniles to parents gnashing their teeth over domestic ones. The book’s other main argument, more specific than the first and dependent upon it, is that this preoccupation lent a special character to period speculations on the possible role of art and beauty in human life. The idea that aesthetic experience could shape the soul was not new in the years indicated by the subtitle of this book, nor was the understanding that people can be influenced (especially in their tender years) by events and forces of which they or their guardians are unaware. What *was* new was the extraordinary depth of this period’s interest in the operations of unregistered experience, along with its tendency to conceive of human development as a series of transactions between an organism and its environment. The pages that follow will consider in detail the synergy between the concept of environment and the belief that any experience, no matter how fleeting or innocent, might exert incalculable influence over a person’s development. They will also note how the ascent of both offered an especially promising basis for claims

that the path to a better world lay in provision of beauty for the young. And they will show how this cluster of ideas bridged the diverse forms of thinking, telling, and doing mentioned in the opening paragraph of this introduction—how it linked (switching now to a more standard vocabulary of disciplines and practices) literature, art, architecture, psychology, philosophy, education, social reform, and popular advice.

Among these fields, the one privileged in *Fateful Beauty* is the kind of imaginative writing that goes by the name of literature. The topic of stealthy environmental influences can certainly be approached in ways that make other territories of human endeavor or natural process central, but a premise of this study is that literature plays an especially important part in this story, and for several reasons. One has to do with the representation of intimate experience, or rather with the intimate representation of experience. As the writings of Walter Pater (to be visited in chapter 2) irresistibly suggest, no form of talk about development may be better at capturing small transactions of life than the narration of the concrete experiences of an individual person. And because subtlety in delineation seems to suit subtlety in things delineated, literary narratives may be especially powerful in this regard, if by “literary” we mean to gesture at an unusual richness of meaning in the minutest details of language. Another way of putting this would be to say that under prevailing taxonomic habits, the detailed narrating of a life’s unfolding can scarcely *escape* being marked as literary; for better or for worse, the literary is commonly understood to bear a tight affiliation to the experientially intimate.

Highly germane to this point is the historical importance of the bildungsroman, which we might succinctly define as the genre of the long narrative concerned with a fictional individual’s maturation. Certainly, one aim of *Fateful Beauty* is to show that problems of development are important in imaginative writing well outside this genre as such (as in Auden’s poetry and criticism), and yet the bildungsroman’s eminence stands behind even this undertaking. If literature has existed since antiquity, “literature” as a category may be an invention of the last two hundred years or so, which means that its emergence roughly coincides with that of the bildungsroman—a genre most often, though ever problematically, said to find its prototype in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*) of 1795–96. Whatever the particulars of interdependence here, it is certainly difficult to imagine how anything like the regnant understanding of “literature” could have come into being apart from a sense that one of the main things literature does is to tell of the growth of an individual human being in a social context. That literature *ought* to be understood this way has, certainly, been contested by many modernist innovators and their heirs; for them, such an identification precisely misses the point that the truly literary di-

mension of a text must lie in its rejection of mimetic representation (including, it may be, the representation of subjectivity) in favor of the play of language. But if views on the proper hallmark of the literary differ, few would dispute that “literature” has been associated in popular opinion—and in the disciplinary partitioning of intellectual life performed by the academy since the nineteenth century—with stories about how particular people mature.

Further, literature and the bildungsroman have had a close if not always transparent relationship to faith in the benevolent power of the aesthetic, as the critic Marc Redfield has argued. Several recent readers have shown how the social hope of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics lay in the idea that beauty—often in the company of its grander companion, sublimity—would bring human beings to some kind of reconciliation with a world that otherwise seems alien, indifferent, fragmented, or oppressive. (Terry Eagleton, to whom we will return in chapter 2, offers the most salient and extensive treatment of this aspiration.) Other readers have pointed out that the bildungsroman attempts something similar, its nominally ideal ending being one in which the protagonist comes to accommodation with a society that has thrown up obstacles to the desires and impulses of youth. (Franco Moretti, to whom we will return in a few paragraphs, presents the fullest elaboration of this argument.) Redfield, for his part, considers a number of collaborations and conflicts between these two programs for harmony, showing how the bildungsroman, as itself an aesthetic enterprise, is meant to abet the reconciliation between soul and world—even if no instance of the genre quite manages this feat, even if it can be doubted whether a true bildungsroman has ever existed. Bildungsromane are, in idea at least, “the most pedagogically efficient of novels, since they thematize and enact the very motion of aesthetic education”; because reading is “a process of *Bildung* inscribed in the text itself as the text’s reflection on its own human essence,” the bildungsroman becomes “a trope for the aspirations of aesthetic humanism,” its concept finally having “no existence apart from . . . the post-Romantic history of aesthetics” (55, 39, 65). The texts considered in *Fateful Beauty* all negotiate in some fashion the dream of tuning subjects to their worlds. And they all draw on an understanding (so widely held in the nineteenth century as to merit the name “popular”) that in any such tuning literature will assume a leading role.

