Literary Decadence and Critical Decay

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Literary Decadence and Critical Decay
by
Kevin David Beverage

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................... iii  
Abstract .......................................................................................................................... vi  
Foreword ......................................................................................................................... vii  
Introduction: Before the Stronghold... ........................................................................... 1  
Chapter 1: Decadent Criticism and the Critical Caesura ............................................. 28  
Chapter 2: The Invisible King in *This Side of Paradise* ............................................. 70  
Chapter 3: The Grave Logic in *Absalom, Absalom!* .................................................. 137  
Conclusion: The Jammy-Rams at Work ........................................................................ 196  
Afterword ........................................................................................................................ 206  
Works Cited .................................................................................................................... 208
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Dedicated to my parents
This dissertation explores the ways in which literary decadence works against the tendency of literary history, scholarship, and literary institutions to make permanent—to monumentalize—certain styles, names, or movements. It does this through an examination of the role of criticism in decadent texts, and that criticism’s resistance to the “technologies of maintenance” working to guarantee permanence. After examining Oscar Wilde’s notion of criticism as conversational and that which comes before the work of art, thus breaking the permanency of the work of art, I shift to an analysis of two novels by F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner. Fitzgerald’s This Side of Paradise is explored in terms of the ways that literary tastes contribute to the concrete formulation of literary arguments. Then, Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! is considered in terms of the ways that it deviates from the “programmatic style” of the institutional MFA program, which began the same year as Absalom’s publication with the founding of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. I show how the novel critiques the notion of the “self-made author” through its more decadent and critical “grave style.” Ultimately, this dissertation is meant to show how literary decadence’s critique of permanency offers ways of interrogating the larger move toward permanency manifesting today, such as the ubiquitous presence of surveillance technologies.
Foreword

Since this work will seem somewhat atypical in a few ways, I think it is important to set out and describe a few of the environmental pressures that contributed to its process. The single most shaping element, I would think, is largely arbitrary: several years ago, right after finishing my exams and beginning the dissertation at Washington University in St. Louis, I moved across the globe to live in Okinawa, Japan, with my wife, who had just begun working at Meio University in the city of Nago. The university sits on a mountain overlooking the Nago Bay; to the north of us grows a large, nationally preserved sub-tropical forest, and to the south extends, becoming more intense the more it collects, a cityscape, studded with the densest concentration of American military bases in the country, and culminating in the larger, southern city of Naha (still relatively small, compared to Tokyo and Osaka). Being in “rural” island Japan (it’s not really that) for many years, of course, has left me somewhat distant from Washington University, both in time and space. Time: because I have significantly elongated this phase of my education (due in part, of course, to the Covid-19 pandemic); and space: not only the vast geographical distance separating this small island from the middle of the U.S., but also the “distance” that comes with the cultural pressures that have transformed my own thinking and understanding.

Practically, that amounts to having fewer resources; since Meio is a small university, it has somewhat less than necessary English language resources on the subject of British and American literary decadence. The larger academy—the University of the Ryukyus—is a two-hour drive down the island. For that reason, most of the book sources cited here come from those I happen to own on the subject, aided by a few more e-books than I would have liked to include; all of the articles come from databases, whether it be through Wash U’s library or by way of JSTOR’s magnanimous decision to allow access to more articles for non-institution-affiliated
people during the pandemic. While certainly a limitation, I took the opportunity to let my dissertation become, in a sense, more “DIY”—crafted and built from resources I specifically had ready-at-hand. Furthermore, I believe this makes for a form that mirrors the essence of what I want to do with this work: it makes it ephemeral and, possibly, more fragile; it loses the rigid supports that serve to make scholarship “permanent” and “monumental”—words and ideas that hopefully will become more complicated and less appealing with the elaboration of this text. In that sense, it amounts to a “feature, and not a bug.” For now, the practical consequence includes effects like the fact that there will be fewer footnotes than might be expected for a scholarly work.

The second “pressure” is less arbitrary, and marks my own intellectual interests since I started higher education so many years ago at a community college in Dallas. From the beginning, I have been most interested in the spaces where the “creative” and the “critical” seem to overlap or combine. I mean this both in reading and in practice: I have always been interested in writing both “types,” and, moreover, finding ways to combine them together. This interest has permeated this dissertation in various ways. The first way is somewhat obvious: with Oscar Wilde’s illuminating comment that “it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms. The tendency of creation is to repeat itself. It is to the critical instinct that we owe each new school that springs up, each new mould that art finds ready to its hand” (“Intentions,” 229), literary decadence has provided for me a site to investigate not only the direct potential of those conceptions (the “critical” and the “creative”), but also the myriad potentials that open up when their “relationship” becomes much more troubled and agitated. The second way, however, has to do with style and content. While it might not be controversial to suggest that criticism should always be allowed to amount to, what Louise M. Rosenblatt calls, “aesthetic reading,” as
opposed to the more instrumental “efferent reading” (24-25), my own particular take on that idea might come off as more possibly “decadent”: not only can and—I mean here, of course, certain versions of it—should criticism be “aesthetic,” I find myself much more interested and mesmerized by the specific intensity and presence of that aesthetic pleasure than I usually do in the arguments themselves. I believe that one indirect goal of this dissertation is to show how that opinion can be the case alongside a certain politics operating by way of that aesthetic intensity. Though I try to keep this aesthetic urge to a minimum for the dissertation—it has often proved difficult to keep those critical and stylistic elements of decadence from infecting my scholarship.
Introduction: Before the Stronghold…

In David R. Bunch’s science fiction short story “No Cracks or Sagging,” from a series of short stories situated in his fictional world “Moderan,” the future King of Stronghold #10, who is on his way into Moderan to have his body transformed into steel and machine (only a single “flesh strip” will remain inside the steel shell), runs across a strange scene in the landscape. He sees an array of machines—“Essentially they were huge black cylinders swung spinning between gigantic thighs and calves of metal”—pummeling spots of earth “with the front end of the cylinder,” sometimes “battering each the other’s cylinder almost as much as they pummeled the ground,” while an “overseer for tamping machines watched this ridiculous punching contest for awhile before he went over and drummed each machine on the rump just enough to break up the rhythm of their misdirected jab-jab-jab and send them both packing off twirling their cylinders as though they hadn’t really wanted to use them anyway” (25-26). When the overseer takes the narrator in his “flap-hap airabout scoot” (27) into the sky in order to show him the landscape, the narrator sees the machines, the “jammy-rams,” transforming the “browny-black” earth into “a blur that was gray or grayey-white,” exclaiming: “‘The new ice age!’” (28). The overseer responds:

“Not at all!” he returned. “Or maybe just precisely, if you want to see it so. But this ice age, if you want it so—go ahead, call it that!—is for the species, not against it. You’ll never see this ice age rolling up boulders or creeping along with mammoth bones in its teeth. This ice age is covering up dirt, not just rearranging it. That’s plastic you’re looking at, man! I’m out here as an advance guard for plastic. It’s a friendly deadly-competitive hell-for-plastic devil-take-the-
hindermost race between my jammy-rams and me one side and that creeping gray edge on the other. And we’re gaining!” (28)

The “jammy-rams,” “these big earth fornicators” (30), work to prepare the earth for its immersion in plastic, since, as the overseer maintains, the earth is ruined, and “‘The solution is to cover the pollution’” (27). “‘This is Moderan,’ he said. ‘We’re building New Land here. When these misters detect a soft place in our soil, they rush right over and batter it into submission’” and so they “‘rush right over and stick in the jammy-ram cylinder when they get wind of a hollow place. By hollow place, I mean a piece of the land surface that isn’t as hard as it should be’” (27). Once out of the hospital, after the narrator has been transformed into a man-machine—

“The steel-spliced doctors knew they had made a monster. They were proud of me, their monster, as doctors must always be proud of successes in their field; but they knew that now I was a kind of King [...] no matter how born or made, a King WILL be a King” (41)—he will take his place as the King of Stronghold #10, and spend the rest of eternity battling with other Strongholds for no other reason than the pleasure and entertainment of their many, many wars.

Bunch’s collection of short stories, *Moderan*, published for the first time in 1971, seemed to exist in obscurity until New York Review Books put out a new edition in 2018. Even so, Bunch’s work did find a place in Harlan Ellison’s important 1967 anthology *Dangerous Visions*, and is furthermore said to have left an impact on the cyberpunk genre in the years following. The NYRB Classics edition of *Moderan* includes an introduction by Jeff Vandermeer and a single, critical snippet from Bunch, taken from an interview with *Amazing Stories* in 1965, also repeated on the back cover of his 1993 book of (non-Moderan) short stories, *Bunch!*

I’m not in this business primarily to describe or explain or entertain. I’m here to make the reader think, even if I have to bash his teeth out, break his legs, grind
him up, beat him down, and totally chastise him for the terrible and tinsel and
almost wholly bad world we allow [...] The reader I want is the one who wants the
anguish, who will go up there and get on that big black cross. And that reader will
have, with me, the saving grace of knowing that some awful payment is due...as
all space must look askance at us, all galaxies send star frowns down, a cosmic
leer envelop this small ball that has such great Great GREAT pretenders. (Bunch,
Cover Copy)

The fact that Bunch claims that he is “not in this business” is rather interesting, since his
relationship to the world of fiction, and, indeed, literature, seemed somewhat tumultuous. He not
only worked toward a PhD in English literature (at Washington University in St. Louis, in fact—
Bunch lived most of his life in and around St. Louis), but he also, after transferring, worked
toward his MFA at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop until he dropped out two years later.

It might seem strange to use a 1970s era experimental science fiction writer as an
introduction to a dissertation on literary decadence, but there are reasons why not only his work,
but also this off-and-on literary “training,” make him a startling interpreter of decadence—at
least the version of decadence that I want to examine in this dissertation. Firstly, and most
generally, perhaps, this dissertation is interested in the way literary decadence seems to spread
into 20th century American literature from its specific, literary origins in France in the mid-19th
century and through British literature at the turn of the century. Even in 2008, David Weir
complains that his “present study cannot be said to build on a critical tradition specific to
American decadence,” and yet still hints that “readers of this book will find themselves thinking
of decadence in connection to some truly canonical authors that I do not discuss (such as William
Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald)” (xix). Those being the two main authors I discuss in my later
chapters, I do hope that, even if this is so, my own speculations on decadence might yet give new interpretations—even in that well-trodden path of decadence—to these authors. The dissertation seems to require at least some illusion of the canon in order to be what it is, and these two American writers’ very connection to some sense of decadence is necessary in order to, possibly, go somewhere slightly new (ish). Bunch, so different from Fitzgerald and Faulkner, is connected through that tenuous link of decadence, as are so many other American writers I only wish I could find the space for here. Secondly, Bunch straddles a line that, at first glance, doesn’t seem necessarily bound to the idea of literary decadence: the line that so hesitantly and controversially runs down the middle between the English PhD and the creative writing program—as well as the addition of the most interesting fact that Bunch effectively abandoned both these programs. Not only will this distance-among-programs be important to my final chapter, it also marks the priority of a notion of criticism to this dissertation. In some ways, it is about “criticism” more than it is about “literature” or, better, the “work of art.” Criticism must take priority. I hope to show why. Finally, Bunch’s work specifically concerning Moderan gives the dissertation its endpoint and its terror: as demonstrated above, Moderan is a world where the entire earth is covered in plastic; plastic trees are built in plastic yards; the weather is controlled by a central agency in order to produce artificial seasons matching the faraway details of a misunderstood past. People have become nothing but flesh strips housed in metal machines that, protected forever in fortified strongholds, do nothing but war with each other constantly for the fun of it. Bunch’s stories definitely show a satire, but they show, specifically, a satire of permanence. “The solution is to cover the pollution.” Plastic covers the pollution—it never decays. Bunch’s satirical solution to the decay of the earth is to create a permanent globe—a plastic forever—which only enables humanity’s worst potential—again, and again, and again.
Towards the end of the cycle of stories making up *Moderan*, the narrator himself does make an attempt to escape the eternal world of plastic. In, “The Final Decision,” the narrator complains,

To live forever; to be our true bad selves. How fine it sounded. What a grand plan! But have you ever lain back at the switch panel in your War Room with your fort on the status of Continuous Blast for weeks on end? *Karoom karoom karoom*. How it palls. How it tires. How you begin to ask yourself, this is for what? what purpose, hey? But you pause once—you rest just a little before the general amnesty goes out with the white flags up and you’re dead, your walls flattened, your Stronghold crushed to dust. So what’s to do? Year after year you lie back in your Stronghold and ride with the general plan. They want war, you war. They decide to peace it awhile, you send up your white flag along with the jolly rest. And you smile your teeth at the seasons and let time roll. After all, you have a lot of it—time. In *Moderan*. (220)

He confesses—“Here in this steel-ribbed land, this plastic-coated iron and concrete new-metal place, where we practice strength and speculate on armor, dedicated to the high principle that only hate is reliable and finally true” (221)—that he has had an experience which requires him to find his PURPOSE: “And now I’m faced with it, by my own Decision. I may as well tell you. The greatest in *Moderan* to be the first to crack in *Moderan*? Irony! Irony! Irony! But the years have piled up on my flesh-strips, the honors have come, have come, the blasting has gone on and goes on year after year, the truth of hate in our land goes beautifully, and yet the final thing comes no closer to a settlement. Purpose? PURPOSE! That I would know”; and he reiterates, “By my own hand—and this is MY decision—I shall disassemble myself” (227). In order to
discover his purpose, the narrator has decided to “disassemble” himself and leave his Stronghold—“If I do not come back? If I am trapped out there, held in some stillborn quietness, some hanging immensity of voice, incomprehensible, space-locked stillness of stillness” (227)—and then only return once he discovers that purpose. Bunch here flirts with the possibility of a momentary, affective break in the permanence of the series, as the implicit “flesh strip”—the remainder of humanity in the metal body—seems to ignite that desire for purpose. This moment, furthermore, is the moment of “criticism”—of the chance to break free from the Identical, as Bunch himself makes his readers aware in his own edged critical manifesto: “...even if I have to bash his teeth out, break his legs, grind him up, beat him down”—in short, disassemble them—until that reader “will have, with me, the saving grace of knowing that some awful payment is due” at the expense of the “explanations” and “entertainment” that is decidedly not his business.

But the satire, like the plastic-world it blossoms into, holds fast. The last few sentences of the story, “Since I have not found out PURPOSE completely in the blasting, the Joys, the loves, the hates, the life of Moderan, I’ll seek it across the line. May fortune smile on my venture. Oh yes, for us all!” (227) collides smoothly with the very first sentence of the very next story, “Will-Hung and Waiting,” claiming, singularly: “I never went...” (228). The narrator describes once again the reflection and repeats the major claim from the preceding story: “All the great victories, all the fine honors, all that heavy fact of my great GREAT love—all were finally nothing now, faced with this final hour. I laid it all in dust, and it was dust! Nothing to keep, nothing whatever to keep, Final Decision was a fine decision. But....” (228). In the end, “Final Decision” decapitalizes into the secondary, supplemental, “...fine decision. But...” Because he found, “faced with the most personal personal fact of my own possible stark going down irrevocably to never-coming-back, I longed for a Final War! [...] One more war, one more, to
complete my Final Victory as a Man of Earth. Then I would go, with no man left at my back to betray me, to seek that final condition, Purpose, across the line...” (228). He finishes the shortest of short stories with a Final Confession: “I never went...I vacillated year after year after year, while the seasons turned and turned on Moderan’s great Central Season Control, Drum of the Changes, and ran one into another. I lingered on in the lists as mighty battle-man war after war after war, and so did my contemporaries, pulsating to the battles and the truces in Moderan. Purpose, alas, we might have found it out...” (228-9). Like the earth around the narrator and his contemporaries, his moment of crisis—very specifically set out as the Final Decision and as “MY decision”—(here the words share the Greek root krinein, to separate, to decide)—becomes completely “covered” over in identical repetition that their world’s permanence cements into place. The “critical” becomes frozen in this enforcement of the permanent. All the capitalizations—all the big F Final absolutes—work to cover over and bury the small f “fines”—the thin, fine lines of that krinein and crisis that speaks only of the ephemeral. The irony, of course, is that only the “fine” makes for final, for an end; the “Final” continues forever, repeating each Final War, Final Victory, Final Decision. Bunch’s story cycle then gets at a perspective of decadence from its noticeable absence: the lack of decay connects with the lack of decision, of crisis. Both are covered in plastic and hold fast.

And this is precisely the set of conditions that I want to use in order to describe a vision of decadence in this dissertation. The aspect of decadence I am most interested in is its relation to permanence. Bunch creates with his stories, firstly, a “utopia of permanence”; but this only establishes, on the other end, invisibly, a “dystopia of anti-decadence,” if I can be allowed such a contorted phrase. For this dissertation, “permanence” is interrogated most specifically, of course, in the manner in which literary history, criticism, and literary institutions attempt to make
specific styles, names, movements, or otherwise, “permanent” or monumental—sealed in plastic. I am interested in the ways different works of decadence seem to be undercutting and undermining those particular systems of permanence, or, as we will see in a moment, “technologies of maintenance.” Secondly, and in combination with this aspect, I want to explore the place of criticism in these handful of decadent works. Criticism—and I mean something both more general and more specific than the reference above to literary criticism, as well as elements of that type itself—as demonstrated in the examples from Bunch, play a part in those technologies of maintenance, and, more often, how they come apart. For that reason, “decadence” and “criticism” meet together in a way that often gets overwritten or ignored—because they are both partners with ephemerality, they remain together at some distance from the “monumental” history writ in stone. Though, of course, they do leave their echoes there in the grand halls. The threat, as exemplified in Bunch’s stories, comes when that pressure of the permanent completely cements over the possibility for criticism—and this is the threat that literary decadence seems to be working against. With that in mind, I want to continue this introduction by more narrowly describing both my notion of decadence as well as my notion of criticism in order to give a better framework for the whole of the dissertation. In the end, the play here constantly involves that brutal covering up of the decadently critical, tenuous “fine”-ness, the ephemeral line, with the permanent methodical FINAL—the “fine decision” becomes the FINAL DECISION—and I am interested in the way literary texts and literary history have worked to reinforce what seems like, as Bunch’s narrator mistakes the expanse of the world collapsing into a frozen plastic surface around him, the “new ice age.”
By attempting to focus my dissertation on a concept of decadent criticism, I am hoping to uncover aspects of literary decadence that do not always find the light of day in earlier accounts of the subject. Decadence is a notoriously difficult thing to describe, as almost any study on the topic will inevitably note first and foremost. Thus we have Richard Gilman’s carnivalesque foray into the larger history of the word, only to discover that much of it is for naught: “But this is getting ahead of our argument, as well as of ‘decadence,’ which at the moment calmly awaits the effort to prove that it is not the oblique, mauve- and tangerine-colored, fine-boned, weary, subtly menacing, insidiously destructive, and enervating creature or organism to which so much recognition has been granted—that in fact it is not anything at all” (35). And we have the first sentence of David Weir’s book, Decadence and the Making of Modernism, “Practically everyone who writes about decadence begins with the disclaimer that the word itself is annoyingly resistant to definition” (1). In the fading light of poststructuralism, of course, that “resistance to definition” might be more or less “annoying,” depending on one’s theoretical persuasion, but it is, I think, valuable to keep a strong sense of that “resistance to definition” as more and more scholarship becomes interested in literary decadence. In fact, I think that resistance to definition reflects a fundamental aspect of decadence itself—remembering always, of course, that we count so many words as “resistant to definition,” including such placeholders as “postmodern” and “modern” and, maybe, “modernism”—but that maybe decadence provides a kind of “ruling origin” of that resistance, or maybe, better, the very lack of a “ruling origin”—a rough translation for the Greek word, arche—thus making it an anarche—and thus, again, making it something of a sibling (or even parent) to deconstruction or a philosophy of difference. If it is the non-ruling
non-origin of that resistance to definition, then it moreover seems simply: the locale where
definition cannot take shape, or cannot keep permanent shape. It’s more about the “movement,”
the change—maybe even, affectively speaking, the intensity—than it is about the definition. This
is where Weir ultimately lands, when he claims that “The time of decadence is a time of
transition” (20). In a similar way, instead of attempting to define decadence myself, I intend on
using it as a movement—adjectively, “precipitated forward”—attached often to the word
criticism as an orientation of movement, in order to make something new out of the two, bound
up that way together, or, better yet, turning in each other’s orbit. “Decadence,” generally, for this
dissertation, is the direction criticism goes.

Even so, even without that kind of easy definition, even in partnership with criticism, it
still must signify. Many works of literary history and criticism have focused on the notion of a
“decadent style.” For example, John R. Reed’s study Decadent Style traces the development of
that style through various “decadent” works. Even so, his own descriptions often verge on the
abstract: “The elaborate and heady manner of Decadent art resembles a Beardsley drawing:
intricately composed of grotesque figures and artificial designs abstracted from nature but, when
examined carefully, often focusing upon a void of white or black—all of experience reduced to
design, but a design that is, in itself, compelling” (11). The fact that this description falls back on
reference—“Decadent art resembles a Beardsley drawing”—is telling, and indicative. The
“decadent style,” when described, becomes somewhat tautological; and in the manner in which
poet Phyllis Webb claims, “The proper response to a poem is another poem” (405), the only
proper response to “decadence” may, in fact, be more “decadence.” As Alex Murray suggests,
“Ultimately Decadent style can only be grasped through close reading, and by reading the
relationship between context and form closely.” He continues: “A taxonomy of stylistic features
threatens to impose a Decadent formalism, reducing Decadence to abstract, formal exercise” (6). In effect, this idea that “Decadent style can only be grasped through close reading” reinforces its own singularity, its own particularity: the style itself must unravel through more style, “another” reading. Once again, “decadence” and “criticism” seem to be working together. Murray further points out the “protestant” nature of historical decadence: “That protest was multifarious, attacking institutions and values as various as: popular journalism; sexual conservatism; ‘high Victorian’ literary forms [...] middle class thrift; nationalism; new media forms; provincialism” (8). Decadence becomes something like a particular, uncategorizable style, always “protesting,” that can only be grasped or described through a close reading—through a new elaboration of style, another “decadence.”

As an “ungraspable protest,” decadence again seems to reflect a movement, or a dynamic. This is more in line with Weir’s notion that “The time of decadence is a time of transition” (20); he further elaborates on this point by describing how “the traditional opposition of decadence to progress and barbarism does not lead to an identity of the concepts; rather, that opposition points to a commonality of meaning that helps to define decadence as a transition to modernism” (13). Specifically, decadence represents that “movement” to modernism. Vincent Sherry’s Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence investigates this “movement”—less a transition, more a secreted imaginary—with even more precision and clarity, revealing a literary history wherein decades of criticism have managed to overwrite and therefore bury any exposure of decadence as a presence of modernism beneath an elaboration of the more friendly, less disturbing, Symbolism. Sherry’s study reveals how intently decadence is connected to a certain complicated unfolding and refolding of critical time, playing out in relation to the temporal index of “modernism”: “‘Modernism,’ accordingly, suggests an acute awareness of a temporal present, all
in all, an empowering awareness of living in a Now distinctly from a Then. This brink-instant sensibility is associated understandably but loosely with the ever-accelerating conditions of change in the material and social circumstances of urban modernity” (32). “Decadence,” on the other hand, which “speaks for long submerged but always growing apprehensions about the value of novelty and progress and [...] futurity in world-cultural and world-historical prospects” (30), becomes easy to effectively smooth out of the texture of that literary history when it impedes on the “brink-instant sensibility” of the Now which—in my reading of these texts at least, and at the core of this dissertation—implies a certain privileging of permanence even in its instantaneousness. The critical removal in 20th century literary history of decadence’s style and history in modernism implies not only a disregard for the cultural issues at stake with an image of decadence, but also moreover the critical disregard of an imaginary that does not take progress or the permanence of monuments—or, indeed, the very present moment as monument—to be its constituent value and substance. This imaginary of the afterward, an “experience of historical time in a sort of posterior tense” (29) more often recognizes ruins in place of the monument.