All this said, it would be a mistake to subordinate the project of the present study to the question “Why literature?” Equally relevant, one might say, is the question “Why *not* literature?” For a governing assumption here is that the study of literature, as of any art, carries intrinsic interest, that it makes a contribution to knowledge requiring no apology in other terms, even if (as has been suggested in this case) other terms are

eminently available. *Fateful Beauty* is not intended to constitute cultural history as opposed to literary criticism, then, nor does it aim to use literary texts merely to illustrate historical phenomena more interesting than the texts themselves. It aspires, rather, to a kind of stereoscopic effect in which one frame, wherein the object of study is a series of literary works, merges with another, wherein the object of study is a preoccupation ramifying widely through culture and society. The hope is that readers principally interested in literature will see how its readings are not just enhanced by, but inextricable from, its reconstruction of more broadly permeating convictions and trends, even as those with a primary interest in psychology, education, or social reform will see why procedures associated with literary criticism are necessary to the historiographical work it undertakes.

The first chapter of *Fateful Beauty* examines several aspects of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinking about developmental environments. It begins by considering how the image of the vulnerable child figured in a variety of efforts to manage the experience of young people within and without the family, then turns to the growth of interest in the human organism's stealthy shaping by environment so named. This question of stealth requiring further elaboration, it next discusses how discoveries in physiology and early psychology enhanced interest in the mysterious, quasi-chemical processes by which character is formed—that is, in what we might call a developmental unconscious—before concluding with a look at how such preoccupations governed period hypotheses about the nature of the aesthetic. Some elements in this wide-ranging chapter bear quite obviously on everything that follows; some resonate more strongly with some sections of the book than with others; some do not have acute application to any succeeding chapter. But the aim here is not to pave the way for later demonstrations that these phenomena were all directly registered in literary texts; it is rather to show that for the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, increasing anxiety about the susceptibility of the young, the rise of environment as a major term of thought, growing attention to the significance of the unconscious, and new understandings of art and beauty profoundly affected each other—that they made, even, a certain practical and theoretical constellation centered on the insight that people become who they are through experiences of which they may hardly be aware.

In its second chapter, the book turns to the developmental program of British aestheticism, as it was anticipated by figures like William Wordsworth and Ruskin, solidified by Pater, and disseminated by Wilde and his contemporaries. Here, the argument is that Pater and Wilde find in the aesthetic a double benefit, the stealthy action of the beautiful environment rendering the soul more beautiful even as highly conscious aesthetic experience provides an opening for a sense of freedom from determination by

external forces. The chapter goes on to ask why aestheticism seemed driven to undercut its own best hopes for beauty, and how its recipes for gentle shaping may be understood in relation to both the ascent of discipline described by Michel Foucault and the ideology of the aesthetic explored by Eagleton.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on James Joyce and Theodore Dreiser, both of whom grew up in the shadow of an apparently conclusive demonstration, by modern science, that an individual's acts and qualities are determined by environmental forces working upon hereditary constitution. Pater and Wilde were also immersed in this understanding, but where it led them to a certain positive excitement about the possibility of young people maturing amid beauty, it led Joyce and Dreiser to forms of rebellion against aestheticism's ideals. In Joyce's framing, the virtue of the aesthetic lies not in the habituating to fair things described in "The Decorative Arts" but in its tendering of an order of experience that—more in line with the second of the two benefits recognized by Pater and Wilde—offers a liberation from circumstances through a suspension of appetitive desire. For Dreiser, meanwhile, Joycean as well as Wildean forms of aesthetic optimism are undone by the recognition that the yearning for beauty is itself a desire of the organism and thus a means by which environmental forces extend or confirm their control of the soul. In exploring Joyce's and Dreiser's responses, the chapter considers afresh the relationship between aestheticism and literary naturalism, which has been discussed periodically over the years but little examined lately and never substantially treated in terms of beauty's stealthy shaping.