In this dissertation, it will be that relationship with permanence that describes the “movement” of decadence; both as a protest (a protest, specifically, against permanence), and as a style that can only be grasped through close reading. Though I will discuss it more in Chapter 3, I am often using Friedrich Nietzsche’s understanding of “monumental history,” from his three “uses” of history in his early essay “On the Utility and Liability of History for Life” as a theoretical grounding for an idea of how permanence is working here. For Nietzsche, the “monumental” is a form of history that only acknowledges or cares about the most important moments—the “great” artists and people—as the events and moments worth remembering and imitating. Though the appeal of thinking this way is entirely motivational (for Nietzsche, this is
for other “great” artists), the problem with it is that it entirely misses the singular and specific
details and context that allowed for its greatness in the first place. “It will,” he writes, “continue
to approach, generalize and ultimately identify nonidentical things, it will continue to diminish
the differences between motives and causes in order to present, to the detriment of the cause, the
effectus as monumental—that is, as exemplary and worthy of emulation” (99). All the great
moments will become reduced to an essential Same that the future will attempt to imitate—
solely, without context—again and again. Literary decadence, then, is the “movement” that
offers to weaken the effects of the monument—the mechanisms and technologies that work to
make only specific elements permanent—in order to create the critical aperture—an ephemeral
eye-blink—that allows the intensity of experience (of the text, of existence). If we step away
from literary history for a moment, some examples of understandings of decadence and decay
and the monument will hopefully make this clearer.

Ghassan Hage, editor of a collection of essays entitled Decay, offers his assessment of the
presence of decay in anthropology and social theory in the introduction to that work. Claiming
“that analytical, and particularly ethnographically oriented, works showing an interest in the
differential modes of decay traversing the entities that make up the social world are rare” (8),
Hage argues that, for his field and others, “Given the pervasiveness of the differential
experiences of organic, physiological, physical, organizational, moral, and social decay in
everyday life, it has attracted relatively little explicit social scientific attention” (7), eventually
concluding, “In fact, the absence of a preoccupation with questions of decay is so systematic that
one begins to suspect that mechanisms of repression, avoidance, and displacement might be at
work there” (8). With this in mind, it seems no less true that literary theory could use a more
elaborate understanding of decay—apart from even the history of literary decadence—in its
handling of literature. By this I don’t mean only the decay of physical objects (though I do mean this, to some degree), or even of the systematic decay Hage also mentions in his introduction, but rather the attempt to envision the history of literary texts (including the discourse and the “author function”) as susceptible to their own, specific diversity of decadences, and the ways in which these various decays can either be maintained or not; as Hage writes, “Some things decay quicker and more extensively than others, some processes of decay are welcome and some are resisted, and we need to know the many internal and external factors that shape such differences” (6). He further notes: “If decay is the natural order and direction of things, what has always stopped it, or at least slowed it down from the outside, are structures, institutions, assemblages, and forms of labor whose function is maintenance. As such, just as there are external and internal factors that induce, facilitate, and accelerate decay (what are termed endo- and exo-decay), there are internal and external factors that slow it down” (11). In applying this thinking to literary study, many questions come to mind: What are the technologies of maintenance for literary history? What is the state of literature that is being maintained? What technologies of maintenance should we keep? What elements of literary study or history should be left to decay, and why? This dissertation will suggest that the subject “literary decadence” will help to field some of these questions about “actual” (if I can call it that) “literary decay.” Genre, for example, is a complex form of maintenance. Another technology is the canon—left behind, in pieces, in many ways; bolstered, however, in others (like this dissertation and dissertations in general). The general question of this dissertation deals with elements like those. The specific direction will be the ways in which works associated with literary decadence work to undermine specific literary “technologies of maintenance” towards the horizon of ephemerality and intensity, at the cost of the permanent.
Literary decadence, in my view, works against that monumental understanding of history. It follows the logic of anthropologist James C. Scott, who notes in his *The Art of Not Being Governed*, in terms of writing opposed to orality, that, “The key disadvantage of monuments and written texts is precisely their relative permanence. Contingent though they are, they become, once erected or written down, a sort of social fossil that can be ‘dug up’ at any time, unchanged. Any written text makes a certain kind of orthodoxy possible” (227). This logic is what gives decadence its politics—which are anarchistic—and establishes the use it wants to make of a specific kind of criticism. I will spend much more time on a notion of criticism in Chapter 1, but I would like to note a few important ideas here, since criticism is so vital to this dissertation.

Firstly, I find Joseph North’s understanding of our contemporary separation of “scholarship” and “criticism”—and the rise to power of scholarship—to be extremely helpful; in fact, North’s story of how cultural analysis/scholarship has affected the “associated demise of ‘criticism’” (Introduction) and effectively replaced criticism reflects Sherry’s story behind literary decadence. Though we continually use the word “criticism,” North shows how we have, in fact, turned primarily to scholarship, letting criticism “decay” with the conservative movements that—the department seems to maintain, though North disagrees—enabled it. His charge to retrieve “criticism” and aesthetics for practical and political use make for a direct influence on this dissertation. However, criticism, in this dissertation, goes beyond his definition of the word as a “programmatic commitment to using works of literature for the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility, with the goal of more general cultural and political change” (Introduction), though it does include that.

The fact that “scholarship,” as North defines it—he means very specifically the use of literature in cultural and historical analysis (Introduction)—does not appear as a prominent
method in this dissertation is not meant in any way to lessen its importance and impact in literary studies. In fact, scholarship has done its work so well that it has managed to preclude a more nuanced inspection of criticism, according to North (Introduction). Practices stemming from New Historicism, Feminism, and Postcolonialist studies have, in my view, effected one important type of “literary decay” by working to erode any sense of a singular canon and to help further dismantle the notion of an “autotelic” work of art, separate from politics and history. Working to, instead, establish various canons that cover voices and ideas otherwise unheard or forgotten, it comes as no surprise that Nietzsche’s sense of a “monumental history”—and its critique—becomes of primary importance to Michel Foucault in his essay on the German philosopher (“Nietzsche,” 86): it is a critique that solidly founds New Historicism. The different perspective this dissertation offers is not attempting to supplant or challenge those important practices and the works afforded by them. Rather, I am more interested in how the monumental nevertheless manages to mantle fragments of its logic across these new explorations, continuing to spider-web throughout them, even while important aspects of that same monumental are being, rightfully, challenged and brought down. I think this complication can be explored by making a further distinction between “scholarship” and “criticism” and by carefully distinguishing between the different aspects or modes of the monumental. This dissertation, from its beginning to its end, asserts that “criticism” is a phenomenon bound in various ways to Brian Massumi’s concept of embodied intensity or affect. As he describes it in Parables of the Virtual:

Intensity is incipience, incipient action and expression. Intensity is not only incipience. It is also the beginning of a selection: the incipience of mutually exclusive pathways of action and expression, all but one of which will be inhibited, prevented from actualizing themselves completely. The crowd of
pretenders to actualization tend toward completion in a new selective context.

(30)

Criticism is that “crisis” of selection, as “mutually exclusive pathways of action and expression” all press and crowd towards being selected, or activating. Criticism, for this dissertation, suggests both the “incipient” choices of the writer(s) making selections for a text, as well as the broader, more overtly politicized and categorized selections made by later critics and readers of a text. It furthermore includes both the “embodied” and therefore only felt form of that crisis—what interests Massumi here—as well as the more registered and logistical reaction that comes in response alongside or after that initial emergence. Finally, and most importantly for the point I want to make here, criticism also includes a prioritization of the “pathways of action and expression” that fail to activate—the elements and choices that are specifically not selected: the remainder. If we so often privilege the “artform” as the activated or selected “form” emerging from the field of potential, then the work of this dissertation is to shift focus to that field of potential itself, along with its residue and its remainder, in order to explore a concept of “criticism” that occurs at every stage of the “creation” of a literary text. In this way, I believe that criticism is directly connected to Sherry’s notion exploring how the sensibility of decadence is one always concerned, stylistically and substantially, with a “lost time” or “aftermath”: criticism marks the very intensity of that lost time and that aftermath in its embodied and “creative” form. It consistently becomes wrapped up with it, including its sense of “becoming secondary” and the state of being unoriginal.

Scholarship—including its important focus on multiple canons and bringing new or unheard authors to bear on literary studies—is primarily oriented towards discovering new fields of potential and on crystalizing important new “selections” within those fields. It works to gather
important data, otherwise overlooked or ignored, and then to interpret that data into the structure of a literary studies that has, up to that point, excluded it. Though incredibly important in the work that it does, it still contains a sense of the “monumental” in that way: it manages to add so many more scratches alongside the “canonical” scratches that have hitherto reigned supreme—always alone and stony—across the face of the monument that still stands strong. That aspect of the monumental—the fact that only a relatively few “great” works by mostly white men dot the literary landscape and its history—has rightfully been challenged and, I think, dealt with (with more work always, of course, necessary, and perpetually on the way). However, a further aspect of the monumental remains its focus on permanence: not merely the who of the monument, but its intent to last forever. It is that secondary logic of the monumental that I am interested in with this dissertation. Literary decadence involves the aspect of criticism that values the “graveyard” of the unselected over the primacy of the selected; in that way, it continually puts at risk the aspects of the selected that we have otherwise named as necessary and permanent: its values, its worth, its history, its place. It does this as it works to erode the logic and various functions attempting to override and erase that “field of unselected potential” in order to establish the selected as permanent. That incipient field of criticism so often gets “covered in plastic” during the narrative of how a work of art “becomes,” as well as the further “covering in plastic” that occurs during scholarship, and I believe that, by focusing on criticism instead of scholarship, I can show how criticism is working against permanence at every stage of the literary text: from its creation, to its judgment, to its historical and literary place, to its possible recreations and transformations.

In that way, criticism here represents the elements of literary history and understanding (and otherwise) that resist or protest the aforementioned “technologies of maintenance.” I do
realize that those same technologies are in fact built and established in works and genres that we call collectively, criticism, but I think that is a mis-used label, and one aspect of a study of “literary decay” that might prove useful to more sharply, minutely describe. There is definitely the “how to write” that is a statement, prescriptive; but there is also the “how to write?” that remains a question—up to and beyond the writing of the thing itself. This means the complex of critical intensity and krinein mentioned above. I am referring to what may be called, moreover, a “technology of aperture”: an opening into a more “chaotic” disorder, which yet reveals potentials and intensities on all levels. This happens at the biological level of the human body, described by affect theory—Massumi’s description of intensity above—and at the larger, political level of the social body: this is how Murray Bookchin describes those anarcho-communists, who “seek to achieve the effectiveness imputed to centralism by means of voluntarism and insight, not by establishing a hierarchical, centralized structure” and who “vigorously oppose the establishment of an organizational structure that becomes an end in itself, of committees that linger on after their practical tasks have been completed, of a ‘leadership’ that reduces the ‘revolutionary’ to a mindless robot” (139). Bookchin notes that “Anarcho-communists seek to preserve and extend the anarchic phase that opens all the great social revolutions” (139). The idea of “preserving” that phase demonstrates its temporary nature—which, consequently, builds into its main weakness as it transforms into the “establishment of an organizational structure that becomes an end in itself”—an act that eventually, according to Bookchin, monumentalizes that ephemeral opening. If only we could extend that temporary opening and hold off its eventual monumentalizing, he is saying, we could have the kind of anarchist community that we deserve.

I will suggest that his is the same as the “opening” of criticism—only at the level of the page, of the text in front of us, both the blank page of the writer, and the textured page of the
reader. Technologies of maintenance work to establish those organizational structures that become ends in themselves. But the opening of that criticism is ephemeral and doesn’t seem to last. The theory behind this dissertation claims that decadent criticism is a response to the loss of that aperture and an attempt to “extend the anarchic phase” that opens up interpretation between reader, writer, and text. It uses the more abstract idea of criticism that I am shaping here, but it is also interested in the different, harder, more encrusted forms of criticism that have been left over in various ways: the former showing what Oscar Wilde calls “the critical spirit” (“Intentions,” 222) and the latter signifying that practice which “deals with art primarily in its concrete manifestations” (“Intentions,” 225). In fact, this is precisely where my notion of “decadent criticism” conflicts with North’s attempt to find a new, orderly paradigm of criticism. When he complains that Isobel Armstrong’s The Radical Aesthetic (2000), while otherwise showing such underrated potential, remains too eclectic, continually “casting about for alternatives” with its “embarrassment of riches,” and, furthermore, begins “to take us up each path a short way, only to turn back and try another, and then another, and another” (ch. 4), he loses sense—in my mind—of what makes criticism, criticism. He critiques, in the same manner, Eve Sedgwick’s otherwise useful approach in her influential essay, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” as being too limited in its possibilities: “[O]ne wants to know whether it might be possible to do more than simply return to the fertile mulch of premethodological practice: one wants to know how to set about growing a new, more positive methodology at least as strong and various as the last” (ch. 4). This dissertation will assert that criticism requires a constant supply of, not only Sedgwick’s “premethodological” mulch, but also Armstrong’s confusing errancy of pathways; and that
decadent criticism, in particular, works out its anarchic politics in the constantly confused and temporary networks composed out of these critical truths.

In the same way, decadent criticism makes use of the confusion emerging when “how to write” overlaps with “how to write?” We will see, for example, in Chapter 1, how it uses critical analysis within the literary text itself—in fact, how it uses that inclusion of criticism in order to burst the edges of the work of art. In Chapter 2, decadent criticism uses criticism in order to dismantle generic interpretations and to expose the way literary taste is used to monumentalize arbitrary arguments. Finally, Chapter 3 shows how decadent criticism works within a difficult literary style in order to unravel the technologies of maintenance that allow only a certain few to be artists and to produce themselves by way of art. This shows just how political decadence can be, and I think this gets missed often in reports of literary decadence. Wilde’s anarchist utopia in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”—“The form of government that is most suitable to the artist is no government at all. Authority over him and his art is ridiculous” (153)—configures a society wherein everybody almost necessarily must be an artist: “Art is the most intense mode of Individualism that the world has known. I am inclined to say that it is the only real mode of Individualism that the world has known” (142) and “Art is Individualism, and Individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force” (144). His dream of a world where machines do all the labor (of course, not an uncommon one at the time) specifically allows every human to become an Individual through Art. Art would at some point disappear, because all people would be doing it. We know that world is a fantasy, of course, since automation has affected society in a very different way. But I am still interested in the other side of that fantasy: How have the technologies of maintenance we employ in terms of writing and literature also worked to keep
every human from being the kind of Individual Artist that Wilde imagined? What happens if we start there, instead?

Chapter Summaries

That being said, I will also be quite interested in how those technologies of maintenance have worked to separate the “creative” from the “critical.” Part of the monumentalizing of the literary “work of art” requires that it sift the critical—the secondary, the ephemeral—away from the creative form. This notion will run through the first chapter to the last—in the first chapter, I hope to show how decadent criticism attempts to make use of this separation for its own purposes. Inserting the “critical” as critical into the “creative,” it therefore hopes to weaken that particular technology of maintenance. In the same way, in Chapter 3, I will simply migrate this topic to its larger arena—the distinction between the Literary Studies Doctorate (critical) and the Creative Writing Program (creative) in the university as the 20th century develops. Decadent criticism claims no distinction between the two—and there are, of course, many incredible works that operate in that same manner (many come with the more decadent “poststructuralist” era)—but it will happily utilize criticism against the monumentalizing force of the creative.

In Chapter 1, I am most interested in exploring this concept of decadent criticism through examples and, furthermore, through comparison with criticism that attempts the opposite. By examining the conversational style of Wilde’s criticism, I hope to pinpoint an idea of criticism that seemed to fade throughout the 20th century, as literary criticism began its more objective, “professional” project. “Conversation” will indeed be the framework for this decadent criticism, since, as a “technology of aperture,” it will leave that critical opening that threatens the stability of any permanent critical method. Specifically, this criticism works by not only referring to
literature, it furthermore “infects” the literature itself—establishing itself as the primary component of the work of art. Since this dissertation is moreover focused on the conceptual separation between “creation” and “critical,” decadent criticism marks that “backward” movement, marks the traces of the critical within the creative text. And since the critical means the secondary and the ephemeral, that critical production within the creative text works to corrupt its more “permanent” or “making-permanent” attributes, hollowing out those monumental strata in order to save space for a potential that always must carry along its own ephemerality. This chapter explores that relationship of criticism to “secondariness,” even while examining the ways in which the critical *comes before* the creative.

After briefly looking at some formulations that criticism takes for T. S. Eliot and the later New Critics, I want to shift perspective to how that decadent criticism “comes first” in different guises of literature. First, I will look at Edgar Allan Poe’s criticism and poetry, and attempt to show how Poe himself recognized the place of criticism in his creative work—for him, I will attest, any effect of a “Poetics of Composition” will always necessitate, beforehand, a “Philosophy of Decomposition.” He fully comprehends that his finished poetry is only half the page; there remain traces of his critical understanding invisibly coupled throughout. For him, the “critical caesura” breaks the rhythm of the poetical and leaves its mark of criticism there. From there, I notice similar aspects in the work of supernatural horror writer Arthur Machen. Machen’s own struggle to “make it new” included the insertion of his critical understanding directly into his short story, “The White People.” The goal of this chapter, in the end, is to describe a type of criticism—decadent criticism—that works in a way different from our conventional notions of criticism. Instead of separating the “creative” or the “work of art” out from its context by, inversely, straightening and making brittle those context from the outside, “decadent criticism”
first and foremost claims that the critical comes beforehand—and the “work of art” can just as readily be seen as context to that critical movement. The “work of art,” then, is less permanent than conventional criticism makes it out to be.

With Chapter 2, I want to shift from the description of a decadent criticism to a more specific account of how that criticism works against various “technologies of maintenance.” Here, I will focus on the first novel of F. Scott Fitzgerald, This Side of Paradise, and attempt to show, among other things, that the novel does more than just show the amateurish first attempt of a precocious talent. That, in fact, the novel works forward—progressively, as it were—to theorize a critical sense of “distaste” which scrambles the framework of arguments that critics will later make against the novel. This chapter will speculate primarily on the way literary tastes formulate arguments, and specifically how those tastes are constellated into place—absolutely—before they can truly be experienced. “Distaste,” then, being different from a simple literary “dislike,” describes another “critical aperture,” an opening right at the cusp of experiencing a literary—or otherwise—“taste,” a moment that either stays open—“decadently,” indulgently, allowing for expanding potential—or closes quickly down under the order of the sovereignty of the “Invisible King.” The “Invisible King” appears in Fitzgerald’s novel, momentarily; but I will use this figure to form connecting tissue with H. G. Wells’ theocratic utopia, God the Invisible King, as well as with Robert W. Chambers’ supernatural horror story, “The Yellow Sign.” Ultimately, this horror of a figure will represent the way in which absolute sovereignty can so easily be maintained through a constellation of pre-formed “tastes” and the erasure of that moment of “distaste”—that hesitant, experiential caesura of “distaste.” Where distaste would short-circuit the connection between tastes and the absolute command, its erasure allows maintenance of the form of that command and lends it permanence, cementing both that form
itself and the array of literary tastes that enable it. Wells’ *God the Invisible King* demonstrates this process vividly in the manner in which it establishes its theocracy, and Fitzgerald’s novel reflects upon those attempts that Wells’ treatise so strangely makes.

Chambers’ horror story, however, does something slightly different: instead of giving credence to this so-called “Invisible King,” Chambers’ story demonstrates how a condition of criticism can—while inherently remaining self-destructive and terrifying in its own way—expose the outline and shape of the King and of the absolute command he gives. Chambers does this through the criticism of genre—specifically through the decay and collapse of a typical “romance” scene in which the edges of criticism pull away at the genre’s framework. Here, that dangerous, expanding moment of a literary “distaste” becomes the same as “criticism” itself; criticism marks the repulsion within the literary form or genre that will eventually destabilize its pre-formed conditions and leave it open to the ephemerality of decadent change. In this way, we return to the notion of a “decadent criticism” from Chapter 1. From this point on, the chapter will focus on how Fitzgerald’s first novel exposes this same relationship: several generic, formulaic scenes in *This Side of Paradise* also, simultaneously, contain that moment of “critical distaste” that threatens the stability and permanence of the whole, of the “Invisible King’s” dictate, and instead offer a revision of decadent criticism that works to undo the permanence of the “technologies of maintenance” that strive to maintain the work of art. The primary scene from the novel doing this is Amory’s brief relationship to Eleanor; the highly “romanticized” section of the novel is the precise place where decadent criticism signals a withdrawal of genre’s royal imperative and instead reveals the subtle horror of the ephemeral—of the passing—of that brief moment of literary “distaste.”
Finally, Chapter 3 will shift this discussion of literary taste from these individuals to the institutions that attempt, more than any other “technology of maintenance,” to make these tastes and these prescriptions permanent. The primary institution here is the 20th century university, and, even more specifically, I will be interested in the creative writing program established with the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in 1936. I will use Mark McGurl’s important history of the program, *The Program Era*, to briefly describe how the program, historically and conceptually, developed its own particular style based on a series of literary prescriptions: “show don’t tell,” “find your voice,” “write what you know.” Furthermore, I will be interested in the way that this particular style reinforces the efficient production of what Michel Foucault calls the “author function”; while maintaining the stylistic divergence of so many skilled writers of the program, of course, I am moreover interested in the ways that these prescriptions and this production work, abstractly, and in spite of that diversity. From this vantage point, I plan to do a close reading of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, a novel published in the same year as the establishment of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Faulkner’s novel provides a particular style (or even, possibly, the lack of a style) that seems deviant from every prescription bound up in what will eventually be famously that programmatic style. Already, from the same “beginning” in 1936, Faulkner’s work seems to indicate a potential forking of the road for literary production; not only in terms of the production of style, but moreover, and more importantly, in terms of what the “work of art” is, the relationship of literature to the style that composes it, and the very function of the author.

I will do this through the differentiation of the concepts of “monumental art”—touched on in this introduction—and the “grave style.” Whereas the program has set in motion a style of literary production that focuses on the “monumentalizing” of both the art form and the name of the author, Faulkner’s novel promotes a very different end point by utilizing this “grave style,”
which not only dismantles the notion of taste in style, connected with Fitzgerald from the previous chapter, but also the notions of the author and the work of art. The “monumental” attempts to extract a form and an author from the context surrounding them and lift it up; the “grave” style, on the other hand, attempts to do the opposite. In the course of the argument, I will make use of Peter Brooks’ important critical analysis of Absalom, founded, as it is, on a Freudian understanding of narrative. Brooks continues to reinforce the powerful importance of narrative even though the novel actively, and just as powerfully, seems to resist that specific form of control; he does this, partly, by attempting to remove and extract Quentin from the complex and conversational chaos of the novel. In the same way as the creative writing program, Brooks attempts to “monumentalize” the story and the authorship of Quentin. However, I believe that Faulkner’s use of the “grave” style actually signifies the opposite: Quentin is not extracted from anything at all; instead, his story and his “self” likewise dissolve into the matter of the text. Instead of the “conventional” critical interpretation, then, Faulkner’s style offers itself as a “decadent criticism,” a more ephemeral, “fine” flux of changes that serve to criticize the “technologies of maintenance” that work to make certain literary mechanisms eternal.
Chapter 1: Decadent Criticism and the Critical Caesura

Decadence—as Richard Gilman very studiously makes clear in his Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet—is hard to define: “Its origins buried under successive drifts of culture, its resonances somehow greatly out of keeping with its putative formal tasks, it recommends itself to us now, or forces itself upon our attention, like some old and intricately specialized object of vaguely exotic use” (24). Even with his attempt to outline its definition, “decadence” becomes an “out-of-time” and vaguely specialized object of unknown use. It is useless in just about every way—even “out of keeping with its putative formal tasks.” Further, “buried under successive drifts of culture,” decadence resembles one of its favorite imaginaries: a corpse, a dead thing rotting under culture’s heavy weight. He continues: “Part of the language and even increasing its narrow sway, [decadence] could, if it would, perhaps teach us something about language by its strange survival and resistance to clear meaning” (24-5). Now the concept seems somehow alive, personified—“it could, if it would...” and “its strange survival”—as it resists clarity itself, its “resistance to clear meaning.” Both dead and alive—or maybe even by way of some new inorganic alchemy, some dimly humming-breathing electric earth—“decadence” seems perfectly content to exist as is—that is, both alive and dead, under the earth and objectified by the earth. It seems that we—its observers and interpreters, like Gilman—are more anxious about its state of being, its lack of clarity and its inherent vagueness. Rather than attempting to give another definition to that vagueness, I am more interested in the reverse vibration and friction that it seems to be de-generating—that un-opening of dead-alive intensity—by way of the multitude of “lacks” Gilman notes in his own understanding: its ecstatic
relationship to time, its confusion of use value and touch, its meaning and value make for unclear inscriptions along a faulty wall in some unknown, unseen, cryptic nowhere.

There are other things to do with the word, other ways to handle it. Instead of a lack, for example, what does decadence produce? Etymologically, the word “produces” a sense of “falling away”; we seem more and more comfortable with this reading, despite its disorientation and vertigo. But the word produces, also, a further etymology that seems more bound to rhythm: if we read it instead as a de-cadencing, then the “cadence” of cadencing (also rooted in cadere)—that rhythm of fall and the fall’s restoration—also becomes unhinged and unlocked.

What is a de-cadence in terms of rhythm? What rhythms matter? This chapter is primarily interested in the way decadence is “outside” poetic rhythms in the same way Gilman describes it as outside time and use. In fact—all these terms seem networked: the time of rhythm; the rhythm of use. De-cadence falls outside these containers and motions—or even, maybe, somewhere inside them. But if literary decadence does locate itself somewhere outside rhythm—in the senses of use or time—then it seems to be connected with the specific form of understanding literature that also seems to appear itself outside (in the same possible senses of use or time) literature: criticism. In this way, and for the entirety of this dissertation, “decadence” and “criticism” will be so intertwined that I will simply use the phrase: decadent criticism. This idea of decadent criticism makes use of that irregularity in rhythm to propose a larger caesura socially, culturally—potentially ontologically. Since, of course, there are many different ways to define and use literary criticism, this chapter will attempt to describe what “decadent criticism” specifically is, how it suggests the possibility that criticism comes before creation, and how it relates moreover to the literature it will inherently inhabit.
If decadence—in its most abstract understanding—always concerns a relationship with time, as I claimed in the larger introduction, then “decadent criticism” also reflects that relationship: it means the play or appearance of the critical with that peculiar effect of deteriorating those “technologies of maintenance” which work in perpetuity to maintain certain mechanisms that no longer reflect what they always intended on maintaining. This criticism reveals the “automatons” of decadence as signals and references—especially in their uncanniness and their hectic malfunctions—to those technologies of maintenance. With that in mind, I want to start with a close reading of Ambrose Bierce’s short story “Moxon’s Master,” about an inventor and his creation; this leads to a notion of the critical-creative “conversational”—in opposition to a more “conservational” criticism that attempts to distance the two concepts—in the works of Oscar Wilde, Edgar Allan Poe, and Arthur Machen. That conversational approach to writing is more willing and able to produce decadent criticism—allowing for the intensity which corrupts the text, staining it with the “dead” critical notions that give vibrant life to creative production. My intention to start with a close reading moreover marks a fundamental aspect of this dissertation. One earlier and often repeated description of decadence, originally described by Désiré Nisard, made famous by Paul Bourget and Friedrich Nietzsche, is helpfully explained by Matei Calinescu as “a ‘decadent style’ of art [which] places such emphasis on detail that the normal relationship of a work’s parts to its whole is destroyed, the work disintegrating into a multitude of overwrought fragments” (158). And if, for fiction, the decadent style, simplified, means the privilege of the sentence over the paragraph, and the paragraph over the page—then the “decadent” style for criticism must mean something similar: the smallest and most individual “part” of criticism, the close reading—also, often enough these days, the most supplemental and self-indulgent (if not attached to a greater theoretical “whole”)—must find its
own privilege, in true decadent fashion, over the argument. With that in mind, I have attempted to let the close readings of these works dictate their own arguments and broken narratives—and stitched any remaining argument out of those delicious scraps.

Ambrose Bierce’s short story, “Moxon’s Master”—which begins mid-conversation: “Are you serious?” (429)—concerns a narrator, skeptical and conservative, and his brief master Moxon (we’ll get to Moxon’s master in a moment), who is interested in the “life” or “livingness” of machines. Or, if not interest, per se, the “inventor and constructor of machines,” Moxon, clearly demonstrates anxiety on the subject: “Life,” he says, quoting Herbert Spencer’s definition, “is a definite combination of heterogeneous changes, both simultaneous and successive, in correspondence with external existences and sequences”; he adds to this his extension: “What I want you to observe is that in Herbert Spencer’s definition of ‘life’ the activity is included—there is nothing in the definition that is not applicable to it” (432). During their conversation, interrupting it from Moxon’s “‘machine shop,’ which no one but himself was permitted to enter,” comes a “singular thumping sound, as of some one pounding upon a table with an open hand” (431). The hand belongs to a chess-playing machine—the conventional enfez-ed chess puppet that so entranced Poe—which will eventually bristle irregularly into life and kill a horrified Moxon (during a chess game, no less; the most brutal case of chess-rage perhaps ever); but for the harmless moment, when the narrator asks, “Moxon, whom have you in there?”, Moxon only answers:

“Nobody; the incident that you have in mind was caused by my folly in leaving a machine in action with nothing to act upon, while I undertook the interminable task of enlightening your understanding. Do you happen to know that Consciousness is the creature of Rhythm?” (433).
That initial empty space, that “nobody,” is here all twisted up with—or, more dangerously, holding open, intact—those “heterogeneous changes” of life. Moxon, of course, hides this irregularity; it is concealed in the machine workshop, ultimately in the play of the “game.” The narrator, having left in frustration (“Oh bother them both!” (433)), ultimately nevertheless finds himself caught in a reversal, or a flood of reversals, that eventually turn him and lead him back to Moxon, who, through that final turn of phrase, has become the narrator’s “master.” The speculative “Consciousness is the creature of Rhythm” did the trick; it found the narrator in the dark, held him in thrall, enlightened him, spirited him away: “Bald and terse as the statement was, I now found it infinitely alluring. At each recurrence it broadened in meaning and deepened in suggestion” (434). He turns multiple times—not only does he literally revert his direction (back to Moxon), he stumbles into a full conversion:

That faith was then new to me, and all Moxon’s expounding had failed to make me a convert; but now it seemed as if a great light shone about me, like that which fell upon Saul of Tarsus; and out there in the storm and darkness and solitude I experienced what Lewes calls “the endless variety and excitement of philosophic thought.” I exulted in a new sense of knowledge, a new pride of reason. My feet seemed hardly to touch the earth; it was as if I were uplifted and borne through the air by invisible wings. (434)

What I want you to observe is: he’s no longer conservative; now he’s legitimately in the conversation. “Consciousness is the creature of Rhythm” flickers in his brain like a fairy-voice, like the uncanny. It settles with him as a spell, a pleasing, clarifying turn of criticism (“the endless variety and excitement of philosophic thought”), quietly unracheting him from his place.

He continues down this series or stairway of reversing, versing, conversation:
Yielding to an impulse to seek further light from him whom I now recognized as my master and guide, I had unconsciously turned about, and almost before I was aware of having done so found myself again at Moxon’s door. I was drenched with rain, but felt no discomfort. Unable in my excitement to find the doorbell I instinctively tried the knob. It turned and, entering, I mounted the stairs to the room that I had so recently left. (434, my italics) 

Some mechanism, some rhythm, has carried him back to his initial conversation. Even the sentences themselves bend, yielding, with the turns (and the rhymes): Yielding to an impulse /
To seek further light / From him whom I now recognized / As my master and guide. / And almost before / I was aware of having done so / Found myself again / At Moxon’s door. Bierce emphasizes the rhythm and not the consciousness; it takes one final turn to rot out philosophy’s “invisible wings” and effect a fall into awareness: “But in my spiritual exaltation, discretion and civility were alike forgotten and I opened the door [there’s the turn]. What I saw took all philosophical speculation out of me in short order” (434). Consciousness is the creature of Rhythm. And let me emphasize the “creaturely” aspect of the creature here: I mean Dr. Frankenstein’s “creature,” the sutured abomination; I mean the monsterish, the horrible, the horribly ecstatic. Whatever it may be, one may see it in Moxon’s face as he, in his turn, faces his chess-machine opponent: “His face was ghastly white, and his eyes glittered like diamonds.”

“Of his antagonist,” the narrator continues, “I had only a back view, but that was sufficient; I should not have cared to see his face” (435). Again, the machine—the puppet—will kill Moxon. Horror will be observed, without a doubt. It may be valuable to look at the incident in some detail. A silence lingers after Moxon exclaims “checkmate!” and afterwards he “rose
quickly to his feet and stepped behind his chair” (the narrator at this point is paralyzed into inaction, hiding, in shadow, from the candle-light of the game):

The wind had now gone down, but I heard, at lessening intervals and progressively louder, the rumble and roll of thunder. In the pauses between I now became conscious of a low humming or buzzing which, like the thunder, grew momentarily louder and more distinct. It seemed to come from the body of the automaton, and was unmistakably a whirring of wheels. It gave me the impression of a disordered mechanism which had escaped the repressive and regulating action of some controlling part—an effect such as might be expected if a pawl should be jostled from the teeth of a rachet-wheel. But before I had time for much conjecture as to its nature my attention was taken by the strange motions of the automaton itself. A slight but continuous convulsion appeared to have possession of it. In body and head it shook like a man with palsy or an ague chill, and the motion augmented every moment until the entire figure was in violent agitation. Suddenly it sprang to its feet and with a movement almost too quick for the eye to follow shot forward across table and chair, with both arms thrust forth to their full length—the posture and lunge of a diver. (436)

It’s not so surprising that the puppet’s birth into life is accompanied with sickness and decay (“In body and head it shook like a man with palsy or an ague chill”); this flash of sickness/birth (sickness born) belongs in part both to Ernst Jentsch’s notion of the “uncanny” and to the repeated appearance of “puppets” and automatons that flutter throughout, wander within, occupy decadence. There remains much to be said on the subject. However, for now, for the less dangerous moment, there is still the newborn “creature” who takes its time and takes its shape: a
strange noise gives “the impression of a disordered mechanism which had escaped the repressive and regulating action of some controlling part—an effect such as might be expected if a pawl should be jostled from the teeth of a rachet-wheel.” This “disordered mechanism” begins the work of decadent criticism; it’s the gap in the incessant, immortal back-and-forth, the retrieval of the automaton from its regularity and its productivity. It kills its creator as a matter of course (a difference with Frankenstein’s creature, which makes demands and takes revenge). And like that “overdetermination of meaning,” this is the creature that overruns and overdetermines its creator. But we still have a narrator; and from his perspective, it means the perceived complex—the experience—that begins with the thought-experiment “Consciousness is the creature of Rhythm,” and ends with the demonstration of that thought-experiment’s horrible viability: “Consciousness is the creature of Rhythm” does not mean simply that consciousness springs from a regular rhythm, a typical back-and-forth, a typical “reproduction” and a typical birth, but rather consciousness jerks into “life” from a “disordered mechanism” gone awry, a crack in the steady pulse of rhythm—and the narrator’s consciousness of this moment of coming-into-consciousness, I will describe as criticism, or, more especially, decadent criticism. It is the creature born from rhythm’s moment of irregularity. The fact that this moment confuses and paralyzes and draws into an ontological hesitation is part of its inhabiting framework, as the narrator demonstrates, standing in the doorway, watching painfully:

I had shrunk back and now stood a little to one side of the doorway and in shadow. If Moxon had looked farther than the face of his opponent he could have observed nothing now, except that the door was open. Something forbade me either to enter or to retire, a feeling—I know not how it came—that I was in the presence of an
imminent tragedy and might serve my friend by remaining. With a scarcely conscious rebellion against the indelicacy of the act I remained. (435)

Scarcely, but there it is: that moment between entering and retiring indicates the threshold, and that threshold, pushing its frame into the frame of the critic’s body of consciousness, is criticism. It is a confused moment, but the confusion is a telling confusion. In the next paragraph, the narrator claims, “There was something unearthly about it all, and I caught myself shuddering. But I was wet and cold” (435). There seemed something unearthly about it all: I shuddered, seemingly, because of its uncanniness. But I was also wet and cold. The confusion here between his physical situation and the possibility of the uncanny is a necessary boundary confusion, and boundary confusions, I hope to show, are the elements of decadent criticism. It is scarcely a consciousness—it easily escapes our perception, locked, as our perception is, into a regular back-and-forth rhythm—but there it is: “a disordered mechanism which has escaped the repressive and regulating action of some controlling part.” As the narrator makes clear, and no matter the scarcity or profundity of that consciousness, its small ignition and its quiet refusal of the rebellion against the “indelicate act” are now in order. Decadent criticism necessarily calls for the “indelicate act.”

Of course, one expects a fuller understanding of this notion of decadent criticism. Let Moxon be our master on that point. The title already proclaims it with a double genitive: the automaton is Moxon’s master, surely, but that doesn’t mean, at the same time, that Moxon’s not master. We could say, at least for the duration of this unraveling, this chess-game with an artificial character, Moxon’s our master. Moxon’s master. We’ll become his victim before he becomes ours. For example, he makes a particularly interesting speech to the narrator during the initial conversation at the beginning of the story:
“Doubtless you do not hold with those (I need not name them to a man of your reading) who have taught that all matter is sentient, that every atom is a living, feeling, conscious being. I do. There is no such thing as dead, inert matter: it is all alive; all instinct with force, actual and potential; all sensitive to the same forces in its environment and susceptible to the contagion of higher and subtler ones residing in such superior organisms as it may be brought into relation with, as those of man when he is fashioning it into an instrument of his will. It absorbs something of his intelligence and purpose—more of them in proportion to the complexity of the resulting machine and that of its work.” (432)

This almost Pater-like description of life, I will hold, has primarily to do with decadence. It is only seemingly ironic: I am not so interested in the word “life” as I am in this description of each thing being “sensitive to the same forces in its environment and susceptible to the contagion of higher and subtler ones residing in such superior organisms as it may be brought into relation with.” The word “contagion,” of course, turns the key. It’s the irregular gap in the incessant back-and-forth rhythm. But the play of forces and constant movement is something that decadent critics (among others) interest themselves in.

Oscar Wilde’s Critical Conversations

The impressions that form from this reading of “Moxon’s Master” take a more solid shape in other works from the same period. Before I look at the “presence” of decadent criticism in works of literature—in Poe’s poetry and in Machen’s fiction—it is important to seek examples of this idea of decadence—this “de” “cadencing”—and its curtailment—in works of criticism. Oscar Wilde’s “Intentions” seems the place to start, since the work effects the decomposition of
any sort of prose format through the use of dialogue and, ultimately, conversation. Whatever his themes may be, the use and unraveling of multiple conversations make the criticism—formally, I will attest—decadent. One of Moxon’s lessons: “the dictionary man’s unconscious testimony [is] suggestive and worth something in the discussion” (430); and the OED defines “to converse” as “To move about, have one’s being, live, dwell in (on, upon) a place, among (with) people, etc.” It is derived from the Latin conversari: to turn oneself about, to move to and fro; pass one’s life, dwell, abide, live somewhere, keep company with…”—or maybe even, to elaborate: “There is no such thing as dead, inert matter: it is all alive; all instinct with force, actual and potential; all sensitive to the same forces in its environment and susceptible to the contagion of higher and subtler ones residing in such superior organisms as it may be brought into relation with.” Wilde’s crafted and perfectly paradoxical statements, rather than being simply reversals, could be described as con-versals: his language, charged with the movement of (possibly) meaning, puts everything with/into verse. Here he lays open, exposed: the poetic. Everything with verse; everything in conversation. Not merely a thing and its opposite; rather, a thing bound up in collapsing networks—decaying, falling, because other things necessarily shift the scene, alter even more rapidly the changing environment—necessarily effect contagion. Wilde’s conversational criticism always draws into perspective this awareness. First of all, they come into being from momentary gaps or pauses in the constant back-and-forth—or, as I will call them later, critical caesuras: Cyril’s first line in “The Decay of Lying,” for example, contains a stage-direction: “(coming in through the open window from the terrace)” (163). As I will show later, this movement—coming in through an open window—will end up revealing a very dangerous, critical maneuver. For now, it means that we have entered this critical dialogue, not at any beginning, but through a “gap” in the conversation. The “Critic as Artist” also begins with a gap
in the conversation; it’s gap in speaking, however, is framed by an intermingled stream of music and laughter. It’s first line is: “Gilbert (at the piano): My dear Ernest, what are you laughing at?” (213). Wilde’s criticism starts nowhere; it slips its verses in through the open window, through the slippage between a man playing a piano and a man laughing at what he is reading.

From that point on, the form of these dialogues follow as a suite: they operate “conversationally,” without a strict argument; even though they surely make arguments, Wilde’s conversational style constantly allows contradiction and deceit. He finds more interest in the untangling and spreading of a personality into the text; he requires pleasure and not argument when he composes—or, perhaps—decomposes. Arguments matter as various attempts at image, as frames carefully sliced and stolen from a tower of movement; but pleasure and style and experiment can be said to matter also, matter more—as the movement itself, which necessarily always involves our participation no matter what our role. My question, in the end, is: why do we disengage from, disallow, or belittle aesthetic experience in favor of something like science when we write or read criticism? Because of the nature of its decomposition and its possibilities, decadent criticism—elaborated most thoroughly in Wilde’s paradoxical conversations on criticism and the critic—always considers this aesthetic situation or experiment in its production and in its discourse. The weight of conserving (as opposed to conversational), twentieth-century criticism of Anglo-American literature has, for the most part, and with a certain warrior’s intent, buried decadent criticism; it had to, in part, in order to establish the institution for the study of English literature. After looking at some of these specific moments—moments that I do believe were in fact inspired by a conscious rejection of Wilde’s “decadent” criticism and those like it—I want to take a few “decadent” examples of conversation in literature (and they are, indeed, conversations: even Poe’s “The Raven” is a conversation) and show how they function according
to Wilde’s criticism. In that sense, I will be using Wilde’s criticism as a blueprint for what I am calling “decadent”; the hypnotizing fragments and images of his criticism which organize the readings in this chapter include the “fine spirit of choice and delicate instinct of selection by which the artist realizes life for us” (227); “For it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms. The tendency of creation is to repeat itself. It is to the critical instinct that we owe each new school that springs up, each new mould that art finds ready to its hand” (229); and the famous notion that criticism “treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation” (239).

And though these thoughts are my main obsessions, the whole of Wilde’s criticism informs the following readings. Wilde suggests that criticism is always within and before the construction of the work of art and that in the place of art, there exists only an unfolding conversation of criticism, Moxon’s master: “poetry” in the sense of a “work of art” is more of an institutional structure intent on preservation—“criticism” has nothing to do with that series of facts; even “Art for the sake of art” is not a prescription for Wilde: it is, rather, another verse of criticism; I want to show, firstly, how that notion is contested during the first part of the twentieth-century, and then, secondly, how “decadent” writers have always been aware of this possibility and also afraid of its necessary horror.

The Separation of Art and Criticism

T. S. Eliot is the major critic/poet of the early 20th century who becomes involved both in the elaboration of “decadent criticism”—which he more or less inherits from the decadent writers of late 19th century France—and in constructing its replacement with a more conservative criticism. His work, especially The Waste Land, will become much more important in how I see this decadent criticism playing out within and as poetry or literature, but for the meantime we
can take a glance at his early criticism for practical insight into how this relationship, that confused band that holds together (or doesn’t) poetry and criticism, takes its place. The narrative in this section describes the slow unbinding and separation of “art” from “criticism” and why that occurs. We can see initial elements, though confused, emerging in Eliot’s criticism. This comes from the last paragraph of the introduction to “The Sacred Wood”:

The writer of the present essay once committed himself to the statement that “The poetic critic is criticizing poetry in order to create poetry.” He is now inclined to believe that the “historical” and the “philosophical” critics had better be called historians and philosophers quite simply. As for the rest, there are merely various degrees of intelligence. It is fatuous to say that criticism is for the sake of “creation” or creation for the sake of criticism. It is also fatuous to assume that there are ages of criticism and ages of creativeness, as if by plunging ourselves into intellectual darkness we were in better hope of finding spiritual light. The two directions of sensibility are complementary; and as sensibility is rare, unpopular, and desirable, it is to be expected that the critic and the creative artist should frequently be the same person. (9)

What interests me in this final moment is that “problem” which seems so distant from our attitudes regarding criticism and poetry in our contemporary moment: that is, whether or not it “is to be expected that the critic and the creative artist should frequently be the same person.” Whatever the fact of the matter may be, it is telling that, at least institutionally, these two “sensibilities” have been divorced. Telling, and yet unsurprising: the divide between a “literature” department and a “creative writing” department demonstrates precisely the kind of conserving (or conservational—I am using this term to distinguish from “conversational”)

41
criticism I am considering. But Eliot comes before this; his criticism elaborates his own style (something Wilde would have much appreciated—despite Eliot’s distaste with that chain of influence beginning with Matthew Arnold and moving to Walter Pater and Wilde), and he seemingly attempts to read together the critic and the poet until the two are yoked together, whatever the variety of their acts.

Yet this becomes tricky for Eliot; in the end, he cannot forge the link. He circles around the possibility, he flirts with the chances given; but his primary obstacles, the reduction of two conceptions of criticism into one which is involved in “analysis and construction,” or “ériger en lois,” as well as his constant irritation with the “personal” (perhaps itself a reaction to Wilde), refuses to allow the kind of transformation his gathering intuitions and insights want to put into effect. He begins by equivocally managing the merged poetic/critical product of “impressionistic criticism”—the work of Arthur Symons and Pater—and finds it to be a form of impotent and weakened creation:

Some writers are essentially of the type that reacts in excess of the stimulus, making something new out of the impressions, but suffer from a defect of vitality or an obscure obstruction which prevents nature from taking its course. Their sensibility alters the object, but never transforms it. Their reaction is that of the ordinary emotional person developed to an exceptional degree…For in an artist these suggestions made by a work of art, which are purely personal, become fused with a multitude of other suggestions from multitudinous experience, and result in the production of a new object which is no longer purely personal, because it is a work of art itself. (4)
It is worth noting that, for Eliot, “impressions” are not detrimental, even though our contemporary distrust of “impressionistic criticism” does seem to branch out from Eliot’s critical control. Rather, impressions are crucial for the further elaboration of art in the way “new impressions modify the impressions received from the objects already known. An impression needs to be constantly refreshed by new impressions in order that it may persist at all; it needs to take its place in a system of impressions. And this system tends to become articulate in a generalized statement of literary beauty” (8). The main problem with impressionistic criticism is not that it becomes too impressionistic; rather, the inability to eradicate personality from the play of impressions “prevents nature from taking its course.” It instead spends itself in the horror of an in-between state, as with Symons: “The disturbance in Mr. Symons is almost, but not quite, to the point of creating; the reading sometimes fecundates his emotions to produce something new which is not criticism, but is not the expulsion, the ejection, the birth of creativeness” (4). Since the author here cannot shed his personality, he should refrain from the “creative” use of impressionistic criticism and instead limit himself to the second critical impulse, the impulse to “analyze and construct, to ‘ériger en lois’” (3); otherwise, he is left with only the “satisfaction of a suppressed creative wish—which, in most other persons [besides the artist], is apt to interfere fatally” (4). There remains a further merging of categories: whereas Swinburne “is one man in his poetry and a different man in his criticism” in that he “is satisfying a different impulse; he is criticizing, expounding, arranging” (3), and therefore “the style of the latter is essentially a prose style, “…Mr. Symons’ prose is much more like Swinburne’s poetry than it is like his prose” (4). Another “disturbance” of Symons’ criticism belongs to its texture: it feels more like poetry than prose. The presence of prose-poetry makes it easier to condemn Symons’ criticism since it means another confusion and disorientation of clearly defined categories.
“Impressionistic criticism” means for Eliot an incomplete and impure creation; yet it still means criticism. He acknowledges that it is a “form of criticism” and his primary inquiry (2): “The moment you try to put the impressions into words,” he writes, “you either begin to analyse and construct, to ‘ériger en lois,’ or you begin to create something else” (3). Eliot never suggests otherwise; he instead intimates that this type of “criticism” does not integrate cleanly with the formulation of his burgeoning aesthetic philosophy and self-construction as an artist. Instead of denying the name criticism to this conception, he decides to characterize its limitations and its problems for the incapable, incomplete artist. He holds out: criticism—and specifically impressionistic criticism—is responsible for “creating” something else. When the “personality” obstacle crumbles, impressionistic criticism gets left over as the criticism which leads to creation. For example, the problem with Coleridge’s criticism is the excessive intrusion of personal emotions, a long drift or wandering: “His end does not always appear to be the return to the work of art with improved perception and intensified, because more conscious, enjoyment; his centre of interest changes, his feelings are impure…It is one more instance of the pernicious effect of emotion” (7). But if we read this against Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s understanding of how contingent values become objective evaluations in community thought, where “a co-incidence of contingencies among individual subjects who interact as members of some community will operate for them as noncontingency and be interpreted by them accordingly” (40), then we can claim that all of the feelings a critic experiences when reading a work of art are impure. Since there can be no objective handling of the art, there always exists the presence of the personal, the frame of personality.