The final two chapters turn to what we might regard as a last phase of the critique of aesthetic optimism, as unfolded by two gifted makers of literary art who were also high-profile public intellectuals in the middle years of the twentieth century—figures, that is, whose work furnishes a singular record of what issues were being pondered by the kind of people whose main business was to ponder issues. Chapter 5 argues that much in the extraordinary oeuvre of the novelist and journalist Rebecca West turns upon a sharp dismissal of the belief that any milieu can remain secure against external forces of rupture. Although sensitivity to beauty is for her the quality that divides worthwhile people from disagreeable ones, West stresses—in her most famous novel, in her best-known work of nonfiction, in her Left-baiting defenses of patriotism, and in her essayistic engagement with the experiments of Ivan Petrovich Pavlov—how dangerous it is to assume that surroundings can be managed, how important to recognize that the terrain of a human organism's struggle is never reliably circumscribed. Chapter 6 turns to yet another encounter between a writer and a scientist to examine how, in the twentieth century, views of environment's power could shape a politics. Beginning by

asking what W. H. Auden learned from the life and publications of his physician father, George, it shows that the poet initially addressed the question of environmental influences less by working through the mysteries of agency than by flatly declaring transcendence of one's milieu to be an imperative. The chapter goes on to survey Auden's concerns about the possible conflict between the manipulation of juvenile conditions and the nurturing of free will, and to show how his vision of the making of the artistic soul relies on dissonance rather than concord between the environment and the growing organism. A brief epilogue to the book visits some scenes from the careers of beauty and environment after the middle of the twentieth century.³

Given the close connection between "literature" and stories about people growing, the claim that many writers of this time were profoundly concerned with human development might not in itself seem cause for comment. Yet this assertion does, in its way, run against a common understanding of what happened to literature in this period, and particularly to the novel after about 1900. Several influential critics have argued that European and North American writers in the twentieth century turned away from the nineteenth century's delight in narrating how young people mature and devoted themselves instead to stories about how young people do *not* mature, about how life in the modern world is an affair of stagnation or regress. Patricia Meyer Spacks, for example, has written eloquently about early twentieth-century novelists' privileging of an empowering arrest affiliated with "genius" (236), while Franco Moretti has argued that even by the time of George Eliot and Gustave Flaubert, "the historical and cultural configuration which had made the *Bildungsroman* possible and necessary had come to an end" (226). Not only had it become difficult to believe that "the biography of a young individual" could be "the most meaningful viewpoint for the understanding and the evaluation of history" (227); by the turn of the century, according to Moretti, youth had begun "to despise maturity," to "define itself in revulsion from" age, to look "for its meaning within itself" because adult niches had ceased to seem remotely hospitable (231).

That there is a great deal of truth in these assessments will be obvious to anyone familiar with the troubled young heroes of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novels, or with the cultural shifts that occurred between, say, 1870 and 1920. When José Ortega y Gasset, born in 1883, recalled, "In my generation, the manners of old age still enjoyed great prestige. So anxious were boys to cease being boys that they imitated the stoop of their elders" (51), he was also acknowledging how rapidly things had changed thereafter. Still, the assertion that the significant literature of the era largely replaced exuberant growth with desperate stasis has to

be qualified. As we will see, the dream of the individual's flowering into harmony with society may have been subjected to new kinds of skepticism, but *interest* in how young people become the adults they become remained high. If this continuity is hard to see, one reason may be that the interest itself came to be directed at hard-to-see factors—to be governed, once again, by a feeling that the really crucial transactions occur on so molecular a scale that they resist elevation to anything recognizable as plot. Although Pater, Wilde, Joyce, Dreiser, West, and Auden all have something important to say about the shaping power of juvenile environments, they do not always say it in texts in which stories of young people take center stage.