In this case—and I do believe that Eliot is primarily reacting against this very notion—Wilde’s repeated call in all of “Intentions” opens up even Eliot’s understanding of what the
“critical” can do: “Nay, more, I would say that the highest Criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation…” (237). If impressions are as important to the creation of art as Eliot suggests, and yet the artist cannot escape criticism’s personality, then suddenly the “disturbance” in Symons’ criticism becomes the important initial pulse of the creation of art: the artwork—interwoven with personality and, thus, “impressionistic criticism,” a criticism that has no intention of putting anything “en lois”—becomes that “not quite,” that in-between freakish creature “which is not criticism” and is yet “not the expulsion, the ejection, the birth of creativeness.” I would suggest that what Eliot ultimately describes in this way is decadent criticism—and because it comes to him through the stylistic lawlessness and “decadence” of Pater and Wilde’s criticism, Eliot uses Wilde’s notion of “personality” as a point of jointure to crack open. Instead, he establishes the necessity and importance of objectivity in both poetry and criticism (because the artist can be impersonal with her art, she is able to be impersonal with her arranging criticism); and, since Eliot is so influential to the later New Critics, this erasure of the “impressionistic criticism” which becomes creation—a notion of criticism which the decadents can get behind—leaves only in its absence a wake that carries that second type of criticism, the analysis-of, construction-of, the putting-into-law. Finally, this second type of criticism becomes the “standard” and the rule of criticism; “impressionistic criticism,” responsible as it is for the creation itself of art—and this is just how it becomes “decadent”—gains ultimately the disfavor of the academy and its use becomes suspect, corrupt, perverse (or worse: lacking rigor, lacking argument—it cannot be easily placed in the regulated system).

By removing “impressionistic criticism” from an understanding of aesthetics and the creation of art, Eliot, along with the rise of the scientific method and its resounding, aching
attitude, inaugurates an age of literary criticism which endlessly elaborates “putting-into-law,” arranging and constructing (the word choice is still strange) categories of literary exchange-value and use-value. *What to do with a poem?* is the question I. A. Richards’ famous *Principles of Literary Criticism* sets out to answer in the twenties. *What to do with a poem? Enjoy it, of course; but Richards wants also to dig a psychological use out of the mesh of enjoyment. Richards bows to science, but he also always—and even then, in 1924—discriminates against literary decadence:

> The view of the arts as providing a private heaven for aesthetes is, as will appear later, a great impediment to the investigation of their value. The effects upon the general attitudes of those who accept it uncritically are also often regrettable; while the effects upon literature and the arts have been noticeable, in a narrowing and restriction of the interests active, in preciousness, artificiality and spurious aloofness. ART envisaged as a mystic, ineffable virtue is a close relative of the “aesthetic mood,” and may easily be pernicious in its effects, through the habits of mind which, as an idea, it fosters, and to which, as a mystery, it appeals. (13)

Besides this condemnation of the literary decadent, Richards also invokes physical decadence: Herrnstein Smith examines, for example, how Richards ascribes “bad taste” to a physical or mental deficiency (21; this should also remind us of Eliot’s description of impressionistic critics as suffering “from a defect of vitality or an obscure obstruction which prevents nature from taking its course”). The two versions of decadence are bound together in the way value gets explained by Richards (and many others, of course, detailed famously by Max Nordau) as natural, innate—happily and with destiny, inside the body. The ultimate problem here lies with art’s readers/audience—specifically with the decadent/aesthetic “critics”: not only are they doing
the “wrong” thing with art (disconnecting it from the “ordinary”), they are letting art suffer in
disvalued and unpopular style—“preciousness, artificiality and spurious aloofness.” Good, non-
aesthete artists and poets themselves are extracted from the “magical thinking” of aesthetes (the
aesthete artist’s rotted-out style is due to rotted-out taste) since, for Richards, they are ironically
separated from “good” criticism and “ordinary” existence due to the fact that they are ultimately
extraordinary: “The arts are our storehouse of recorded values. They spring from and perpetuate
hours in the lives of exceptional people, when their control and command of experience is at its
highest, hours when the varying possibilities of existence are most clearly seen and the different
activities which may arise are most exquisitely reconciled, hours when habitual narrowness of
interests or confused bewilderment are replaced by an intricately wrought exposure” (27) and,
furthermore, “In the arts we find the record in the only form in which these things can be
recorded of the experiences which have seemed worth having to the most sensitive and
discriminating persons” (27-28). Indeed, this special privilege of the artist ultimately amounts,
perhaps ironically, to a kind of magic of ART: “Through the obscure perception of this fact the
poet has been regarded as a seer and the artist as a priest…The arts, if rightly approached, supply
the best data available for deciding what experiences are more valuable than others. The
qualifying clause is all-important however” (28). The qualifying clause—“if rightly
approached”—signifies two things: firstly, that ART can be rightly approached; secondly, it
suggests that art becomes a kind of truth-telling oracle, surrounded by pythons, rightly or
wrongly approached—tip-toed to, perhaps, through the harrying and hissing in its den. In any
case, his understanding mimics the “magic” ART of the aesthetes; only his discrimination
matters: the artist is allowed magic and oracular judgment; the critic (here for Richards—the
“aesthete” in her world of ART) is destroying the word by reaching for, by essaying, that
privileged position without the proper authority. There remains a clear demarcation between artist and critic: one is above, one below.¹ What the “critic” or aesthete tries for shows merely a corrupt, run-down and decadent version of what the “true” artist creates.

As with Eliot, this organization unfolds once again in retaliation to Wilde’s idiosyncrasies. Richards has no interest in Wilde’s emphatic point (voiced through Gilbert): “All fine imaginative work is self-conscious and deliberate” (227). Rather, he agrees with the view Ernest reiterates beforehand: “I should have said that great artists worked unconsciously, that they were ‘wiser than they knew’, as, I think, Emerson remarks somewhere” (227). So Richards makes this point many times in *The Principles of Literary Criticism*; it becomes a hallmark: the artist must be unconscious of art’s true “communicative” purpose, otherwise he suffers a “dissipation of attention” which would “be fatal in most serious work” (22). Furthermore, “Much that goes to produce a poem is, of course, unconscious. Very likely the unconscious processes are more important than the conscious…”; and, ultimately:

What concerns criticism is not the avowed or unavowed motives of the artist, however interesting these may be to psychology, but the fact that his procedure does, in the majority of instances, make the communicative efficacy of his work correspond with his own satisfaction and sense of its rightness. This may be due merely to his normality, or it may be due to unavowed motives. The first suggestion is the more plausible…All supremely successful communication involves this correspondence, and no planning can take its place. Nor is the

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¹ This distinction is quite interesting when we compare Richards’ understanding of art with the OED. He claims that art makes value judgments—that works of art *judge* for us and create values; this is art’s function and *use*. This definition nicely reflects the OED’s definition of the word *critic*: “one who pronounces judgment on any thing or person.” In this way, when Richards’ defines *art*, he is simultaneously defining—merely by the OED’s purview—*criticism*. 

48
Richards proposes the opposite of Gilbert’s (and postmodernism’s) “self-consciousness” in art. The “normality” of the artist, or perhaps the uninvoked coincidence of normality’s spell, establishes the correspondence between artist and reader. The critic—scientific and removed, all eyes and fingertips and no body—isolates and remarks the small ache of that correspondence. One thin and intangible atmosphere reads or skirts the edges of another; there are no inferences because there are no bodies. This idea, stemming from Eliot—this hard cracking of the Wildean critic-artist (the critic necessarily bound up into the artist—the “impressionistic critic”) into two unequal halves, artist aslant to and conquering the critic—builds up throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

For example, it becomes more concrete and available in William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s infamous New Critical manifesto, “The Intentional Fallacy,” in 1946. Though the two authors begin to unravel this notion of the necessary unconsciousness of artistic production, they continue to separate the two even further instead of critiquing or addressing the problem itself: “All this, however, would appear to belong to an art separate from criticism, or to a discipline which one might call the psychology of composition, valid and useful, an individual and private culture, yoga, or system of self-development which the young poet would do well to notice, but different from the public science of evaluating poems” (1238). Furthermore, as with Richards and as with (for the most part) Eliot, the very inclusion of some operation of “criticism” within the production of art means decay and rot for the artist: “Coleridge and Arnold were better critics than most poets have been, and if the critical tendency dried up the poetry in Arnold and perhaps in Coleridge, it is not inconsistent with our argument, which is that judgment of poems is
different from the art of producing them” (1238, my emphasis). Finally, the separation that Wimsatt and Beardsley “observe” reduces to a complex of verbal negotiation:

The day may arrive when the psychology of composition is unified with the science of objective evaluation, but so far they are separate. It would be convenient if the passwords of the intentional school, “sincerity,” “fidelity,” “spontaneity,” “authenticity,” “genuineness,” “originality,” could be equated with terms of analysis such as “integrity,” “relevance,” “unity,” “function”; with “maturity,” “subtlety,” and “adequacy,” and other more precise axiological terms—in short, if “expression” always meant aesthetic communication. But this is not so. (1239)

More examples of “precise axiological terms” would be appreciated; most of these terms in both categories can be questioned in regards to contemporary understandings of aesthetics. But the point here is not to remark the outdated terms, but rather the outdated separation and distinction that has yet developed and burgeoned rigidly beneath the perpetually transforming landscape of aesthetics and aesthetic terminology. Wimsatt and Beardsley, in the continuing tradition of New Criticism, further distinguish the artist from the critic in the name of scientific objectivity: the artist—unconscious and spontaneous, creates without a sense of judgment or critical consciousness; the critic, if she is to be valid and respected as a critic, must differentiate herself and her work from the miracle of the artist or risk becoming nothing but a decayed and defunct artist, an abnormal, sterile monstrosity and half-breed. She must cease and separate one code of axiology from the other lest the “critical tendency” dry up the poetry in her (and never, of course, is it vice-versa: poetry is the miracle and the Eden; the critic is the garden’s resident adversary). In this way, one version of “literary decadence” gets played out as the core of the description,
used by the moral majority of critics in the first part of the century, which categorizes an aesthetic too much infected by *criticism*—an aesthetic lacking the unconscious imperative of “real,” spontaneous and communicative art—and the critic-artist who practices such a degenerate art and its surrounding, necessarily deviant, erotics.

The Critical Caesura

There remains outside of this scholarship, shaping or guiding as it does the flight of criticism in the early twentieth century, the less popular notion that criticism is an interior and dynamic part of artistic production. The New Critics and their followers make this out to be a kind of decay of art: art itself depends on an unconscious spontaneity and must not be overtly questioned or criticized or self-criticized. Criticism is the science of “what to do with poetry” once it’s been organically spilled and grown into the world. Wimsatt and Beardsley, for example, briefly examine the thought of aesthetic philosopher Curt Ducasse, who claims, in the words of Wimsatt and Beardsley, that “aesthetic art is the conscious objectification of feelings, in which an intrinsic part is the critical moment. The artist corrects the objectification when it is not adequate, but this may mean that the earlier attempt was not successful in objectifying the self” (1239). The two New Critics write off this argument by reducing and questioning: “What is the standard by which we disown or accept the self? Professor Ducasse does not say” (1239). However, Ducasse’s argument for the creation of art by way of criticism represents for me how “decadent” an understanding of aesthetics and literature can be. He betrays a Wildean influence; the first sentence of his book, for example, comes from Wilde: “In his well-known essay on *The Critic as Artist*, Oscar Wilde declares that it is much more difficult to talk about a thing than to do it—anybody can make history, but only a great man can write it!” (1). The book shows, it
seems, an attempt to take a moment of Wilde’s criticism seriously by demonstrating how criticism
and consciousness are necessarily integral to artistic production. The fact that Wimsatt
and Beardsley take this argument seriously also—feeling, as they do, that it must be drawn into
their essay in order to be justly refuted—demonstrates that their notion of “criticism”—whether
in the specific or the general sense—is threatened by Ducasse’s proposition. Herrnstein Smith
represents a more recent version of this in her *Contingencies of Value*:

> The inevitable evaluative and prefigurative aspects of literary composition, or of
what is commonly referred to as “the creative process” in relation specifically to
aesthetic/cultural production, mark significant continuities not only between
“creative” and “critical” activities but also between “artistic” and “scientific”
production, and thereby make quite problematic the traditional effort to maintain
clear distinctions between any of these. (45)

Ducasse and Herrnstein Smith’s observation, appearing small, has large ramifications in face of
the “unconscious artist” model: because the artist is practicing “criticism” with each aesthetic
choice, the artist *is always necessarily* a critic. Though this distinction seemingly divides
“criticism” into two variations—a “micro” (the judging or arranging of individual choices
established in creating a work of art) and a “macro” (the evaluation of the work of art in relation
to every other work of art; the work of art in art history, etc…)—the whole gravity and
momentum of “decadent criticism” (and thus the fear of those critics supporting the unconscious
artist) resides in its perception of the “micro” and the “macro” drawn together, converging, *in
collage*. Criticism—specifically and generally—operates before the art, pulls the art into
existence with its sway, holds the *activity* of the thing together (until dissipation) with its tenuous
and chaotic impracticality.
One also witnesses criticism in the “cutting” and ceasing—for that mere critical, witnessed moment—of the regularity and back-and-forth movement in the work of art. By the “back and forth movement” I mean exactly what Paul Fussell describes in his book on poetry and scansion when he says, “The pleasure which universally results from foot tapping and musical time-beating does suggest that the pleasures of meter are essentially physical and as intimately connected with the rhythmic quality of our total experience as the similarly alternating and recurring phenomena of breathing, walking, or love-making” (5). The break in this pattern—also, in parallel, a break in health (breath), ability (walking), or, say, normative reproduction (love-making)—is Bierce’s “disordered mechanism which has escaped the repressive and regulating action of some controlling part” (436). There is a gap in the pleasurable “time-beating” which also—in some perverse, occult way—gives pleasure. It remains raw and rich before the New Critics crack a different “criticism” out of the variegated stony fabric. Edgar Allan Poe—as critic and as, if not the origin, then at least an initial and toppled nexus of decadence and decadent ideas (Poe is always a location of thriving: his disorderliness; his confusions; his deceits)—writes it out in his art/criticism. We can make critical use of his particular definition or appropriation of the poetry term caesura; a rewrite of this device and the whole of poetry appears in his “Rationale of Verse.” The caesura expresses in a poem the “variability of value” (51); it is the foot “most important in all verse” (50). He cites an example and then furthers his notion: “Here we dwell on the caesura...just as long as it requires us to pronounce either of the preceding or succeeding iambuses” (50-51). The caesura becomes prominent in Poe’s poetic theory because, for him, the poem is a matter of relation within time:

Thus when we enunciate an independent syllable it is long, as a matter of course.

If we enunciate two, dwelling on both equally, we express equality in the
enumeration, or length, and have a right to call them two long syllables. If we
dwell on one more than the other, we have also a right to call one short, because it
is short in relation to the other. But if we dwell on both equally and with a
tripping voice, saying to ourselves here are two short syllables, the query might
well be asked of us—“in relation to what are they short?” Shortness is but the
negation of length. To say, then, that two syllables, placed independently of any
other syllable, are short, is merely to say that they have no positive length, or
enunciation—in other words that they are no syllables—that they do not exist at
all…It is a mere chimera bred in the mad fancy of a pedant. (51)
The caesura, the expression of the “variability of value,” is that “pause or termination” (50)
which gives the time necessary to pronounce the fragments which surround it. Its very existence
allows the organization of the poem to exist “without authority,” without the rigid and pedantic
rules enforcing “Procrustean” adjustments to the words in poems that do not need them (44). The
caesura in this theory corresponds with Herrnstein Smith’s investigation into the relativistic
“variablities of value” in her Contingencies of Value: for my purposes, then, Poe’s understanding
of caesura stands in for the work of criticism. It means a pause or cut holding open the variability
of values within the work of art; it is irregular, imperfect, conscious—flush with personality—
conversational. That is, it makes out of the “conserved” or preserved poetic thing a living
“conversation.”

Poe reveals elsewhere the conscious and defiantly understood presence of criticism
inside the work of art. He has no qualms about opening his own poetry to self-analysis; that’s the
primary thrust of “The Philosophy of Composition”: “For my own part, I have neither sympathy
with the repugnance alluded to, nor, at any time, the least difficulty in recalling to mind the
progressive steps of any of my compositions...” After choosing to analyze “The Raven”—the “most generally known” of his works—he continues: “It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referrable either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (14-15). “The Philosophy of Composition” itself resembles more of a decomposition than a composition—it is not crystal, but essay. Its form, with stanzas of “The Raven” interwoven into prose paragraphs of variable length describing the confusion of values, shows these critical viscera, fragmentary and mottled and inchoate. For the conservative critics: rot, corruption, exposed organs, the purple description of decadence (imagine, of course, Baudelaire’s shocked paramour and the corpse living its life before her). But, from another perspective, if the work of art and criticism are necessarily bound together in the way I’m attempting to describe, then the “Philosophy of Composition” is more the poem than the poem itself: its evidence of conscious criticism at work before (in all regards) the work of art shows decadence unraveling the wholeness and health of the “licensed” poem into its edges, its illicit peripherals. The “Philosophy of Composition”—its criticism—means simultaneously the decomposition of the poem. It is the living wasteland inside the dead utopian whole.

Not only does the “poem” resist Richards’ notion that an artist cannot or should not realize her own efforts at “communication”—Poe carefully weighs the presentation of the poem as he delivers it to an audience, including the variations of length: “If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression—for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed” (15)—but it also demonstrates how the “micro” aspect of criticism—the importance of critical choice at the word and sentence
level emphasized by Ducasse and Herrnstein Smith—operates according to each moment as the work of art unfolds. Here is one example:

The question now arose as to the character of the word. Having made up my mind to a refrain, the division of the poem into stanzas was, of course, a collary: the refrain forming the close to each stanza. That such a close, to have force, must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis, admitted no doubt: and these considerations inevitably led me to the long o as the most sonorous vowel, in connection with the r as the most producible consonant. (18)

*Nevermore* comes into being from fragments *already decomposed*: the need, that is, for two variable and separate sounds. It had to be decomposed and already corrupt—already in an array of bodiless limbs—before it could ever be composed into the whole. Poe moves through each “desideratum”; he moves, for example, through the decomposition of an individual word to the thematic application of that word: “I had not to combine the two ideas, of a lover lamenting his deceased mistress and a Raven continuously repeating the word ‘Nevermore’—I had to combine these, bearing in mind my design of varying, at each turn, the *application* of the word repeated” (19). All the while, of course, he elicits theory from the combination of criticism/poetry:

But in subjects so handled, however skillfully, or with however vivid an array of incident, there is always a certain hardness or nakedness, which repels the artistical eye. Two things are invariably required—first, some amount of complexity, or more properly, adaptation; and, secondly, some amount of suggestiveness—some under current, however indefinite of meaning. (24)

Each of these “critical” breaks or pauses occurring between stanzas of “The Raven” show us *critical caesuras*. They depict how each *desideratum* actually means a “variability of value,” and
each desideratum furthermore shows a destiny by way of choices Poe personally made. And, by saying that the caesura is the most important aspect of a poem (or, for my purposes, the “work of art”), we can also link the concept to these critical caesuras. These are the cuts and stops that show the inside of the work—that particular and unraveling formulation of its “decay.” If the “Philosophy of Composition” is, as I am suggesting, the poem itself, then that is because these critical caesuras are so totally inherent to the work of art that their existence and revelation give the insanity of viscera to what is otherwise a tactless exterior, a shell to be formally and conservatively criticized. Because they make out “criticism” to be something other than Richards’ exteriorizing and categorizing effort—the effort that must necessarily be shucked from the process of art itself—they are moments written off as excessive, or purple, or decadent.

Slipping this exterior self-description into the interior of “The Raven,” making it into a kind of caesura of criticism, feels, no doubt, a little out of grasp; I would not shy from the fact that the claim is occult. But the same thing appears to happen—with much more vividness and therefore more vulnerability to record—in Arthur Machen’s decadent short story, “The White People.” This story, written in 1899 and published in 1904, and considered by H. P. Lovecraft to be, strangely, “a triumph of skilful selectiveness and restraint” (91), is composed of two parts. First—and this is by now an unsurprising ubiquity—the framing conversation: one character, Ambrose, is in conversation with a stranger, Cotgrave, “in a northern suburb” of London, “through an old garden,” and in “the room where Ambrose the recluse dozed and dreamed over his books” (110); Cotgrave was “brought by a friend”—an indistinct third character, a narrative and phantom hesitation, who never speaks and departs halfway through the conversation. Ambrose attempts to elaborate for Cotgrave the nature of Evil—as opposed to the “numerous infractions of our social ‘bye-laws’” (113)—through a “positive” understanding of the subject: “I
think not. The murderer murders not from positive qualities, but from negative ones; he lacks something which non-murderers possess. Evil, of course, is wholly positive—only it is on the wrong side. You may believe me that sin in its proper sense is very rare; it is probable that there have been far fewer sinners than saints” (112). When Cotgrave asks what sin is, Ambrose answers with a series of odd questions:

“What would your feelings be, seriously, if your cat or your dog began to talk to you, and to dispute with you in human accents? You would be overwhelmed with horror. I am sure of it. And if the roses in your garden sang a weird song, you would go mad. And suppose the stones in the road began to swell and grow before your eyes, and if the pebble that you noticed at night had shot out stony blossoms in the morning?” (113)

Sin for Ambrose almost amounts to the pathetic fallacy (also resembling Moxon’s summary of life posed at the beginning of this chapter); moreover, it amounts to the supernatural born from the mundane—a theme that will recur in Machen’s work. The second part of “The White People,” the “thing contained”—the gap—in the framing conversation, is the “Green Book.” This pocket book, which Ambrose lends to Cotgrave to help the latter understand the nature of Evil, contains, in terms of the short story, about thirty pages of paragraph-less disorientation: landscape wandering (both natural and fantastic), occult-building, story-telling, fairy tales and odd descriptions of various ceremonies and rites. It is supposedly written, without break and without breath, by a young girl within a few years. We read it as some elaboration of an occult diary. When we return to the “conversation”—after Cotgrave has finished reading the green book—we learn that the girl’s corpse has been found before the particular “image” she obsesses over in the text:
“Well, it was of Roman workmanship, of a stone that with the centuries had not 
blackened, but had become white and luminous. The thicket had grown up about 
it and concealed it, and in the Middle Ages the followers of a very old tradition 
had known how to use it for their own purposes. In fact it had been incorporated 
into the monstrous mythology of the Sabbath.” (147)

She has poisoned herself at this location and, finally, the image is “hammered...into dust and 
fragments” (147).

When “The Green Book” appears in the story, it marks a disjunction or gap, an irregular 
crack in the rhythm, loosening and aslant, hammering from within the whole into “dust and 
fragments”; this demonstrates an epitome of the kind of caesura I’m interested in—it breaks the 
back-and-forth with its disorientation and flux of horror and literary style. Moreover, the 
demarcated caesura in this story, like Poe’s poem of decomposition, unfolds in response to and 
as literary criticism. During the same year (1899) as “The White People,” Machen writes his 
book-length study of literary criticism, *Hieroglyphics: A Note Upon Ecstasy in Literature* 
(published, however, in 1902). Machen’s literary criticism in this case consists of another 
conversation; it is, however, one-sided: the author of the book—Machen himself—has proposed 
to record the “talk” of an “obscure literary hermit” who avoids “personalities” (5) and regards 
himself “a very humble disciple in Coleridge’s school; he was fond, as I have said, of imitating 
his master’s manner as well as he could, and I think that he cherished, in the fashion of S. T. C., 
the notion that he had a ‘system,’ an esoteric philosophy of things” (8). So far—a familiar and 
romanticized, though fabricated, conversational narrative of literary criticism. The hermit cleaves 
the high from the low and in doing so defines the terms of literature as they cycle around a 
presence of *ecstasy*:
Substitute, if you like, rapture, beauty, adoration, wonder, awe, mystery, sense of the unknown, desire for the unknown. All and each will convey what I mean; for some particular case one term may be more appropriate than another, but in every case there will be that withdrawal from the common life and the common consciousness which justifies my choice of “ecstasy” as the best symbol of my meaning. I claim, then, that here we have the touchstone which will infallibly separate the higher from the lower in literature, which will range the innumerable multitude of books in two great divisions, which can be applied with equal justice to a Greek drama, an eighteenth-century novelist, and a modern poet, to an epic in twelve books, and to a lyric in twelve lines. (19)

The separation however does not always become so clear. The impulse for literary discussion itself comes from a chance occurrence—a fantasy dwindling, crumpled, into newsprint reality—with the low or ordinary:

I was staring, then, out of the window, when to my vast astonishment a great pale bird seemed suddenly to shoot up into the air from the road, and to flutter in the garden, where it became entangled in that sapless old laburnum that weeps green tears upon the wall. I saw, as I thought, the beating and fluttering of wings, and I ran out, imagining that I was to secure a strange companion for my solitude. It was the evening paper, not a bird, and I saw at once that it would be impious to let it flutter there unread, so I secured it and brought it in, meditating the adventure, and wondering what strange message was thus borne to my eyes. (15)

Eventually he comes across a “short comment upon some agitation that is now appealing rather strongly to Progressive leaders…”:
…but the subject-matter is of no consequence, since the significance lies in the last sentence. Here it is: “We are glad to hear that extensive arrangements have been made for the dissemination of literature.”

You don’t see the immense importance of that? You surprise me. Let us go into it, then. (16)

The weight of the book’s criticism shifts with the light-as-print ambiguity of the word “literature”: “and all this mass is known as literature: what is to be our criterion, our means of distinguishing between the two extremes I have mentioned and all the innumerable links between them?” (17). The ambiguity of literature and other words leads the hermit to make a chart separating words by their different meanings—“I think I made some attempt to deal with ‘art’ as I was talking. I contrasted it with ‘artifice,’ and my phrase ‘Artist with a big A’ was another hint to you that the word must be handled cautiously” (28)—until he convinces Machen that each “popular” word has an occult and hidden “high” meaning embedded within it. And though the hermit attempts to clear up the discrepancies between the two, the text itself often maintains that obscurity between what remains occult and what appears; the single appearance of the title of the book within the book, for example, finds itself lost in the gulf:

In the beginning all literature was a matter of improvisation or recitation and memory, and hieroglyphics, writing, printing, are mere conveniences. Indeed, the point is only worth mentioning because there are, I believe, simple souls who think that the invention of printing has some sort of mysterious connection with the birth of literature, and that the abolition of the paper duty was its coming of age. (20)
Hieroglyphics, though “mere conveniences,” yet, according to the logic of what follows, continue to purpose literature and to fulfill its unraveling as criticism; the magic act of the pale bird-becoming-newspaper-becoming-literary criticism demonstrates how criticism gets invoked or summoned from the juxtaposition of personality (despite his purported lack-of; I mean the imagination of the bird) and print. What the hermit wants to demarcate, in his claim of Coleridgean criticism, ultimately remains confused in true decadent fashion—though it hangs there, entangled always, with the—also decadent—presence or notion or complex web of literary (and otherwise) ecstasy.

This complex—elaborated and complicated throughout the whole of Hieroglyphics—has a place, too, in “The White People.” I mean this literally; Ambrose references the claims of the “obscure literary hermit” in his discussion of true and ordinary evil: “Oh, yes, there is a sort of connexion between Sin with a capital letter, and actions which are commonly called sinful: with murder, theft, adultery, and so forth. Much the same connexion that there is between the A, B, C and fine literature” (112). Ambrose uses the hermit’s literary-critical claims from Hieroglyphics as a way to elucidate and make a comparison with the variations of literature and Literature and sin and Sin. Furthermore, the hermit’s key conception of the Literary as ecstatic also makes an appearance in defining Sin (here, ironically, as unconscious): “It is like holiness and genius in this as in other points; it is a certain rapture or ecstasy of the soul; a transcendent effort to surpass the ordinary bounds” (115). Again: “But you see the gulf that separates the two? The ‘word,’ if I may so speak, is accidentally the same in each case, but the ‘meaning’ is utterly different. It is flagrant ‘Hobson Jobson’ to confuse the two, or rather, it is as if one supposed that Juggernaut and the Argonauts had something to do etymologically with one another” (116). We see Machen letting the very formulation of his literary criticism operate within the specific terms and jargon
of his short story; literary criticism—as a “philosophy of composition”—finds use in energizing
the conversation on “sin” between the two men: criticism on multiple levels operating within the
creative. Eventually it works to decompose the creative. While “The Green Book” is Ambrose’s
example of literary sin, it shows Machen’s effort at sinful literature: in the same way that it
attempts to open up the diegetic conversation on sin, it furthermore opens up Machen’s non-
diegetic experiment with literary style—it shows, like Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition,”
literary criticism at work. Alex Murray notes how Machen, from 1895, “realized that the
‘Stevensonian manner was ended’, and he would now enter a period of searching for a new
literary style, no more of the ‘measured, rounded Stevensonian cadence’” (143), leaving him
with the desire to hammer out his own literary style. The green book, as a caesura within a
conversation about both sin and the creation of literature, marks an instance of that attempt. A
sample passage from the perspective of the young female author:

I wanted a book like this, so I took it to write in. It is full of secrets. I have a great
many other books of secrets I have written, hidden in a safe place, and I am going
to write here many of the old secrets and some of the new ones; but there are
some I shall not put down at all. I must not write down the real names of the days
and months which I found out a year ago, nor the way to make the Aklo letters, or
the Chian language, or the great beautiful Circles, nor the Mao Games, nor the
chief songs. (119)

The rest of the green book—its extremely long and disorienting paragraphs; its unapologetic
merging of genre and style, realism and supernaturalism; its array of incredibly vague
descriptions (an example: “Then they all rose up and danced, secret things were brought out of
some hiding place, and they played extraordinary games, and danced round and round and round
in the moonlight, and sometimes people would suddenly disappear and never be hard of afterwards, and nobody knew what had happened to them” (133))—all these moments and fluxes betray a fierce resistance to Machen’s contemporary literary aesthetics and formulate an anticipation of later, experimental stylistics. Likewise, these exact same attributes demonstrate a confusion and a vibrant, living uncertainty: the “green book,” as caesura, offers us its killing pause and opens the work violently into its consternation and its exposed “variability of values.” Here again is its design and its decay; again—literary criticism, unlocked and mobile from within the artwork, seduces this work into its own decomposition through its critic’s experimentation and its critic’s desperate innovation.

The Horror of Criticism

As “The White People” demonstrates, the presence of this critical caesura indicates a certain amount of danger and violence and most certainly a sense of horror. It means a kind of cutting, slicing transmission—a transmission that draws blood—or the influence that masks influenza, the disease and discomfort beneath Richards’ understanding of ART as safely removed from the unplaceable and unevaluated experience of the limited, broken critic below. Art is not pure, unpunctured, untouched skin; rather, it’s the dangerous handling of one or another’s body/text and a handing-off of that body; moreover, experience of art is haunted and pricked with phantom pains. Immediately before Ambrose gives Cotgrave the green book he offers a strange anecdote:

He fondled the faded binding.
“I know the girl who wrote this,” he said. “When you read it, you will see how it illustrates the talk we have had to-night. There is a sequel, too, but I won’t talk of that.”

“There was an odd article in one of the reviews some months ago,” he began again, with the air of a man who changes the subject. “It was written by a doctor—Dr. Coryn, I think, was the name. He says that a lady, watching her little girl playing at the drawing-room window, suddenly saw the heavy sash give way and fall on the child’s fingers. The lady fainted, I think, but at any rate the doctor was summoned, and when he had dressed child’s wounded and maimed fingers he was summoned to the mother. She was groaning with pain, and it was found that three fingers of her hand, corresponding with those that had been injured on the child’s hand, were swollen and inflamed, and later, in the doctor’s language, purulent sloughing set in.”

Ambrose still handled delicately the green volume. (118)

It matters that this anecdote—focused, as it is, on maimed and cracked and broken fingers (both real and supernatural)—gets framed by two sentences describing Ambrose handling and fingering the green book right before he hands it over to Cotgrave. The threat of broken fingers belongs to the transmission and the influence of the text—bound up, as it is, into the necessary critical “conversation.” For the decadent, the “work of art” holds inside it the open caesura, that window revealing the cracked and broken clockwork of the malfunctioning automaton; but that gap or caesura or window always carries with it, too, the possibility of a falling sash—echoing, when it falls, its scribbled break across lines of generations. These are the details of its fall and
the text’s *bite*: swollen flesh, inflamed fingers—later, purulent sloughing setting in; exposure to criticism leads to the clear and necessary indication that *health fails—decadence is to be.*

As with Moxon’s deadly conversation, a moment in Wilde’s “The Critic as Artist” considers the place of horror necessary for criticism to burgeon. It also remains the most fervent depiction (drama) in the work of criticism-as-conversation; Gilbert imagines himself in conversation with a friend before the Mona Lisa, webbed, sticky, with Pater’s prose:

> Who, again, cares whether Mr Pater has put into the portrait of Monna Lisa something that Lionardo never dreamed of? The painter may have been merely the slave of an archaic smile, as some have fancied, but whenever I pass into the cool galleries of the Palace of the Louvre, and stand before that strange figure ‘set in its marble chair in that cirque of fantastic rocks, as in some faint light under sea’, I murmur to myself, ‘She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as St. Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.’
>
> And I say to my friend, ‘The presence that thus so strangely rose beside the waters is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years man had come to desire’; and he answers me, ‘Hers is the head upon which all “the ends of the world are come”, and the eyelids are a little weary.’ (238-9)
The criticism casts a spell on these late-coming critics; they find themselves infected with a paralysis that leaves movement only in their puppet-mou̇ths, uttering Pater’s criticism like broken, spent automatons. But the passage here “opens” Pater’s criticism into its caesura; and, in so doing, does more than quote it. While it means “one of [Wilde’s] cruder demonstrations of the proposition that ‘criticism of the highest kind…treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for new creation’” (84), as Lawrence Danson so knowingly puts it, it also puts into focus interesting features of Pater’s criticism; for example, Pater’s revision of the Mona Lisa, among other genre transformations, turns it gothic: “She is older than the rocks among which she sits,” and “…like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave.” An element of horror gives the initial impulse to the artwork’s criticism. Wilde wants to understand that; most of his remarks concerning criticism always end with “seduction” and “poison”: in the same paragraph and concerning the same subject, for example, he offers his own criticism: “And so the picture becomes more wonderful to us than it really is, and reveals to us a secret of which, in truth, it knows nothing, and the music of the mystical prose is as sweet in our ears as was that flute-player’s music that lent to the lips of La Gioconda those subtle and poisonous curves” (239). Horror is the scene of criticism: the paralysis of style; the attempt to transform horror into a seduction; the ubiquitous rebellion of the gothic—but even more precisely, the manner in which Pater wields the “genre” of the gothic against its Early modern subject, inserting it there, critically, where it not only creates a new reading of the “La Gioconda,” but also taints it with questions of literary/critical taste—this is another production of decadence that I want to analyze further in the next chapter on F. Scott Fitzgerald.

For now, for this moment, we have a particular depiction of the decadent critic, the critic observing decay: a sensitivity edging into the neurotic; ideas caught in perpetual conversation—
whether with an accomplice or with one’s own voice; a spreading artificiality under the skin as
the threshold expands—a face ghastly white, and eyes glittering like diamonds; and fingers
always nervously cajoling that moment of criticism—that caesura—within the work of art (a
moment that very well could have been put there by her) and always under threat of crippling or
phantom crippling. This critic, this structure, built from the living thought caught in its paralysis
of decay, shelters the fact that criticism—both the micro and the macro versions—always
operates within the “work of art,” or—more precisely, rather—as the work of art. It is not, as the
New Critics attempt to claim, separate and posterior to the work of art; as past or current
methodologies of science can prove to be dissimilar to the way science actually works\(^2\), so
criticism—and literary criticism in particular—does not mean a separate act intent on explaining
literature or “what to do with a poem” from without. Operating as the work of art, decadent
criticism, always revealing a thing’s insides or the impossibility of insides in terms of
inside/outside, makes no regulations and makes no particular demands. One cannot purify art by
drawing out and isolating and professionalizing criticism. Separating the two does not, in turn,
make the two activities more natural. Rather, the critic finds that necessary critical artifice in the
text by being, necessarily, artificial; and, furthermore, she observes the inevitable decay of a
permanent, whole work of art by inevitably being herself decadent—fragmented, perverse,
impressionistic. In this way, the two connotations of decadence apply to her work: she is
“philosophically” decadent because she observes the presence of criticism—a falling, a decay, an
everchanging conversation—in the work of art; she is “socially” and academically decadent
because, by observing this presence within art, she puts any formulated, calculated institution of
literary criticism at risk: for “decadent criticism,” there are no standards; there is no high/low; no

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\(^2\) Paul Feyerabend’s *Against Method*, and its legacy, for example.
major/minor literatures; no real distinction between art and criticism. This intertwined understanding of multiple “decadences” sets the scene for the horror to come.

One can see why the critic so often cannot endure the effort required to turn the page with these broken and maimed, suppurated, fingers; or, maybe even more often, the confusion of this physical pain and paralysis in the writing fingers with the apparent jouissance of conceiving ideas into and from the play of intellectual erotics…such as when she comes across a hypnotizing, transforming phrase like: “Consciousness is the creature of Rhythm...”
Chapter 2: The Invisible King in *This Side of Paradise*

Stephen L. Tanner asks, regarding F. Scott Fitzgerald’s first novel, “What is the devil doing in a novel like *This Side of Paradise*?” (66). He asks this about a famous section from the novel, “The Devil,” where the protagonist, Amory Blaine, seems to come across a strange and supernatural figure when he’s out drinking with his college friends. This scene offers interesting and strange readings, adumbrates alien questions, gives a new torque to a novel which has hitherto floated around Amory and his changing, but recognizable, coming-of-age configurations. However, despite all that, Tanner reduces the scene to an interpretation that I suppose isn’t too surprising, considering the name Fitzgerald gave the section in the first place. Tanner says: “I… will argue that the supernatural elements in *This Side of Paradise* are part of Fitzgerald’s profound concern with the problem of evil, particularly with the diminishing sense of evil. Fitzgerald intended Amory Blaine’s struggle with a diminishing instinct for recognizing evil to represent an important phenomenon of modern American on the eve of the 1920s” (66). Fitzgerald uses, according to Tanner, the “moral supernatural,” and “indicates a continuity in his writing with the romances of Hawthorne, the ghost stories of Henry James, and the morally oriented fiction of Catholic writers like the priest-novelist Robert Hugh Benson” (66). He even extends the argument to our contemporary age: “for the same phenomenon that Fitzgerald treated as occurring within an individual persists today in American society at large in an even more perplexing postmodern form” (66-67). Walter Raubicheck doesn’t move too far away from this when he likewise claims that “Fitzgerald’s first novel cannot be satisfactorily appreciated if the Catholic concerns are underappreciated, and his religious imagination affects all his major work, especially its romantic vision” (54). He ends his article in the same way: “...*This Side of Paradise*
is a worthy introduction to Fitzgerald’s thematic concerns and establishes clearly that his investigation of the mores of his time was based on a moral foundation that underlies his romantic idealism, a foundation that is essentially Catholic” (65). Both of these readings attempt to show the novel as a questioning of particular moral values—the Catholic and conservative ones—as Amory struggles with the temptations of sin and decadence—and ultimately, despite its somewhat obscure ending, triumphs over them and affirms those particular values he started out questioning.

But is this really the case? Really—What is This Side of Paradise doing in a politics like religious and reactionary conservatism? It is probably no surprise that Tanner uses his argument as leverage against “postmodernism” in general: “Such a view [his view] runs counter to the moral relativism of our time, which finds words like ‘evil’ and ‘wicked’ quaint and embarrassing, and it also runs afoul of the postmodernist tendency in academic theory and criticism to explain all formulations of good and evil as repressive constructions of the ruling caste” (76). What is slightly more surprising is that Tanner and Raubicheck’s articles appear back-to-back in a collection of articles derived from lectures given at a conference at Princeton celebrating the centennial of Fitzgerald’s birth. Most surprising, for me at least, is that this collection of essays is entitled F. Scott Fitzgerald in the Twenty-First Century. This set of interpretations gestures outward to the whole of the century; it is more future than it is past. And it is beyond reassuring to know that, for the whole of the 21st century, we can read, safely, comfortably, easily comprehending how the Devil section in Paradise literally and simply refers to the devil himself and indicates our diminishing recognition of evil in the world. “The Devil” restricts itself, brokers itself, settles nicely down into the hard flame-form—: The Devil. He’s the same Devil in the same devil form that has always tried to convince us mortals that there is no
evil in the world. From there it becomes easy to package and ship out that hard, extracted form, “The Devil.” If we remove all the excess and the supplementary objects of these readings, it seems to concern the protection and distribution of the shape of a particular form—the “devil,” for Tanner; Catholic morality, for Raubicheck. These two “shapes” or forms go together particularly well, touching each other without colliding or collapsing. They were born together. But despite their overt conservatism and their innate bonds, I believe we see similar protections and guarantees-of-shapes taking place in other literary critical spaces, several of them concerning Fitzgerald’s first novel. It is a phenomenon that leads me to ask, leaning against a typical reading and typical problem of the novel: What is this “conservatism of form” doing in the criticism of a pre- post-modern mess of a novel like This Side of Paradise? And to what degree does that form “save” the work form being decadently critical?

We can take, for example, two 2000 era articles by Derek Lee and David W. Ullrich concerning the literary-scholarly place of a novel like Paradise. Derek Lee, in his “F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Specters of Gothic Modernism,” commits himself to clearing that space within “the emerging critical discourse known as Gothic Modernism.” He claims: “The supernatural form and pitched moral battles encoded within Fitzgerald’s work place him squarely within this fledgling field and allows us to productively distinguish between some of its varied currents, which on the whole still remain ambiguous” (137). He goes on to explain the presence of Fitzgerald’s gothic mode in terms of three staples of the genre, “formula, hyperbole, and social anxiety,” ultimately contributing to the expansion of the gothic brand and its place in literary study: “Over the past half-century, critics have expanded the traditional view of Gothic literature beyond a ridiculed set of stock conventions to an established field entangled, historically and ideologically, with Romanticism” (129). Lee then maps out the precise elements of Fitzgerald’s
latent gothic modernist style and gives examples of gothic moments from the more realistic later novels. There is no doubt that literary categorization is an activity that critics are still committed to, despite certain pertinent poststructuralist criticism on that activity, but it does seem to me that Lee’s attempt at this new categorization for novels like Paradise just echoes and expands Tanner’s argument from the Fitzgerald conference paper. Instead of forming that nebulous and ghostly shape into a hard “Devil,” however, Lee takes the same formlessness and makes it into a tangible gothic-ness. Instead of that powerful Catholic narrative, we have the gothic one. And although Lee does not share the conservative politics/religion, perhaps, of the earlier two critics, he does commit to a conservatism when he attempts to preserve that gothic narrative (including the contemporary narrative of gothic studies: “Over the past half-century…”) by shaping it out of Fitzgerald’s disarray of influence and product.

David W. Ullrich’s 2004 article “Reconstructing Fitzgerald’s ‘Twice-Told Tales’: Intertextuality in This Side of Paradise and Tender is the Night,” however, gives an even better example. Since “[n]o critic… has provided an intertextual analysis of Fitzgerald’s first and last (completed) novels” (43), Ullrich takes it upon himself and duly outlines the task that seems so impossible: “The 14 years separating the novels, even their dates of publication, suggest they be interpreted as oppositional moral tales: Fitzgerald’s before and after meditation on the twenties, the golden promises of youth degenerating into chronic bickering and dissipation” (44). Despite this cavern of difference, however, Ullrich ultimately emboldens himself through one of Fitzgerald’s own insights and becomes able to make his main claim: “Fitzgerald’s insight that authors repeat their two or three foundational stories in different narrative disguises provides a compelling rationale for interpreting This Side of Paradise and Tender is the Night as ‘Twice-Told Tales,’ for claiming they exist as an intertextual dialogue in Fitzgerald’s literary
imagination, and for reading *Tender* as Fitzgerald’s self-conscious, elegiac revision of *Paradise*” (44). This notion of one novel being an “elegiac revision” of another seems to stir some image in my mind; something begins to wake up. But it’s not quite there: I want this “being a revision” to become instead a *being-revising*, a thing in the midst-of, not in completion, a *critical caesura*—something that Ullrich is less interested in. Instead of a multiple, fragmented text dissolving still other texts inside it, harangued and glittering with the glitches and repetitions of revision (revision meaning exactly the moment one text separates and becomes open *against* another), Ullrich means something more like: this later novel—polished for posterity by a seasoned and licit “author”—has the same basic story of the first novel—the one that belongs to unprofessional youth; it’s messy, but precocious. Even if they do exist in an “intertextual dialogue in Fitzgerald’s literary imagination,” they are two closed circuits, tapping against each other—respecting each other’s unique and individual single self. Ullrich maintains this by binding the two novels together through the logic of the “monomyth”:

A radical approach to examining intertextuality in *Paradise* and *Tender* is the simplest and the most daunting: take Fitzgerald at his word and identify the ‘two or three stories’ he tells, hypothesizing that these too must eventually synthesize into an urtext, a monomyth from which he continued to mine and to reassemble his individual texts, his life’s work, the products of his continually recombinant literary imagination. (55)

When will we stop taking writers at their word? How can we ever hope to unfold this world into its destiny of multiple and multifarious writers if we are constantly taking this or that specific writer at his or her word? Isn’t writing (and especially criticism) specifically *not* taking this particular shape or form at its singular *Word*? In any case, this particular approach and task does
not seem either radical or daunting, however simple it may actually be; instead, Ullrich wants to utilize a kind of micro-metanarrative to restrict these books (and all the others) into a more conservative, preserving and monumental channel—he wants to concretize a Fitzgerald-myth in order to concretize an aspect of literary study. Like Lee, Ullrich uses a pre-cut, pre-shaped form to curtail the shape of “Fitzgerald—author of things”: here, the “monomyth” establishes that conservatism by removing all instances of difference in an effort to maintain a conceptual identity and form—and, more materially, a particular taste.

Indeed, these attempts to concretize a particular form for Fitzgerald’s novel seem to presage Caroline Levine’s 2017 study Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network, where she sets out an argument in favor of forms against the so-called formlessness of poststructuralism. In fact, the “devil” and the shape of the devil represents just such a form—established by way of a long history of licit literary tastes—that essentially enables these specific acts of scholarly criticism to safely maintain distance from what makes the text truly decadent and horrible (and decadently critical): its sheer distastefulness. The solidity of form in literary studies requires, just like any other solidity, “technologies of maintenance,” and this chapter will explore how literary tastes—abstracted from the intensity of affect and built into such technologies—work to maintain that form as arguments and, more specifically, as genres. Both arguments and genres will here indicate the establishment of a “form” through literary tastes. Distaste, on the other hand, shows what is decadently critical as it works to dismantle those technologies. In the terminology of this dissertation, it means a double decadence: “literary decadence,” firstly and most superficially, instantly brings to mind notions of distaste, or the “tasteless,” whether it be, most often, related to subject matter, or to that excessive decadent style; secondly, and more to the point of this project, “distaste” means less the “mere dislike” of a thing, and becomes more
connected with Brian Massumi’s understanding of what comes “between forms” or what makes up formlessness: the “abstractness pertaining to the transitional immediacy of a real relation—that of a body to its own indeterminacy (its openness to an elsewhere and otherwise than it is, in any here and now)” (5). Distaste means that “openness to an elsewhere and otherwise than it is” as it works to repulse and to forestall at the moment of its “being tasted”—its intensity. It is, then, critical. It belongs with the critical caesura. The meeting point of these two “distastes” call upon the decadently critical by marking that intense crisis (krinein) of taste—and here, specifically, literary tastes. Form cannot hold in Fitzgerald’s first novel because “decadent criticism” so fully saturates the text; intense distaste short-circuits so many technologies of maintenance that the novel becomes, ironically perhaps, a testament to what is decadent. I want to investigate these manifestations in the book in connection with two other stories obliquely referenced in the novel itself, a 1917 theocratic treatise written by H. G. Wells, and a horror story concerning the mythos of the Yellow King by Robert Chambers.