This and preceding references to the writing of the period clearly invite another question about this book, however: Why has the term “modernism” been omitted from its title and skirted, at least so far, in this introduction? For answer, we might begin with the point that “modernism” was not a word much on the lips of the authors with whom *Fateful Beauty* is occupied. It only came into its current use around the middle of the twentieth century, referring at first to a movement, trend, or group of formal features (radical experimentation, difficulty, fragmentation, refractoriness, and malaise, among others) associated with certain innovative artists and writers. Only a little later did it come also to name a span of years. With this turn, of course, those cultural producers and works that looked more modernist in the qualitative sense came to be seen as epitomizing the age's meaningful progress, while others tended to recede from view; to have been nonmodernist in the age of modernism was, so it now seemed, to have been out of sync with the times, retrograde or irrelevant. It can also be argued that when “modernism” became the dominant temporal marker in the story of the arts, the qualitatively modernist features *within* particular works and oeuvres became the ones easiest to discern and most necessary to discuss.

Because concern with developmental environments has not heretofore been regarded as a leading characteristic of modernism in its qualitative acceptance, however, centering this study on modernism would mean either (1) deploying the term as a purely temporal designation or (2) arguing at length that this concern was a distinctive dimension, though so far little noticed, of the web of texts and writers that have been marked modernist in the qualitative sense. Both options prove problematic. Certainly, the most generous demarcations of modernism in the Anglo-American world might adopt something like 1860 (or at least Pater) as a start, 1960 (or very late West and Auden) as an end. But precisely because so large a span hovers just within the limits of the plausible, and because rival accounts might put the beginning as late as 1910 and the close as early as 1930 or even 1925, the invocation of modernism would seem to demand

fuller defense here than it would in a book zeroing in on, say, the second and third decades of the twentieth century. It would appear to require some buttressing by demonstrated relevance to modernism in the less contested sense, the one that refers to groups or qualities—which is to say that option one passes directly into option two.

But option two, again, has problems of its own. To make a strong case that one is revealing a hitherto unnoticed feature of modernism (as school, style, or corpus), one would have to devote substantial attention to artists recognized as modernist—to demonstrate that the newly disclosed traits or interests accompany ones that have already put those artists securely in the modernist category. Among the writers substantially visited here, however, only Joyce has impeccable modernist credentials. In crucial respects, Dreiser, Wilde, the later Auden, and West can be understood as antimodernist, while Pater's work seems to many less an instance of modernist practice than a stimulus to modernist innovation. Nor will this book's personnel fully cooperate with an attempt to forge an intriguing trajectory, say from incipient modernism to intense modernism to attenuated modernism. Were we to rank our principal authors from most to least evidently modernist, we might come up with something like: Joyce, early Auden, Pater, West, later Auden, Wilde, Dreiser—or the fourth, sixth, first, fifth, seventh, second, and third of our writers chronologically speaking. Preferable to either of these two options, then, would seem to be a relatively sparing use of “modernism” in this study. This tack has the collateral virtue of affirming something important to those who like a certain thickness or range in readings of the culture of a given period: that the intellectual and artistic life of this era does not necessarily look less bristling or vibrant if we expand our scope beyond the figures generally regarded as most central to high modernism.

Still, it would be wrong to imply that this book has little to contribute to the ongoing critical conversation about modernism's meanings. As one of the readers of its manuscript pointed out, one way of understanding modernism is to see it as driven by a sense of a contest over who was best equipped to describe and amend human relations, a contest in which artists (still drawing inspiration, at some level, from earlier ideals of the poet-sage) saw their opponents as social scientists, natural scientists, and other professional analysts of the modern world. In such a frame, the six writers principally discussed here would be inescapably or even essentially modernist, though their ways of joining the contest in question clearly vary. West and Auden enter the fray most directly, perhaps, inasmuch as they most visibly arrogate to themselves the right to critique and adapt extraliterary theories about human behavior for their own projects. But Pater ingeniously suggests that the modern worldview is at once a product of science and that which confirms the necessity of art, while Wilde, Joyce,

and Dreiser offer prescriptions for (or diagnoses of) living whose claims to expertise cannot quite be subsumed under poetic inspiration or empirical investigation alone.