In the end, the decadent criticism implicated through (Fitzgerald and Chambers) or in spite of (Wells’ theocracy) these particular works gives us the slightest and most ephemeral glimpse of the true horror hidden underneath that old form of the devil: the otherwise formless Invisible King.

Taste

It is true that Fitzgerald’s first novel seems very interested in the formation of Amory Blaine. Not only, of course, is it a bildungsroman, determined to show how Amory develops as a moral and romantic and educated personage, but one also finds in the novel the idea of “form” as a larger question that Amory must continually solve for himself. For example, he takes stock of
his formation and reformation, including the necessary influence of his mother (Beatice) and boarding school (St. Regis’), after he fails a math exam at Princeton and therefore becomes ineligible for chairing the *Princetonian*:

Amory’s point of view, though dangerous, was not far from the true one.

If his reactions to his environment could be tabulated, the chart would have appeared like this, beginning with his earliest years:

1. The fundamental Amory.
2. Amory plus Beatrice.
3. Amory plus Beatrice plus Minneapolis.

Then St Regis’ had pulled him to pieces and started him over again:

4. Amory plus St. Regis’.
5. Amory plus St. Regis’ plus Princeton.

That had been his nearest approach to success through conformity. The fundamental Amory, idle, imaginative, rebellious, had been nearly snowed under. He had conformed, he had succeeded, but as his imagination was neither satisfied nor grasped by his own success, he had listlessly, half-accidentally chucked the whole thing and become again:

6. The fundamental Amory. (73)

Understanding the impact of environment, Amory continually negotiates his “form” throughout the novel, until the famous final line of the novel invites a new deformation into the “fundamental Amory”: “I know myself,’ he cried, ‘but that is all.’” (213). The character of Amory conceptually, continually gets made and unmade and remade again and again. From this point of view, certainly, the concept of form makes for important matter within the novel, and
lends its weight to the exterior literary and religious forms imposed on Amory and the novel from critics like Tanner and Ullrich. Amory and the matter of the text ultimately get made and remade with those same motions when the critics start handling them. However, despite this center place of form—and I will return to form in the course of this essay—I am, first of all, more interested in certain elements that seem to create a firm ground for these particular formations.

For example, one thing that seems to emanate in a similar way from these quite different scholarly articles is their indirect application of the critic’s literary taste. This kind of thing, of course, is not unusual, but for some reason during these readings these moments struck me more than normal and even—maybe—left in me a small trace of something like horror. Perhaps set off by the more partisan evidence of Tanner’s dislike for postmodernism (his idea that “we have an obligation to name evil and oppose it in ourselves as well as in others [...] runs counter to the moral relativism of our time, which finds words like ‘evil’ and ‘wicked’ quaint and embarrassing, and it also runs afoul of the postmodernist tendency in academic theory and criticism to explain all formulations of good and evil as repressive constructions of the ruling caste” (76)), I became more interested in the smaller instances: when Ullrich, for example, makes a claim that three moments of attempted self-sacrifice and redemption in three different novels become “arguably the most crucial events in Fitzgerald’s canon” (58); or his claim that a “dialectical tension between this dark vision and its romantic countermovement” is what “sustains Fitzgerald through such a dark vision” and “empowers his finest literary investigations” (59). Since the argument itself can be questioned and changed and reformulated—from the definition of “dark vision” and the description of a “dialectical tension between this dark vision and its romantic countermovement”—and it requires that these are, in actuality—by all tastes—
the most “crucial events” in the novels, the grounding of the argument actually seems to be the initial act of taste: i.e., the statement that they are “his finest literary investigations.” After a brief disorienting and dyslexic moment, I became curious if the cause and consequence of this interchange isn’t actually reversed: rather, it’s the fact that Ullrich believes a set of Fitzgerald’s works are his “finest literary investigations” that empowers the “dark vision” and “dialectical tension” between it and its “romantic countermovement.” In other words, how far does taste go in establishing the argument? How much of Ullrich’s attempt to create a Fitzgerald monomyth is based around his taste for (however it may be established) a particular set of novels and stories? According to this almost critical materialism, the taste seems to be of stronger matter than the argument itself, even to the point of becoming the actual ground for the development of the argument.

Something similar happens in Lee’s argument when he petitions for Fitzgerald’s place in the form, “gothic modernism.” Lee’s initial plan is clear: gothic modernism denotes a category in which we can easily locate examples of Fitzgerald’s stranger, more supernatural work. In fact, his claim seems perfectly acceptable to me: “The supernatural form and pitched moral battles encoded within Fitzgerald’s work place him squarely within this fledgling field [i.e., Gothic modernism] and allows us to productively distinguish between some of its varied currents, which on the whole still remain ambiguous” (137). Nothing wrong with that. As a problem of definition and categorization, Lee doesn’t really have much work to do. However, in elaborating this categorization (or perhaps this is precisely what is happening in the categorization itself), he runs into complications of evaluation and taste folded up neatly within the process. First of all, it is partially a matter of taste entirely that allows some of Fitzgerald’s work to even be gothic: “One common complaint about Fitzgerald’s fantastical fiction is that their plots and characters pale in
comparison with those found in his more nuanced social realism, but such critiques miss the precise point of the Gothic ‘cliche.’ In fact, what makes Fitzgerald’s supernaturalism so shoddy as high Romanticism is exactly what makes it so effective as Gothic narrative” (129). Setting aside for a moment the relativism of “so shoddy as high Romanticism is exactly what makes it so effective as Gothic narrative,” Lee still expends his argument’s energy on the fact that these stories’ “plots and characters pale in comparison with those found in his more nuanced social realism.” Furthermore, “As both a shadow of Romantic idealism and the actualization of its excess, the Gothic spurns minimalism for maximalism in its language, symbols, and emotional tenor. What we witness in the Gothic mode is neither careless allegories nor cheap entertainment [...] While critics have judged the short fiction as a form of ‘selling out’ to crass public tastes, Fitzgerald’s Gothic mode challenges this view” (136). Lee’s argument, like Ullrich’s, comes created fully out of a singing network of critical taste; he is very careful as he bends and prods the wires and nodes of this electric network in order to make space and gently insert his own, ready and hungry—critical position. Fitzgerald’s worst work is important, he seems to be saying, precisely because it is his worst work.

That Lee is not willing to actually deal or interrogate these critical tastes themselves becomes clear in the same paragraph: “This is not to say that Fitzgerald’s supernatural stories are collectively superior to his other work, of course. I simply suggest they served as more than a financial haven or a testing ground for his novels, as they are often perceived. His Gothic mode served as an end unto itself, and hence the very stories that critics once marginalized should be reinterpreted as central to his art” (136). Furthermore, he later hedges that more “superior” work into his argument as much as he can: “Even Fitzgerald’s most splendid creation, Jay Gatsby,” he writes, “has been described as a Gothic protagonist” (137, my italics). Below Lee’s argument
spreads a constellation of tastes empowering the entire mechanism of this gothic modernist narrative: brilliant beams of “superior” and “most splendid” energizing the dead cells of “shoddy” and “cliche,” until the entire machine comes alive to produce its shifting and heft of “objective” argument. Whatever the tastes may be, they are founding the argument. In fact, the argument itself seems to be only an empty category, a mesmerizing aesthetic surface; the substance remains a demonstration of Lee’s taste. This possibility leads to one final note here: the constellating mechanism of taste that empowers the aesthetics of an argument is clearly a community affair. He writes near the end of his essay: “Hence, when we engage with his oft-forgotten fantastical works, we can see that in a symbolic sense there have been two Fitzgeralds all along: the Romantic Fitzgerald we have always admired for his inimitable prose, and the Gothic Fitzgerald lurking close behind, always cast in shadow—not because he was hiding, but because we refused to see him” (138). While this idea may make a lot of sense, I still consider it valuable to ask: who exactly is the we in this sentence referring to?

We means: a constellation of tastes undergirding a community-accepted argument. A formation given its pricked map and order of directives by way of tiny-quantum, cosmic, indiscriminate, invisible—universal/universalizing taste nodes. At the same time, We have the potential to turn attention to that constellation of tastes studding the folds below, instead of the arguments gilding the crests. We can reveal that constellation and machinery and determine how its operations alter not only the argument itself or the desirability of the argument, but the range and potential of what we can do with the morsel we have tasted: we can learn how to want more of its taste, how to make more and more again of its experiential taste. A decadent criticism is firstly and primarily interested in this subterranean and affective network of taste (not divorced from the argument—it is the aesthetic artificial surface, after all), and opens itself up inside this
unfolding skin. If I persist in using the word taste instead of value, it’s because I want to maintain the experiential, sensorial component of tasting itself: of course, I have been most clearly referring to the literary tastes of academics in the field, but I never want to let go of that sense of tasting—and I mean exactly that, right there at the moment of eating or savoring, that word-crack incipience of to eat—a thing, whether it is literary or otherwise. This includes the bodily pleasure of eating, and reading, writing, thinking, as well as the physical discomfort of distaste in all the same cases.³ Both senses of the word taste—cognitive and physical—are in motion with the experience. Ben Highmore spells this out in his essay, “Bitter after Taste”:

The term ‘taste,’ often center stage in evaluative aesthetic discourse, vividly registers the imbrication of sense and status, of discernment and disdain, of the physical and the ideational. The very mobilization of the word ‘taste’ to describe refined and discerning choice (and the social status that might go with it) should alert us to the way that bodily sensorial life is implied in such judgments from the start [...] One aspect of this distribution of sense (both cognition and sensation) is the way that seeing and hearing are invoked in matters of ideational cognition (‘ah, I see,’ ‘I hear you’), whereas ‘taste’ is mobilizing sensorial realms that are, in the end, impervious to rationalist dictates. (124)

Both the sensorial and the cognitive are intertwined. The experience of taste operates down there with the understanding; that pleasurable or uncomfortable bodily sensation must illuminate the

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³ This includes the response to what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls “the Other’s poison,” the distaste stemming from the mere fact that someone else likes or enjoys something deemed distasteful, and specifically involves the idea that “the Other’s enjoyment of his bad meat is possible only because of something suboptimal about his physiology, some problem in the organization of his responses that keeps him from ‘appreciating’ certain ‘things’—really or objectively good meat” (38).
cognitive registry of *I like it* or *I don’t like it*: and with that *fiat lux* of *I like it* or *I don’t like it* comes the first burgeoning consciousness of the inchoate argument.

Of course, these experiences of taste are never naked experiences. The first thing that comes to mind is Paul Shephard’s psychoanalytic conception of domesticated taste in *Nature and Madness*. Primarily interested in the transition of early humanity from a hunter and gatherer’s existence to an agricultural one, Shephard sees there a regression from complex maturity to a more simplified and limited immaturity. For various reasons, including a “chronic preoccupation with food” caused by the reductive factors of newly civilized life (32), people living in such conditions suffered from a reduction of taste potential: “I mean not only the infantile impatience to eat and the whole alimentary oral-anal romance to which he is so responsive, but the typical conservatism of older children and adolescents—the first, perhaps because of a sensitivity to strong or strange flavors; the second, because of a psychic state in which the groping for a new selfhood is partly one of recognition of codes that identify a group. Teenagers are the weakest gourmets because they have not yet achieved a confident-enough identity to free themselves to develop personal preferences. The young are wary about what they eat, probably for adaptive as well as culturally functional reasons” (32). In contrast, “...the small foraging band ate dozens of kinds of flesh (including invertebrates) and scores of kinds of roots, nuts, vegetables, and leaves. [...] There were certainly seasonal opportunities and choices, but apparently to be human is to be omnivorous, to show an open, experimental attitude toward what is edible, gilded by an educated taste and a wide range of options” (33). Because of the limited conditions of the agricultural community—because of this tightening, community-induced domestication—people’s tastes became likewise limited; and, by way of the limitation of their literal taste-buds, immature arguments began to form: “The food-producing societies that succeeded the hunter-gatherers
attempted to make virtue of defect by intensifying the cultural proscriptions on what was to be eaten in a world where, for most people, there were fewer choices than their archaic ancestors enjoyed. And how was this tightening of the belt and expanded contempt achieved? It was built into the older child and adolescent. It could be frozen at that level as part of a more general development check” (33). James C. Scott makes similar claims more recently, claiming that, in distinction to early agriculturalists, hunter-gatherers are “generalists and opportunists ever alert to take advantage of the scattered and episodic bounty nature bring their way” (Against 89); in contrast, early agriculturalists have a much more rigid enforcement of specific tastes: “Once Homo sapiens took that fateful step into agriculture, our species entered an austere monastery whose taskmaster consists mostly of the demanding, genetic clockwork of a few plants” (Against 91). This constriction of idea by way of taste is reflected metaphysically in Deleuze’s Difference and Repetition, during his discussion of “good sense” and “common sense,” two factors that ultimately reinforce recognition and the Same and thus limit the real possibility of difference and thought. He writes, “What is recognised is not only an object but also the values attached to an object (values play a crucial role in the distributions undertaken by good sense). In so far as the practical finality of recognition lies in the ‘established values’, then on this model the whole image of thought as Cogitatio natura bears witness to a disturbing complacency” (135). “The form of recognition,” he says, “has never sanctioned anything but the recognisable and the recognised; form will never inspire anything but conformities” (134). Both of these examples are meant to close in on the notion that taste is shaped by elements other than the mere experience of a thing itself.

For the scholars, of course, the university proves a kind of sub-domestication within our more general civilization. Tastes are tacitly allowed or turned away from; encouraged or
forbidden (perhaps, not ostentatiously); held on display or guiltily held in secret. We have seen how an academic like Lee can become nervous that his own tastes will become interrogated while simultaneously maintaining the necessity of texts with an unhappy, unpopular taste to his effort at categorization. Barbara Herrnstein Smith described it in the late 80’s in terms that evoke the concept of “technologies of maintenance”: since “Those who are in positions to edit anthologies and prepare reading lists […] will usually exclude not only what they take to be inferior literature but also what they take to be nonliterary, subliterary, or paraliterary, their selections not only imply certain ‘criteria’ of literary value, which may in fact be made explicit, but, more significantly, they produced and maintain certain definitions of ‘literature’” (46-7); and, moreover, remarking on how changing ideals and conditions alter literary texts, and if a text “no longer performs those original functions particularly well, it will, accordingly, be less well maintained and less frequently cited, recited, etc., so that its visibility as well as interest will fade and it will survive, if at all, simply as a physical relic” (49). Herrnstein Smith here describes aspects of literary taste that operate simultaneously as technologies of maintenance. If literary taste has a large part in grounding literary arguments, then, the institutional armature that literally affords those arguments seems to be the major effort establishing those tastes to begin with. And, furthermore, if decadent criticism works to resist and confuse various technologies of maintenance, those that operate off of literary taste become easy ways of accessing the rigidity of the university.

Fitzgerald’s first novel operates with this situation held in check. Yes, the novel is interested in form and formation. But it is also extremely interested in how tastes contribute and even seem to build those formations; and, likewise, how the institution (for Fitzgerald, of course: it’s Princeton) imposes its reduction of tastes on the individual, closing off potential and the
apparatus for opening up to various pleasures. There is the unlimited unravelling of literary and fashionable tastes throughout the novel,—littering so many pages with lists of authors and thinkers Amory likes and the ones he doesn’t, whom he’s expected to approve of and whom to reject; there is the fact that the novel begins with the many “decadent” tastes of his mother and the singular “taste for Byron” of his father (1). Likewise, this experience of taste is not limited to literary and otherwise values. Amory’s first experience at Princeton—and the only experience that can calm him—involved eating four “bacon buns,” “finding them of pleasing savor,” and two “double chocolate jiggahs” (27) at a local confectionery. And there is the important early scene where Amory finds his first real taste of romantic expression by way of his first kiss: “But Amory, being on the spot, leaned over quickly and kissed Myra’s cheek. He had never kissed a girl before, and he tasted his lips curiously, as if he had munched some new fruit. Then their lips brushed like young wild flowers in the wind”; immediately afterward, the affect finds its effect—“Sudden revulsion seized Amory, disgust, loathing for the whole incident. He desired frantically to be away, never to see Myra again, never to kiss any one; he became conscious of his face and hers, of their clinging hands, and he wanted to creep out of his body and hide somewhere safe out of sight, up in the corner of his mind” (9).

I will return to this particular moment—a moment where the taste of a theme finds its flavor and texture against the edges of the mouth, hesitantly against the tongue—and, then, immediately and strangely, flowers into a beautiful repulsion—a moment that also immediately “finds” its most obvious form when Tanner describes it as “Amory’s intense revulsion at his first kiss signals his initiation into evil and prepares the reader for his encounter with the devil. That revulsion is accordingly described in Adamic terms” (72-3). Before we can return to this moment, however, I want to better describe exactly how it is that a critic like Tanner can so
easily find his particular and contrived form in the taste-experience, because I believe that part of what this novel is doing is adeptly investigating exactly how the experience of taste can equally lead to form. Or perhaps, it might be better to describe it this way: we know thoroughly how the sense of smell adds or detracts from the sense of taste, and we know how these senses overlap and bring an experience into existence hand-in-hand, so to speak; perhaps we can say the same about how the sense of taste can overlap and produce an experience of vision. As Brian Massumi points out in *Parables for the Virtual*, “Vision always cofunctions with other senses, from which it receives a continuous feed and itself feeds into: hearing, touch, proprioception, to name only the most prominent” (145). In the same way, what we see or what is visible may be determined and founded by the sense and expression of taste more than we might let on or even know. Both form and taste matter here, and for this novel, because they are inherently connected, with an experience of taste grounding form and vision. By privileging that unfurling experience of taste over the establishment of form—by dwelling with that initial and chaotic burst emanating from a strange “new fruit” and attending to how that strange burst of taste begets form—I find myself more interested in what is decadently critical about the experience than the more conceptual and less sensual (or sensational) form of its argument. Fitzgerald seems interested in the what Herrnstein Smith describes as “that validation” which “typically takes the twofold form of, first, *privileging absolutely*—that is, ‘standard’-izing, making a standard out of—not simply the preferences of the members of the group but, more significantly and also more powerfully because more invisibly, *the particular contingencies that govern their preferences*; and, second but simultaneously, *discounting or pathologizing* not merely other people’s tastes but, again more significantly and effectively, *all other contingencies*” (41). Something else orchestrates that formulation from deep within the constellation of tastes, and it’s not the devil; the problem with
the devil is precisely that he shows himself, becomes too seen to let loose the argument. It’s all too permanent and conforming. Our lurking, dictating judge-king here, on the other hand, is wholly invisible, dwelling insensate and unfulfilled, and somehow casts such illusory arguments far and wide entirely on that account.

The Happy Adventure

One of Fitzgerald’s primary interests in Paradise follows the complex array of psychological and social compulsions that slowly organize students and various young men and women into the lasting social formations they will ultimately be appropriated into: ultimately, these organizations rest on the individual’s taste. Both Amory’s eager acceptance of this phenomenon and his discomfort are noted throughout the novel at different points. One of the most demonstrative examples of this psychological and compulsory organization occurs when Princeton students organize themselves into various clubs:

There were fickle groups that jumped from club to club; there were friends of two or three days who announced tearfully and wildly that they must join the same club, nothing should separate them; there were snarling disclosures of long-hidden grudges as the Suddenly Prominent remembered snubs of freshman year. Unknown men were elevated into importance when they received certain coveted bids; others who were considered “all set” found that they had made unexpected enemies, felt themselves stranded and deserted, talked wildly of leaving college.

(53)

When Burne Holiday attempts to bring the smallest measure of anarchism to the clubs by persuading juniors to quit them because (as Amory’s friend Tom frames it:) “...clubs injurious to
Princeton democracy; cost a lot; draw social lines, take time; the regular line you get sometimes from disappointed sophomores. Woodrow thought they should be abolished and all that” (90), the action sparks a miniature rebellion: “Every one’s been sitting and arguing and swearing and getting mad and getting sentimental and getting brutal. It’s the same at all the clubs [...] They get one of the radicals in the corner and fire questions at him” (90). The pulse of that compulsion keeps fast and steady in Amory’s perspective, despite Burne’s attempt, even to the end of the novel. Amory tells the “man in the goggles” who’s driving him back to Princeton: “Did you ever see a grown man when he’s trying for a secret society—or a rising family whose name is up at some club? They’ll jump when they hear the sound of the word. The idea that to make a man work you’ve got to hold gold in front of his eyes is a growth, not an axiom. We’ve done that for so long that we’ve forgotten there’s any other way. We’ve made a world where that’s necessary” (207). It’s this impulse—“They’ll jump when they hear the sound of the word”—that seems to offend or interest Amory, since even “gold” cannot fully account for the sheer compulsion on command: “We’ve done that for so long that we’ve forgotten there’s any other way. We’ve made a world where that’s necessary.” We have, so to speak, established and accepted a self-domestication. The notion plays out even more dramatically in an earlier moment during a description of the Triangle Club’s, a theatre group, production of their yearly comedy:

There was one brilliant piece in “Ha-Ha Hortense!” It is a Princeton tradition that whenever a Yale man who is a member of the widely advertised “Skull and Bones” hears the sacred name mentioned, he must leave the room. It is also a tradition that the members are invariably successful in later life, amassing fortunes or votes or coupons or whatever they choose to amass. Therefore, at each performance of “Ha-Ha Hortense!” half-a-dozen seats were kept from sale and
occupied by six of the worst-looking vagabonds that could be hired from the streets, further touched up by the Triangle make-up man. At the moment in the show where *Firebrand, the Pirate Chief*, pointed at his black flag and said, “I am a Yale graduate—note my Skull and Bones!”—at this very moment the six vagabonds were instructed to rise *conspicuously* and leave the theatre with looks of deep melancholy and an injured dignity. It was claimed though never proved that on one occasion the hired Elis were swelled by one of the real thing. (42)

Despite the fact that this rather classist injunction plays for a pretty bad joke, Amory’s fascination shows itself: it’s the secret society or club from Amory’s later speech—here specified as Yale’s Skull and Bones—utterly and silently compelling its component members to literally jump up and remove themselves based on “the sound of the word,” the iteration: “Skull and Bones.” It’s a joke—but it’s clear that Amory orients his own formation and philosophy and oftentimes his fear off of this ordering phenomenon. The sound of the word—and likewise, I would argue, the *taste* of the word in the mouth, as these senses fold over each other—articulates the argument its adherents will form and mouth in response. The idea clearly illuminates Amory and the form of his thinking; and it casts in the background that shadow of skull and bones and *tongue* on the wall.

This compulsion that Amory sees is unaligned with any sort of authority figure, even though the impulse seems to be there. From the beginning of the novel, Amory rejects practically every authority figure that comes his way, starting with his mother. The only figure that might come close to an authority that Amory submits to would be Monsignor Darcy, and their relationship can be reduced ultimately to a friendship of equals, wherein the Monsignor himself understands his limited influence: “Whatever your metier proves to be,” he writes to Amory,
“I’m sure you would be much safer anchored to the Church, but I won’t risk my influence by arguing with you even though I am secretly sure that the ‘black chasm of Romanism’ yawns beneath you” (78). Rather, as we have noted, these social formations seem to be “authorized” and set in place by an invisible system of compulsions signaled through literary and otherwise tastes: “One week, through general curiosity, he inspected the private libraries of his classmates and found Sloane’s as typical as any: sets of Kipling, O. Henry, John Fox, Jr., and Richard Harding Davis; “What Every Middle-Aged Woman Ought to Know,” “The Spell of the Yukon” […] and, finally, to his surprise, one of his own late discoveries, the collected poems of Rupert Brooke” (79). Even Burne, the anarchist of Princeton undergraduates, formulates his argument through his literary (and physical) tastes: when asked by Amory, “What started you?” he answers: “‘Wells, I guess, and Tolstoi, and a man named Edward Carpenter. I’ve been reading for over a year now—one a few lines, on what I consider the essential lines,’” and, in the same conversation, on Tolstoi, “‘He’s the greatest man in hundreds of years,’ cried Burne enthusiastically. ‘Did you ever see a picture of that shaggy old head of his?’” (92). It is no surprise, of course, that a person’s (and especially a student’s) political formation comes from their literary reading; but I would argue here that, for Amory, this kind of formation is akin to the Skull and Bones members who must compulsively rise and depart when they hear that directive, that “sound of the word.” Amory cannot commit in the same way to Burne’s politics, even though he finds himself often electrified by the ideas, because this perception of how tastes ground a person’s philosophical and political arguments ultimately aggravates and dissuades Amory from that single possibility.

This aggravation reaches a culmination towards the end of the novel, in section five, where Amory finds himself figuratively adrift in his thoughts and literally adrift in New York
city. “There were no more wise men,” he writes, “there were no more heroes; Burne Holiday was sunk from sight as though he had never lived; Monsignor was dead. Amory had grown up to a thousand books, a thousand lies; he had listened eagerly to people who pretended to know, who knew nothing” (198). Distraught from this realization, Amory finally attempts to account for a source behind the compulsory organizing and his understanding of that organization’s ultimate failure:

Life was a damned muddle… a football game with every one off-side and the referee gotten rid of—every one claiming the referee would have been on his side…

Progress was a labyrinth… people plunging blindly in and then rushing wildly back, shouting that they had found it… the invisible king—the elan vital—the principle of evolution… writing a book, starting a war, founding a school….

Amory, even had he not been a selfish man, would have started all inquiries with himself. He was his own best example—sitting in the rain, a human creature of sex and pride, foiled by chance and his own temperament of the balm of love and children, preserved to help in building up the living consciousness of the race.

In self-reproach and loneliness and disillusion he came to the entrance of the labyrinth. (200)

I am most interested here in the reference to an “invisible king,” since I believe it to be both a general and a specific reference. In general, this “invisible king” accounts for the missing authority that directs all that social and formal organization Amory skirts and seeks and elaborates and hides from. This is potentially the same king from Foucault’s description in
“Truth and Power”: “...political theory has never ceased to be obsessed with the person of the sovereign [...] What we need, however, is a political philosophy that isn’t erected around the problem of sovereignty, nor therefore around the problems of law and prohibition. We need to cut off the king’s head” (63). Despite the absence or deterioration of the monarchy, society and the state still operate through a sovereign logic where all potential or possibility is edited through a complex knot of laws and prohibitive words and registered as functional reality. The King still has his head, but we don’t see him anymore. He is something like pure political possibility, given shape and form—based on our obsession to establish the “person of the sovereign,” our directive to give a form to a prohibitive argument which will reduce all multiplicities to an equal Same—but a shape and form that retrospectively blots out and erases the political potential of Foucault’s “political philosophy that isn’t erected around the problem of sovereignty.” This is the “invisible king” of Fitzgerald’s novel, as well; and yet Amory seems to catch a glimpse of this phenomenon not only occurring in the political milieu, but in practically every other social formation as well. There seems to exist an invisible hand moving around the characters in the novel—plucking them up from their seats and removing them at the “sound of the word,” or the taste of the word—and it’s that perception that creates a disturbance for Amory that seems unchecked even by the end of the novel.

The more specific reference of the “invisible king,” I believe, is to H. G. Wells’ strange and strangely detailed theocratic manifesto published in 1917, God, The Invisible King. Written in part as a response to World War I, Wells’ book provides plans for a new, worldwide theocracy that operates under the configuration of a new, “modern,” and limited God, one characterized by limitation and an almost human personality. The community here remains deeply committed to a powerful authority, but since Wells, scarred by the war and hungry for a new newness, finds
issue with Earthly authority, he must write out this figure as one “invisibly” authoritarian—his Invisible King must be able to control and shape his followers without explicit command and without any sanctified hierarchy to fall back on. He establishes this “modern” deity by carefully extracting Him from the web of traditional and historical accumulation that have more or less shaped the more objectional aspects of certain religious cultures. It means a modern religion without dogma and with, interestingly, a much more limited and, as he repeats again and again, a much more finite god. Wells builds this religion by distinguishing the modern god from the “Veiled Being,” a different figure entirely, “enigmatical and incomprehensible,” who “[broods] over the mirror upon which the busy shapes of life are moving. It is as if it waited in a great stillness. our lives do not deal with it, and cannot deal with it. It may be that they may never be able to deal with it” (ch. 1). Instead, the Invisible King becomes a variation of the old form: “The new religion does not pretend that the God of its life is that Being, or that he has any relation of control or association with that Being. It does not even assert that God knows all or much more than we do about that ultimate Being” (ch. 1). Echo almost, or shadow—the Invisible King has already begun to slip into the periphery of perceiving. Already he becomes less metaphysical as he takes on more human categories: “He is the immortal part and leader of mankind. He has motives, has characteristics, he has an aim. He is by our poor scales of measurement boundless love, boundless courage, boundless generosity’ (ch. 1). And, ultimately, that periphery of perception matters here, since “Modern religion appeals to no revelation, no authoritative teaching, no mystery. The statement it makes is, it declares, a mere statement of what we may all perceive and experience,” and, with this lack of authoritative teaching and focus on perception in mind, Wells manages to split open perception and bind within it a quicksilver trace of the absolute: “All this is in the nature of things. If every one who perceives and states it were to be
instantly killed and blotted out, presently other people would find their way to the same
conclusions; and so on again and again” (ch. 1). Repetition here signifies the absolute, full pulse
of the Invisible King within the singular act of perceiving, and Wells has essentially relocated the
deity’s epistemological and authoritative intensity from believer to perceiver. The fact that this
religion “appeals to no revelation, no authoritative teaching, no mystery” and no dogma cements
its Tao into the perceptual faculties alone of these active perceivers: they either perceive and
know and act accordingly, or they don’t perceive—don’t have the taste for it—and therefore
don’t know and therefore disappear into the void.

Since this Invisible King is divorced from both the “Veiled Being” and the “life force”
(ch. 1) itself (an interesting trinity—), Wells channels his absolute “presence” into a singular
perception by defining the King into a “personality,” with characteristics and goals. Already
there flames a spark as this work comes striking against Fitzgerald’s novel—more than once in
the novel, but most specifically in a scene with an unhappy Amory gaining solace from
Monsignor Darcy, the reader learns how “personality” is somehow a weaker and lesser version
of a “personage.” This passage will return later in the chapter, but it remains interesting to note
how again and again the notion of a “personality” gains less traction for Fitzgerald than one
might assume otherwise. On the other hand, the idea that Wells’ Invisible King is very much a
personality and a person also rings again and again throughout the pages of his treatise. “God is a
person,” Wells writes, “who can be known as one knows a friend, who can be served and who
receives service, who partakes of our nature...He is our king to whom we must be loyal; he is our
captain, and to know him is to have a direction in our lives” (ch. 3). Again, this personality is
proved only through perception—“those who have left the old creeds ... say, Show us this
person; let us hear him (If they listen to the silences within, presently they will hear him)” (ch. 3)
and “Those who profess modern religion [...] declare that God is without any specific body, that he is immaterial, that he can affect the material universe—and that means that he can only reach our sight, our hearing, our touch—through the bodies of those who believe in him and serve him” (ch. 3). Importantly, the fact that God does not have a body and yet still a personality becomes the hallmark of the idea: “From the earliest ages man’s mind has found little or no difficulty in the idea of something essential to the personality, a soul or a spirit or both, existing apart from the body and continuing after the destruction of the body, and being still a person and an individual. From this it is a small step to the thought of a person existing independently of any existing or pre-existing body” (ch. 3). Existing without a body and without a historical or religious creed, the Invisible King means a personality—and it’s interesting to note how it’s the personality here that nurses the spirit or the soul (or both)—that yet remains somehow graspable—and only graspable—by the body’s perceiving faculties. “No one, however, who understands the religious life seeks conversion by argument” (ch. 3). Absolute personality; singular perceptions; the interplay of this asymmetry seems to fuel the modern religion in new ways, separated from the presence of history and dogma and external control that often work in tandem with institutional religions.

But where does this modern religion go? If personality makes for the first part, then the “happy adventure” equals the second part of the formula of the Invisible King, and together the whole substantiates its place in Fitzgerald’s larger criticism. Describing God as a “beautiful youth, already brave and wise,” Wells writes, “he should stand lightly on his feet in the morning time, eager to go forward, as though he had but newly arisen to a day that was still but a promise; he should bear a sword, that clean, discriminating weapon, his eyes should be as bright as swords, his lips should fall apart with eagerness for the great adventure before him, and he
should be in very fresh and golden harness, reflecting the rising sun” (ch. 3). Though bound to its classical motif, the depiction here of the King rests on its “eagerness for the great adventure before him,” and this “great adventure” returns time after time in the prose as the endpoint of humanity’s interaction with the Invisible King. Of course, the “great adventure” is not an uncommon fixture in stories of romantic heroism, stories that Wells is interestingly drawing on for this description, but it is interesting that this adventure makes for the culmination of a human relationship with the divine and, moreover, it is even more interesting how this “adventure” finds its expression or desire in humans who have no real communication with the King other than perceiving his personality by way of other humans. Once again, it has nothing to do with arguments: “Modern religion bases its knowledge of God and its account of God entirely upon experience [...] It does not argue about God; it relates. It relates without any of those wrappings of awe and reverence that fold so necessarily about imposture, it relates as one tells of a friend and his assistance, of a happy adventure, of a beautiful thing found and picked up by the wayside” (ch. 1). Furthermore, we humans, after allowing for the invisible king to “rescue us from the chagrins of egotism and take us into his immortal adventure,” must “be equally ready and willing to give our energies to the task we share with him, to do our utmost to increase knowledge, to increase order and clearness, to fight against indolence, waste, disorder, cruelty, vice,” and “bring about the establishment of his real and visible kingdom throughout the world” (ch. 5). Wells phrases this kingdom in dynamic terms: the kingdom unravels into a narrative. His adventure is his kingdom in movement—the absolute story that can only be pierced by humans by way of purposefully perceiving an invisible and intangible deity. This is made even more clear in an interesting passage, concerning “those who explain this modern religiosity”:
And just as they advance no proof whatever of the existence of God but their realisation of him, so with regard to these qualities and dispositions they have little argument but profound conviction. What they say is this; that if you do not feel God then there is no persuading you of him; we cannot win over the incredulous. And what they say of his qualities is this; that if you feel God then you will know, you will realise more and more clearly, that thus and thus and no other is his method and intention. (ch. 5)

In order to engage with this happy adventure, one must first feel (and we have seen that this seems to suggest the intensity of sensual perceiving) God; and, drawing the final conclusion, one must therefore have a sense for—or have a taste for—the happy adventure and the Invisible King. If you have that taste, “then you will know, you will realise more and more clearly”; if you do not, “then there is no persuading you of him.” Either you have that singular, earthly taste for the absolute narrative—that happy adventure of progress (the “increase of knowledge [...] order and clearness”)—or you do not and you are left behind with the “decadent” lack thereof (“...indolence, waste, disorder, cruelty, vice”). Progress is an absolute narrative, a happy adventure; the only way to globally reach it is through the happenstance of being able to perceive this Invisible King. One must simply—have the taste for it. Wells’ directive for the Invisible King demonstrates this divine taste, this immaculate mouthing of the invisible fruit: “...his eyes should be as bright as swords, his lips should fall apart with eagerness for the great adventure before him.” The fact that it is taste that precipitates the adventure of progress and any theological inclusion into the community is what truly fascinates me; it refutes control, institutional or otherwise, choice, belief, and anything like argument. It literalizes in a striking way what I believe is fundamental to This Side of Paradise and what I believe marks the critical
deployments introduced at the beginning of this chapter (and much criticism overall): there is a flashing moment when the supposed arbitrariness and singularity and subjectivity of (literary or otherwise) taste overflows into an absolute, when that arbitrary, personal, ephemeral act of perceiving intensity actually calls down with it an infinitely unraveling, infinitely narrativizing, absolute “adventure” of steel and argument. Even if it’s only for that one moment (and, importantly, because it’s only for that moment): the ephemeral here becomes the absolute.

It seems highly likely that Fitzgerald read this book by Wells. First, H. G. Wells is the most often referenced author in the entire novel, and one that Fitzgerald the author found himself deeply influenced by. As Thomas Birch notes, this influence goes beyond style: “What had a more enduring impact on Fitzgerald than Wells’ discursive style was his socioeconomic thought, which satirized the wealthy aristocracy and faith in the capitalist system. In this respect, Wells, Shaw, and Fitzgerald were linear brethren” (56). Secondly, Fitzgerald seems to be offering Amory the character as a kind of foil and resistance to the ideas purported in Wells’ treatise. Amory becomes a kind of thought experiment in the face of the Invisible King: If this theocracy is our destiny, what about the one who simply can’t or won’t taste the taste of progress? Or, perhaps even more to the point, what about the one who finds this taste itself distasteful? Not the logic or the meaning or the truth of the concept of progress, but, rather—the taste of it. Being tasteful, as we have seen, and can see here, becomes important for the mission that Wells’ Invisible King has set into motion: “The coming kingship of God if it is to be more than hieratic tyranny must have this universality of appeal. As the head grows clear the body will turn in the right direction. To the mass of men modern religion says, ‘This is the God it has always been in your nature to apprehend’” (ch. 5). Here, the taste, the universality of appeal, draws the head towards the “right direction.” Even though Wells calls for the “universality of appeal,” he does
describe a specific case which denies this “taste” of progress and therefore cannot find nourishment in it. This case marks, in Wells’ terms, the “benevolent unbeliever,” and he vividly relates the differences between this person and “those who have found God”:

The difference is this, that the benevolent atheist stands alone upon his own good will, without a reference, without a standard, trusting to his own impulse to goodness, relying upon his own moral strength. A certain immodesty, a certain self-righteousness, hangs like a precipice above him; incalculable temptations open like gulfs beneath his feet. He has not really given himself or got away from himself. He has no one to whom he can give himself. He is still a masterless man. His exaltation is self-centred, is priggishness, his fall is unrestrained by any exterior obligation. His devotion is only the good will in himself, a disposition; it is a mood that may change. At any moment it may change. He may have pledged himself to his own pride and honour, but who will hold him to his bargain? He has no source of strength beyond his own amiable sentiments, his conscience speaks with an unsupported voice, and no one watches while he sleeps. He cannot pray; he can but ejaculate. He has no real and living link with other men of good will. (ch. 4)

Amory is depicted as precisely this type of benevolent unbeliever in *Paradise*. In fact, this description accounts for much of the trouble Amory has in expressing himself. That disturbance, that constant dismantling of form that we have noted, finds a source in this specific shape; and somehow it gives itself over to nothing but *form*, no sense or presence of *taste*. Wells describes the general person who does not have a taste for the adventure the Invisible King slowly unravels and it becomes singular in the figure of Amory Blaine. Amory is always being praised for his
right sense of the “good,” and yet can never really unlatch himself from his own desires: “His exaltation is self-centred, is priggishness, his fall is unrestrained by any exterior obligation. His devotion is only the good will in himself, a disposition; it is a mood that may change.” Amory consistently reports these very facts about himself to himself; he is clearly aware that he seems to be filling this role: “‘I am selfish,’ he thought. ‘This is not a quality that will change when I “see human suffering” or “lose my parents” or “help others”’”; and, on the same page, “‘There is no virtue of unselfishness that I cannot use. I can make sacrifices, be charitable, give to a friend, endure for a friend, lay down my life for a friend—all because these things may be the best possible expression of myself; yet I have not one drop of the milk of human kindness’” (211).

The fact that the “benevolent atheist” “cannot pray; he can but ejaculate” seems entirely appropriate for the final lines of the novel: “I know myself,” he cried, “but that is all” (213). “There was no God in his heart,” Fitzgerald writes about Amory, “his ideas were still in riot; there was ever the pain of memory; the regret for his lost youth—yet the waters of disillusion had left a deposit on his soul, responsibility and a love of life, the faint stirring of old ambitions and unrealized dreams” (213). Amory provides a fictionalized account of Wells’ benevolent atheist in the midst of rejecting that taste for the happy adventure. Fitzgerald gives the depiction and process for, indeed, a kind of distaste of that project in general.

From this vantage point, the novel seems to be a kind of response to Wells’ 1917 treatise; returning to the passage from *Paradise* connects it again to Wells: “Progress was a labyrinth... people plunging blindly in and then rushing wildly back, shouting that they had found it...the invisible king—the elan vital—the principle of evolution...writing a book, starting a war, founding a school... Amory, even had he not been a selfish man, would have started all inquiries with himself. He was his own best example—sitting in the rain, a human creature of sex and
pride, foiled by chance and his own temperament of the balm of love and children, preserved to help in building up the living consciousness of the race” (200). Again, Amory becomes both the challenger of Wells (“Progress was a labyrinth”) and the exact depiction of Wells’ “benevolent unbeliever” (“...even had he not been a selfish man [...] a human creature of sex and pride, foiled by chance and his own temperament...”). Fitzgerald here is interested in and thereby interrogates that central idea from Wells’ book—not specifically its (or any others’) description of God or religion or Socialism or the intellectual—but, rather, he comes to that more specific notion that Wells’ book seems to be eternalizing: the idea that an “absolute morality” or an unquestioned compulsion can be linked inextricably to an individual’s tastes—that mere intensity of perceiving that emerges there at the edge of the tongue, then swallowed, broken and falling down—and is more fundamental and profound and permanent to that morality or compulsion than the act of choosing, the act of believing, the act of knowing, or the act of being persuaded by argument. For Wells, that “absolute” of a happy adventure guides and determines the tastes of its perceivers beforehand; it determines individual tastes by gathering them at the community’s overarching goal of its adventure. It is a taste that fits the pre-formed end. The transcendence here rests on the notion that most people agree “tastes” are entirely subjective; the line is crossed when subjective tastes lead an individual to an objectively absolute endpoint. But this mechanism also protects the “origin” and purpose of its objective endpoint by hiding it precisely in those miniature, subjective tastebuds. Where the absolute object remains immobile and powerful and all-consuming, the threads that bind all individuals to its ballooning steel vanish into the discrete moments of subjectivity and those pinpricks of taste. This is what I mean by “constellations of taste”: micro-subjective intensities that sneak into the form of gigantic mythological orders and grand narratives without anyone ever noticing. The “compulsions” of so
many characters in *Paradise* that seem to fascinate Amory so much are of the same material as this Invisible King: the ephemeral tastes of these characters seem to divine an absolute shape for them, despite themselves. While Wells inadvertently depicts this complex in his theocracy by the manner in which he welds his perceivers to the Invisible King and the King’s adventurous genre, Fitzgerald seems to be responding to it in his characterization of Amory and, likewise, Amory’s critical distaste of all the genres he is forced by his author to experience.

Distaste

There exists another potential example for the “invisible king” in Fitzgerald’s novel. Though less likely than Wells’ *God the Invisible King*, Amory does mention reading the works of Robert W. Chambers, an early 20th century writer who spent the majority of his career writing popular “shop girl” novels and refurbishing antique furniture. However, he began his career with a book of horror stories that were somewhat popularized later in part by H. P. Lovecraft’s inclusion of them in his book on supernatural horror fiction. Chambers’ stories, though varying quite a bit in terms of character and setting and plotting, all include the presence of a fictional play called “The King in Yellow.” This play takes place in a fantasy world, inspired by (and named from) an ambiguous story entitled, “An Inhabitant of Carcosa,” by Ambrose Bierce. In *Paradise*, Fitzgerald once again smuggles Chambers into another paragraph of taste-making names: “He read voluminously all spring, the beginning of his eighteenth year: ‘The Gentlemen from Indiana,’ ‘The New Arabian Nights,’ ‘The Morals of Marcus Ordeyne,’ ‘The Man Who Was Thursday,’ which he liked without understanding; ‘Stover at Yale,’ that became somewhat of a textbook; ‘Dombey and Son,’ because he thought he really should read better stuff; Robert Chambers, David Graham Phillips, and E. Phillips Oppenheim complete, and a scattering of
Tennyson and Kipling” (23). Though “The King in Yellow” comprises several different and varying stories centering only on the appearance of the titular play, I want to focus on “The Yellow Sign” and how this story offers a model with which to see the Invisible King—and a model for how to read Amory’s role in *Paradise*. Both of these stories work against the notion of genre—and here, I want to use Lauren Berlant’s understanding: “Genres provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art” (qtd. in North, ch. 4). It makes sense that *distaste*—itself an intensity and affect—works against “genre” in this way, since genre itself is an “affective expectation.”

“The Yellow Sign” is, as the other stories in the collection, billed as a horror story. However, after reading, its genre seems somewhat hard to distinguish. Although the two main protagonists of the story, a world-weary and unnamed painter and his young model, Tessie, both end up apparently dead or dying by the end of the story at the hands of a true supernatural horror, the majority of the story resembles the kind of romance the author would later be known for writing. Fifteen of the story’s nineteen pages follow the beginning of a budding relationship between the painter and his model, as Tessie reveals her love for the sardonic, older painter in the studio in which practically the entirety of the story takes place. When she declares her love for him, the painter’s psychological and reflective response is typical of the kind of romantic description the story offers:

> It was too late now for me to regret what had occurred during the day. Whatever it had been, pity, a sudden tenderness for sorrow, or the more brutal instinct of gratified vanity, it was all the same now, and unless I wished to bruise an innocent heart my path lay marked before me. The fire and strength, the depth of passion of a love which I had never even suspected, with all my imagined experience in the
world, left me no alternative but to respond or send her away. Whether because I am so cowardly about giving pain to others, or whether it was that I have little of the gloomy Puritan in me, I do not know, but I shrank from disclaiming responsibility for that thoughtless kiss, and in fact had no time to do so before the gates of her heart opened and the flood poured forth. (13)

The next day, after that first kiss, the two are together again and a new complication ensues:

Tessie now feels embarrassed at modeling for her new courter. “Then I understood,” the painter thinks, “Here was a new complication. I had lost, of course, the best nude model I had ever seen. I looked at Tessie. Her face was scarlet. Alas! Alas! We had eaten of the tree of knowledge, and Eden and native innocence were dreams of the past—I mean for her” (15).

Though this is the primary movement of the story up to this point, scattered throughout the build-up are fragments of horror elements. The constant presence of a strange pale man loitering in the churchyard below his window haunts the protagonist from the beginning:

“Instantly I thought of a coffin-worm. Whatever it was about the man that repelled me I did not know, but the impression of a plump white grave-worm was so intense and nauseating that I must have shown it in my expression, for he turned his puffy face away with a movement which made me think of a disturbed grub in a chestnut” (2). The strange man returns several times during the story, including in one encounter where two of his moist, larval fingers “twist off” into the hands of the protagonist’s bellboy, both in reality and in various dreams that the two characters share. In the dreams, the strange man operates a hearse in which the protagonist lies. The sound of the man’s voice echoes in his dream, “It filled my head, that muttering sound, like thick oily smoke from a fat-rendering vat or an odor of noisome decay,” and repeats the question, “‘Have you found the yellow sign?’” three times (14). Towards the end of the story, Tessie gives
him a present she found one day, a “clasp of black onyx, on which was inlaid a curious symbol or letter in gold. It was neither Arabic or Chinese, nor as I found afterwards did it belong to any human script” (15). Afterwards, the painter sprains his wrists in an accident and Tessie finds a copy of the play “The Yellow King” on his bookshelf, even though he had made sure to never own such an awful thing (“I was dumbfounded. Who had placed it there? How came it in my rooms? I had long ago decided that I should never open that book, and nothing on earth could have persuaded me to buy it. Fearful lest curiosity might tempt me to open it, I had never even looked at it in book-stores” (17)), and after she reads the entire play and becomes altered by it (“She seemed dazed, and when I told her to lie down on the sofa she obeyed me without a word. After a while she closed her eyes and her breathing became regular and deep, but I could not determine whether or not she slept” (17)), the protagonist does so as well, in sympathy. The two then discuss the play “in a dull monotonous strain” (18), and an unseen presence enters the room and embraces the protagonist after killing Tessie. When the protagonist wakes up, he sees that Tessie has been killed, he himself is dying, and another body is present. A doctor, who has shown up alongside a priest, explains, “as he pointed to a horrible decomposed heap on the floor—the livid corpse of the watchman from the church: ‘I have no theory, no explanation. That man must have been dead for months!’” (19). And the protagonist ends the story mid-sentence: “I think I am dying. I wish the priest would—” (19). All this happens in a schizophrenic rush of three pages at the end of a full nineteen.