Even at its most narrowly delimited, moreover, modernism was entangled in crucial ways with questions of beauty and receptivity to environmental stimuli. Three of these bear particular mention here. First: it will soon become clear that many of the ideas about human development examined in *Fateful Beauty* depend upon an engagement with the concept of the moment. This tiniest of temporal abstractions has always loomed large in modernist writing and writing about modernist writing, from the “awful daring of a moment’s surrender” in *The Waste Land* to Virginia Woolf’s “moments of being,” from Ezra Pound’s definition of the Image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” to the sweeping surveys of modernism offered by later critics like Moretti and Ronald Schleifer. Parts of this book, especially in chapters 2 and 3, nod to connections between the moment in developmental thinking and the moment as it figures in modernist art, but there is clearly more to be said on this point, and it will surely be to the good if future readers in future books say it.

A second, and closely related, impulse in modernism lies in its conviction that a single rich perception can alter a life. In chapter 3, we will situate Joyce and his elevation of quotidian experience amid the discourses of environment and development, but something similar might be done with a number of other modernist or protomodernist writers. Henry James and Virginia Woolf could each have been given a chapter here, as much for their concern with the power of the impression as for their sensitivity to the ways surroundings resonate through souls; so perhaps could William Carlos Williams, ever anxious for a fresh seeing that would renew the world. And so, for that matter, could Pound, whose absorption of Pater and Wilde in this area is betrayed by numerous passages in his work. In one, from 1916’s *Gaudier-Brzeska*, Pound declares that James McNeill Whistler and the Impressionists have made him “more conscious of the appearance of the sky where it juts down between houses, of the bright pattern of sunlight which the bath water throws upon the ceiling,” and that “[a]ll this is new life, it gives a new aroma, a new keenness for keeping awake” (126).

This testimony to aesthetic resurrection leads to a third and rather different point of entanglement: the importance of the not traditionally beautiful and the ugly in modernist aesthetics. On the first page of her study of the modernist cult of ugliness, Lesley Higgins quotes the following epistolary comment, March 1918, from John B. Yeats to his son William: “The poets loved of Ezra Pound are tired of Beauty, since they have met it so often in plays and poems and novels and in ordinary life. . . . It

has ceased to be unintelligible, so very naturally and inevitably they turn to the ugly, celebrating it in every form of imitation” (quoted in Higgins 1). Pound might have taken exception to the elder Yeats’s terms—as Higgins notes, he and many other modernists were often ready enough to promote beauty as such (145)—but it is clear, all the same, that in the early part of the century beauty suffered from its very positivity, which allied it with qualities disdained by moderns and allegedly beloved by philistines (spiritual elevation, sexual decorum, piety, cheerfulness). As the century wore on, interestingness displaced beauty as the essential quality of valid art; praise of beauty in art came to seem ever more anachronistic and recherché; and—in a development astutely noted by Denis Donoghue—casual allusions to beauty receded ever farther from the legitimate conversational terrain of heterosexual men (29). As if this were not enough, the last decades of the century saw trenchant critiques of the ideological work of the aesthetic and of sensuous pleasure (Pierre Bourdieu, Laura Mulvey, Paul de Man, Eagleton) that made it difficult to offer a judgment of beauty without recalling the exclusions, injustice, and violence perpetrated in its name.

Recently, however—and perhaps partly because these critiques made the aesthetic look more blooded and forceful than it had for some time—beauty has enjoyed a certain return to favor. Against the charge that aesthetic judgment has always been an implement in the class warfare practiced by the high upon the low (adaptations of Bourdieu) and that the sensuous pleasure taken in an object amounts to a violation of it (extensions of Mulvey), well-known critics such as Wendy Steiner, Elaine Scarry, and Donoghue have mounted eloquent defenses. They have pleaded that attacks on pleasure perform their own suspect kinds of ideological work; that the feeling for beauty and the feeling for justice augment each other; that we have much to gain not only from the unsettling experience of beautiful things but also from irresolvable debates about the value of beauty.⁴ This impetus toward a theoretical reevaluation seems, further, to have encouraged or dovetailed with an efflorescence of interest among novelists and poets. Zadie Smith’s novel *On Beauty* (2005), for example, plays off Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just*, while Alan Hollinghurst’s Booker-prize-winning *Line of Beauty* (2004) draws its titular conceit from an ingredient of aesthetic success apprehended by William Hogarth in the eighteenth century.

Yet the claims for beauty whose devising is described in the earlier chapters of this book, and whose calling into question is described in the later ones, have not so far figured prominently in the twenty-first-century turn. As should be clear by now, these claims were informed by a social optimism according to which conscious aesthetic experience on the part of adults might be no more crucial than scarcely registered aesthetic experience on

the part of the young. Though these claims accorded beauty an important role in the fashioning of a better world, they did not rely solely on encounters between informed audiences and works of art as such, nor did they accord the highest importance to the cultivation of taste or to some mimetic (or antithetical) relation between art and society. And though they often touched on a certain dream of resuturing life to art (dreamt by figures as diverse as the anthropologist Jane Harrison and the art critic Clement Greenberg), these claims did not exactly repose on that dream, either.⁵ To the way of thinking that they expressed, what art could make people know or feel was not necessarily more important than what aesthetic environments could make people insensibly become.

In this strand of a program, in this strain of a social vision, beauty and environment clearly worked together. As the notion of environment became more and more central to thinking about juvenile development and the destiny of humanity, it enhanced the aesthetic's bid to nurture future possibility; promoters of the beautiful may be said to have returned the favor. But the fortunes of the two soon diverged. If beauty's hold declined in the early years of the twentieth century, the same cannot be said of environment's. In the 1920s a radical yet appealing behaviorism briefly made environmental conditions the concern of every parent up on the latest in child rearing; in the 1930s widespread social misery lent prestige to the view that nothing was as important as socioeconomic circumstances in determining the life courses of individuals. But it was the decades after World War II that arguably witnessed the height of environment's triumph. Revulsion at Nazi eugenic policies helped make inquiry into hereditary and even physiological influences on human development broadly unpalatable, which meant that in serious research (and in popular understandings growing out of new science) environment had the field largely to itself. Not until the end of the century—with the arrival of newly sophisticated genetic analysis, explosive innovation in psychopharmacology, and a certain sense of generational distance from the era of the Third Reich—would the dominance of environment begin to recede.

The reach of environment in the popular imagination of the postwar era is nicely illustrated by the second of this introduction's two epigraphs, drawn from a text appearing around the end of the period treated in *Fateful Beauty*. That text is the 1953 Warner Brothers cartoon "A Mouse Divided," directed by Isadore "Friz" Freleng with story by Warren Foster, and the line is spoken by a drunken, baby-delivering stork. Having overindulged at a "Stork Club" in the sky, and believing himself therefore incapable of carrying an infant mouse all the way to its proper parents, the inebriated avian leaves the winsome rodent on the nearer doorstep of Sylvester the Cat and his bride. Sylvester is at first tempted to devour the new



Figure 0.1. The drunken stork.

arrival (“I’ve given birth to a breakfast!”), but ends up defending his so unusually acquired bundle of joy from other hungry felines. The last scene finds Sylvester himself being pushed in a stroller far too small for him by the rodential parents, to whom *he* instead of the infant mouse has now been delivered in the stork’s no less bungled attempt to correct his earlier mistake.

As uttered by the stork, “A baby’s a baby! It’s the environiment that molds ’em” rationalizes a dereliction of duty. Under its intoxicated and intoxicating logic, no hereditary differences among offspring can really matter because environment determines everything in the fate of the young; kitten or baby mouse, the scion of the Sylvesters will be the scion their parenting produces. But the affective consequences here are just the opposite of those usually engendered by a conviction of environment’s great power: among parents, as not among besotted messenger storks, such a belief tends to heighten anxiety about the conditions under which precious offspring will mature, since it is precisely those conditions that fall to parents’ charge.

The cartoon does not endorse the stork’s pronouncement, of course: all manner of calamity follows the Sylvesters’ adoption of the baby mouse. What is instructive for our purposes is that the stork makes the remark at

all. Incorporating the line about environment into an absolutely mass-cultural form, its author or authors had to assume that it would be comprehensible to most Americans, just as Wilde had to assume that his audience would make sense of his wallpaper quip.⁶ To pass from the earnest aesthete on wallpaper in 1882 to the cartoon stork on the fungibility of parents in 1953, therefore, is not only to pass from the absurdly sublime to the sublimely absurd, or from a tendentially middle-class spectacle to a thoroughly cross-class entertainment. It is also to move from an indication that certain ideas about environment were widely diffused near the end of the nineteenth century to a confirmation that environment's power had achieved something like universal recognition, if not universal assent, in the postwar United States. By the middle of the twentieth century, it was clear that beauty's own fate had not been to dominate thinking about the raising of children in the new age. But environment had fared extraordinarily well.