Besides the visceral turn at the end of this story—it seems to have a sonnet’s horrible curve here—the ending feels completely compacted and fragmented and “unnatural” in comparison with the rest of the story. “I think I am dying. I wish the priest would—” makes for the final line; the fact that this story ends in the present is interesting since the rest of the story
has been in the past tense. This is especially interesting since the story is presented as being
written the whole time, with the first section entitled, “Being the Contents of an Unsigned Letter
Sent to the Author.” The story-as-letter, written from the vantage of “I think I am dying”
somehow manages to begin with thoughtful musing: “There are so many things which are
impossible to explain! Why should certain chords in music make me think of the brown and
golden tints of autumn foliage?” (1). The letter framework makes for a popular strategy in horror
fiction, of course, providing an immediate verisimilitude to engage the reader, but it is still
strange that the majority of this letter is a thoughtful past-tense exploration of a budding
relationship only to be suddenly thrust into a kaleidoscopic finale in the present-tense, wrought
somehow by a confused and distraught perceiver. Perception matters most of all, and the shift
from the past-tense to the present-tense is not an immediate turn, but rather one that hinges and
slides along the lines separating the fragments of horrifying experience after the two “discuss”
the “The King in Yellow.” As they discuss, the world around them begins to merge into the
fantasy world of the play, and this seems to leverage a shift in tense: “We spoke of Hastur and of
Cassilda, while outside the fog rolled against the blank window-panes as the cloud waves roll
and break on the shores of Hali” (18). Then the King himself seems to become present, and I
want to quote here the entire passage in order to give a shape to this presence:

The house was very silent now and not a sound from the misty streets broke the
silence. Tessie lay among the cushions, her face a gray blot in the gloom, but her
hands were clasped in mine and I knew that she knew and read my thoughts as I
read hers, for we had understood the mystery of the Hyades and the Phantom of
Truth was laid. That as we answered each other, swiftly, silently, thought on
thought, the shadows stirred in the gloom about us, and far in the distant streets
we heard a sound. Nearer and nearer it came, the dull crunching of wheels, nearer and yet nearer, and now, outside before the door it ceased, and I dragged myself to the window and saw a black-plumed hearse. The gate below opened and shut, and I crept shaking to my door and bolted it, but I knew no bolts, no locks, could keep that creature out who was coming for the Yellow Sign. And now I heard him moving very softly along the hall. Now he was at the door, and the bolts rotted at his touch. Now he had entered. With eyes starting from my head I peered into the darkness, but when he came into the room I did not see him. It was only when I felt him envelop me in his cold soft grasp that I cried out and struggled with deadly fury, but my hands were useless and he tore the onyx clasp from my coat and struck me full in the face. (18-19)

Though still anchored to the past-tense here, the repeated pressure of “Now” and “now” and “nearer and yet nearer” work to draw the fiction into the present-tense of the final two paragraphs and sentence. Culminating with the phrase—and it sits oddly on the tongue, “Now he had entered,” the “King in Yellow,” merged possibly with the larval watchman, breaks into the room, embraces the protagonist and kills Tessie. Like Wells’ Invisible King, the King here is also invisible but still—even so, still perceivable: “With eyes starting from my head I peered into the darkness, but when he came into the room I did not see him. It was only when I felt him envelop me in his cold soft grasp that I cried out [...].” The end of that paragraph ends by thrusting us fully into the present: “Then, as I fell, I heard Tessie’s soft cry and her spirit fled to God, and even while falling I longed to follow her, for I knew that the King in Yellow had opened his tattered mantle and there was only Christ to cry to now” (19). That final “now,” stitching together the flow of “now’s” from the entire paragraph, “nearer and nearer,” bleeds into
the next two, final, paragraphs: “I could tell more, but I cannot see what help it will be to the
world. As for me I am past human help or hope” (19). In this single paragraph, the story “closes
down” from the past into the present; in these same lines of movement and collapse Chambers
gives the impression of the King in Yellow. Or, from the other side, this paragraph closes down
and scrambles the form of the story because it is the paragraph that “describes” the Invisible
King. The story—the more typical, conventional romance story that gives most of these pages
their weight—has completely fragmented at this point, so much so the apparent “unsigned letter”
framework cannot even hold it.

But what exactly, for Chambers, is the King in Yellow, this story’s own Invisible King?
He is, of course, nothing like Wells’ benevolent and young and adventurous mentor-figure. S. T.
Joshi suggests that the story is, “in its essence, a rumination on the horrors of death” (qtd. in
Browning, iv), and that seems to definitely cover important angles. The King in Yellow appears
with his hearse and most definitely kills the two protagonists of the story. Yet, there seems to be
another sinister presence alongside “death” that announces the presence and actions of this
Invisible King: criticism. Specifically, art and literary criticism. Moreover, the presence of this
criticism seems to produce a sense of intense distaste for the protagonists of this story—and,
possibly, invites their demise. From the basic fact that the horror of the story revolves around the
“yellow sign”—both the literal onyx clasp with the illegible sign on it that the protagonist
receives from Tessie, but also the notion of the “so many things which are impossible to
explain!” from the first page—and around the comprehension of both this yellow sign and the
play “The King in Yellow,” it seems clear that literary criticism and literary discussion play a
central part in the unraveling of the mystery. After reading the play, both characters are struck
and altered into “dazed” versions of themselves, reduced to somnambulistic and tired figures
locked into literary conversation without even knowing it: “We had been speaking for some time in a dull monotonous strain before I realized that we were discussing ‘The King in Yellow.’ Oh the sin of writing such words—words which are clear as crystal, limpid and musical as bubbling springs, words which sparkle and glow like the poisoned diamonds of the Medicis! Oh the wickedness, the hopeless damnation of a soul who could fascinate and paralyze human creatures with such words—words understood by the ignorant and wise alike, words which are more precious than jewels, more soothing than Heavenly music, more awful than death itself” (18).

Later, on the same page: “Night fell and the hours dragged on, but still we murmured to each other of the King and the Pallid Mask, and midnight sounded from the misty spires in the fog-wrapped city. We spoke of Hastur and of Cassilda, while outside the fog rolled against the blank window-panes as the cloud waves roll and break on the shores of Hali” (18). Then, as quoted before, the “discussion” becomes practically telepathic and fully absolute, when “I knew that she knew and read my thoughts as I read hers, for we had understood the mystery of the Hyades and the Phantom of Truth was laid. Then as we answered each other, swiftly, silently, thought on thought, the shadows stirred in the gloom about us, and far in the distant streets we heard a sound” (18). The experience between the two amounts to a kind of critical fusion, where the absolute presence of the art has equaled an absolute understanding—they seem to make for one and the same, until this merging continues and draws together two separate people into a single understanding of a single text.

It is “absolute” criticism. It means the epitome of criticism. And, furthermore, it even turns the protagonist into an elitist, after the horror itself occurs: “They will be very curious to know the tragedy—they of the outside world who write books and print millions of newspapers, but I shall write no more, and the father confessor will seal my last words with the seal of
sanctity when his holy office is done. They of the outside world may send their creatures into wrecked homes and death-smitten firesides, and their newspapers will batten on blood and tears, but with me their spies must halt before the confessional” (19). Once the two characters are locked into an absolute criticism, their doom is sealed; and yet, it is this critical fragmentation of tense and mood that allows the Invisible King himself to become exposed. The past and present have overlapped in grammatical disarray; likewise, the overall genre and mood of this romantic fiction has equally fragmented and shattered as the characters become forced to read and discuss and criticize. Criticism is here not the same as the Invisible King, but it is the action necessary in the story to give enough paragraph to the King to allow his description—to allow that embrace and perception—even though it destroys one protagonist and leaves the other paralyzed in mid-sentence—paralyzed in writing.

Criticism seems to destroy what the Invisible King—up to that point mostly hidden, except for the horrific asides to the dreams and the church watchman—has been concealing all along: the form and function and conventions of this particular genre, this miniature romance. This is a genre romance shattered into fragments by way of an uninvited criticism; that criticism, within its dismantling action, gives shape to the Invisible King, who had been there all along; he is only revealed through reading and understanding the “yellow sign.” It has been there since the beginning in the presence of the living dead-man who stood outside the protagonist’s window in the churchyard: “His face was toward me now, and with a perfectly involuntary movement I bent to see it. At the same moment he raised his head and looked at me. Instantly I thought of a coffin-worm. Whatever it was about the man that repelled me I did not know [...]” (2). Immediately after seeing the man and being “repelled” by what he didn’t know, he returns to his easel to find his current work irreparably stained:
I went back to my easel and motioned the model to resume her pose. After working awhile I was satisfied that I was spoiling what I had done as rapidly as possible, and I took up a palette knife and scraped the color out again. The flesh tones were sallow and unhealthy, and I did not understand how I could have painted such sickly color into a study which before that had glowed with healthy tones.

[...]

I did not know whether it was something in the turpentine or a defect in the canvas, but the more I scrubbed the more that gangrene seemed to spread. I worked like a beaver to get it out, and yet the disease appeared to creep from limb to limb of the study before me. Alarmed I strove to arrest it, but now the color on the breast changed and the whole figure seemed to absorb the infection as a sponge soaks up water. Vigorously I plied palette knife, turpentine, and scraper, thinking all the time what a seance I should hold with Duval who had sold me the canvas; but soon I noticed that it was not the canvas which was defective nor yet the colors of Edward. (2-3)

Tessie makes the obvious claim: “‘Everything went wrong from the time you came back from the window and talked about that horrid-looking man you saw in the churchyard,’ she announced” (4). Here, the presence of the watchman—or, as I have argued, a hint or representative of criticism—quite literally spoils the art on the canvas. It makes for apt foreshadowing; the mere presence of this representation corrupts the in-story painting in the same way that its fuller presence will later corrupt and stain and destroy the generic story itself.
This story is about death, indeed; but it is also about the way criticism—specifically art and literary criticism—corrupt and disable the more “absolute” patterns of genre storytelling. The romance story that constitutes this fiction (and much of Chambers’ later work) becomes sickly and unhealthy with the presence of a criticism that overrides its generic logic. The protagonist is constantly “repelled” by this presence, constantly finding it *in bad taste*; later, he states, “The young man with the unhealthy face stood by the churchyard gate, and at the mere sight of him the same overwhelming repugnance took possession of me” (7). The fact that this criticism is ultimately paired with tastes and eating should therefore not surprise. After the protagonist once again “leaned out of the window but recoiled with disgust” (4) at the man outside, Tessie confesses that she has seen the same figure in a terrifying dream; the protagonist responds by joking: “‘Had you been eating Welsh rarebits, or lobster salad?’” and “‘There was no real hearse. That was a soft-shell crab dream’” (6). The horror elements here become a product of food poisoning or miscalculating digestion: *bad tastes*. From here, “Tessie rose, unrolled her scented handkerchief, and taking a bit of gum from a knot in the hem, placed it in her mouth” (6), as though to protect her fragile senses in a multiplicity of ways from the repellent presence of diseased criticism. The genre story becomes immediately stained with criticism and repulsive tastes—*something is wrong*—and these pressures won’t come fully to bear until the end of the story, roughly ten pages later, when the full culmination of critical “vision” gives shape to the Invisible King: the cracks showing in the story that reveal it to be generic and rigid. Criticism is that “*something wrong*”; and the measure of its “aura” of distaste is what cinches it back to my story of Wells’ Invisible King: whereas Wells had unconsciously illustrated the culminating point where an absolute morality becomes the endpoint of taste and guides taste to itself—“gathers” taste alongside its happy adventure, so to speak—Chambers’ story shows a
similar absolute logic of genre that becomes threatened only by the bad taste of anything that might criticize that logic. It’s the same Invisible King; only, Chambers shows how the king can finally manifest: only indirectly, in that critical space that comes with such repugnant tastes and corrupted fabrics.

As the story fragments, the lines of the Invisible King become apparent. His shape reveals itself in the disorientation of a bad taste, a downward-facing intensity. That is to say, that sovereign command of “Thou Shalt Not,” woven into both the absolute of Wells’ morality and the absolute of the generic pattern in “The King in Yellow,” empowered by its invisibility, becomes less so only through the stain or corruption of criticism: and because of this interaction, this pyrrhic necessity, it tastes badly. In bringing this configuration back to Amory and Fitzgerald, I want to note how closely it comes to resemble the biblical story of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve taste the fruit from the tree of knowledge and that inevitably leads to death and the corruption of their absolute garden. Everyone knows the story; but the one thing we will never know is: With the most profound disappointment, what did it taste like? What is the taste of the fruit that condemned humanity to suffering? Chambers himself references the famous moment in his story several times. When the two characters finally declare their romantic intentions, for example, leading Tessie to become unable to any longer pose nude, the artist thinks: “Alas! Alas! We had eaten of the tree of knowledge, and Eden and native innocence were dreams of the past—I mean for her” (15). After the artist comes across the copy of “The King in Yellow,” the one that should not exist, he describes it this way: “I stared at the poisonous yellow binding as I would at a snake” (17). Of course, this story reinforces and perpetuates the notion of the “fatal book,” as described by Linda Dowling in Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle (143)—indeed “The King in Yellow” does fit that bill in fascinating ways—these
two references also bind back that idea that criticism here counts for the forbidden fruit—and the
work of art, here “The King in Yellow,” makes for the serpent who seduces simple genres
toward it. In this metaphor, it’s not the fruit itself but the taste of the fruit that brings corruption
to the purity of the garden; the taste of that knowledge is the same as the taste of criticism in
Chambers’ story: it is the bad taste—the untaste or distaste—that gets carried along with it in the
wake of a new, corrupted existence. Taste here is a kind of supplementary source. Fitzgerald
likewise references Adam and Eve in This Side of Paradise, showing Amory’s movement in a
similar direction and momentum as a critical force.

I have already referenced how this scene in particular is said to be described in “Adamic
terms” (Tanner 73), and it clearly seems to be so; yet it also seems to be doing something else
entirely. The moment contains Amory’s first romantic interaction in the story when he is around
thirteen years old. He has snuck off with Myra during her birthday party and the two find
themselves alone: “But Amory, being on the spot, leaned over quickly and kissed Myra’s cheek.
He had never kissed a girl before, and he tasted his lips curiously, as if he had munched some
new fruit” (9). This quote indeed links the moment to the story of Adam and Eve, as well as his
immediate revulsion of the event, and Tanner seems correct in pointing that out. However, the
manner in which the scene so prominently plays itself out as a scene opens it up to an interesting
secondary interpretation. From the beginning, Fitzgerald sets the location as a stage: “They
drifted up the stairs and Myra led the way into the little den of his dreams, where a cozy fire was
burning before a big sink-down couch. A few years later this was to be a great stage for Amory,
a cradle for many an emotional crisis” (9). This “setting the stage” establishes the base for its
generic unfurling: Berlant’s “Genres provide an affective expectation of the experience of
watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art” (qtd. in North, ch. 4). And the
rest of the “incident” makes the preparation for that stage by beginning to situate in its place an inchoate narrative and genre set-up:

Myra’s eyes became dreamy. What a story this would make to tell Marylyn! Here on the couch with this wonderful-looking boy—the little fire—the sense that they were alone in the great building——

Myra capitulated. The atmosphere was too appropriate.

“I like you the first twenty-five,” she confessed, her voice trembling, “and Froggy Parker twenty-sixth.”

Froggy had fallen twenty-five places in one hour. As yet he had not even noticed it.

But Amory, being on the spot, leaned over quickly and kissed Myra’s cheek. He had never kissed a girl before, and he tasted his lips curiously, as if he had munched some new fruit. Then their lips brushed like young wild flowers in the wind.

“We’re awful,” rejoiced Myra gently. She slipped her hand into his, her head drooped against his shoulder. Sudden revulsion seized Amory, disgust, loathing for the whole incident. He desired frantically to be away, never to see Myra again, never to kiss any one; he became conscious of his face and hers, of their clinging hands, and he wanted to creep out of his body and hide somewhere safe out of sight, up in the corner of his mind.

“Kiss me again.” Her voice came out of a great void.

“I don’t want to,” he heard himself saying. There was another pause.

“I don’t want to!” he repeated passionately. (9-10)
Although Amory is here partially caught and left feeling that peculiar guilt of a new scandalous experience and, quite literally, this new taste, the context of the scene folds that taste into an instant genre, into a staged scene, and Amory’s repulsion seems to be simultaneously rebounding from that form of organization. He is “on the spot” in more ways than one, as he becomes suddenly enmeshed both in the desire of this new experience—on this spot, this couch, near the breath of Myra, lips like “young wild flowers in the wind”—and the less immediate staged execution of its “story”—on that other spot, that “Amory shalt—,” required by the conventions of the scene to perform a generic duty: the bildungsroman first romance unfolding. The reader remains unsure whose perspective this section illuminates, but it’s easy to assume it’s still Amory’s: “Myra’s eyes became dreamy. What a story this would make to tell Marylyn!” Either Myra has already staged this story and has begun the process of narrativizing it, or Amory has done it for her: “What a story this would make!” Already, either one or both has gauged the context and “capitulated”: “The atmosphere was too appropriate.” Revulsion seizes him when Myra “rejoices gently,” “We’re awful”; it’s that incredible deception there, the “awful” just barely trapped in the gentle rejoicing, and then she “slipped her hand into his, her head drooped against his shoulder.” She’s playing the part, indicated by that friction between guilt and rejoice, portraying what she knows to be (at least in Amory’s eyes) a part of the story. The story—the claim of a formulaic genre—repulses Amory and when he accesses his distaste, Myra threatens to tell her mother: “I’ll tell mama you kissed me! I will too! I will too! I’ll tell mama, and she won’t let me play with you!” Yet when her mother arrives, she proves once again that she is merely playing a part: “Amory watched Myra and waited for the crash—but none came. The pout faded, the high pink subsided, and Myra’s voice was placid as a summer lake when she answered her mother” (10). Rather than the guilt of the first kiss, Amory’s distaste seems also to
be inherently bound to this staging and this story; somewhere between the indescribable taste of his first kiss and the complex trappings of genre that both surround and seemingly enable it, Amory finds his first moment of critical “distaste,” and the corruption of that forbidden fruit, like Chambers’ story, expose to him the compulsive order of the larger genre.

I have demonstrated already Amory’s understanding of that strange, invisible compulsory game that seems to hypnotize most of the people around him and, likewise, as this passage further shows, stirs up in him an experience of distaste. The example of Chambers’ “The Yellow Sign” helps to tie that compulsive order and the distaste that reveals it back to genre and convention; Wells’ theocracy furthermore shows how easy and possible it may be that the typically contingent value of taste can often take an absolute form, without its bearers ever really being aware. Amory’s distaste in this passage helps to reveal the “decadence” of the work: here, distaste, itself unraveling as a stylistic and critical dismantling of generic form, helps to demonstrate how that concretion of taste and convention works to make permanent those elements that are more profound when left ephemeral. It is the concretion of young green lips, like wild-grass—like “young wildflowers brushing together in the wind,” into the conventional “story” of a first kiss, mouthed into place by the more stony lips of ancient statues, that repulses and disorients young Amory. Fitzgerald describes Amory’s critical distaste this way: “Sudden revulsion seized Amory, disgust, loathing for the whole incident. He desired frantically to be away, never to see Myra again, never to kiss any one; he became conscious of his face and hers, of their clinging hands, and he wanted to creep out of his body and hide somewhere safe out of sight, up in the corner of his mind.” Not merely indicating a simple “dislike,” Amory’s distaste offers an intensity that withdraws Amory from the scene (“He desired frantically to be away”) and simultaneously sinks him more deeply within it (“he became conscious of his face and hers,
of their clinging hands”). The story’s scene—the pure appropriateness of its context and the proper flowering of its romantic genre—seem to put Amory into this intense combination of withdrawal/embeddedness; just like the experiences of the protagonist and Tessie from “The Yellow Sign,” “critical distaste” experientially disrupts the generic storytelling moment in *Paradise* and stylistically establishes him as the inherent critic of such conventions.

As many readers of *Paradise* note, the novel is full of various and seemingly incomplete genres and parodies of different genres, including entire sections written in the form of a play, supernatural and ghost stories, many typical romance stories and a passage of question-and-answers. While this does have to do with the book’s composition—hastily thrown together short stories of various genres in order to publish a novel—I will still claim that this style of composition, intended or not, offers itself as a theory on how to make visible and understand the powerful sovereignty of the theoretical “Invisible King” in ways that other novels of Fitzgerald—a writer now hungry to become a famous literary “self”—do not. What I’m calling “critical distaste” refers to this Adam-and-Eve tasting moment—this backward intensity that removes-and-embeds Amory from/into the scene in such a way that it decays and corrupts the generic elements that usually work to make that typical story a permanent, “tasteful” form of the genre. Amory, as critic and as genre-disrupter, then shows exactly how all of the disparate concepts in this chapter finally come together.

Amory the Critic

The rest of the novel only further reinforces this trajectory: if *This Side of Paradise* is a bildungsroman, then it is a bildungsroman of this type of critic. Always aware that he can basically “be” nothing else, Amory comes to accept this condition through both the
characterization of his self-awareness and the meta-fictional presentation of his figure in the book itself. Multiple times in the novel, Amory makes the claim that he cannot write any type of literature. Early on, for example, he claims that he will never write poetry: “‘I’ll never be a poet,’ said Amory as he finished [...] ‘I may turn out an intellectual, but I’ll never write anything but mediocre poetry’” (62), even though he continuously writes poetry in the novel (and this last point of “mediocre poetry” will became quite important). When Tom suggests he write fiction, Amory says, “‘Trouble is I get distracted when I start to write stories—get afraid I’m doing it instead of living—get thinking maybe life is waiting for me in the Japanese gardens at the Ritz or at Atlantic City or on the lower East Side” (160-1). In the midpoint of the novel, in a letter to Tom, he writes in the third person, “As for the well-known Amory, he would write immortal literature if he were sure enough about anything to risk telling anyone else about it. There is no more dangerous gift to posterity than a few cleverly turned platitudes” (121). This idea that he wants to live life instead of writing it will return in the section with Eleanor, but already it hints at the presence of a “distaste” for what writing offers in terms of forms and genres. Amory is always critic, never “artist,” even though he never stops writing poetry and never stops inventing fictions, philosophies, theories. Just as with Myra, Amory “corrupts” a similar romantic scene with the later Isabelle, who reflects back at him his own critical nature: “That’s just the point,’ insisted Isabelle. ‘You got all upset tonight. You just sat and watched my eyes. Besides, I have to think all the time I’m talking to you—you’re so critical” (69). Again, like Myra, Isabelle is commenting on the way Amory’s “distaste”—here, the fact that he forces her to “think all the time” she’s talking to him—scrambles and corrupts the generic scene she is after. As she considers earlier: “What a wonderful song, she thought—everything was wonderful tonight, most of all this romantic scene in the den, with their hands clinging and the inevitable looming
charmingly close. The future vista of her life seemed an unending succession of scenes like this: under moonlight and pale starlight, and in the backs of warm limousines and in low, cosey roadsters, stopped under sheltering trees—only the boy might change, and this one was so nice” (51). Throughout the novel, Amory more and more takes his place as a “critic,” as he slowly discovers an aversion and distaste of the genres his presence and his challenges corrupt.

As we have seen, many of the characters in the novel attempt to follow their generic compulsions, arrayed in constellations of taste, truly informed by the “Thou Shalt Not” of the Invisible King, and Amory’s presence and distaste always seem to ultimately corrupt the elements of those scenes that most strongly formulate them as scenes. I will turn here to what, in my opinion, is the strongest version of that scene in the novel: the section entitled “Young Irony,” towards the end of the book, where Amory meets and has a brief relationship with Eleanor. At this point in the novel, Amory has ended the relationship with the love of his life, Rosalind, and has left New York to “join Monsignor in Washington. They missed connections by two hours, and, deciding to spend a few days with an ancient, remembered uncle, Amory journeyed up through the luxuriant fields of Maryland into Ramilly County. But instead of two days his stay lasted from mid-August nearly through September, for in Maryland he met Eleanor” (165).

“Young Irony” suggests the most pressing “formulation” of genre in the book. It presents a veritable catalogue of Romance with a capital R, including both its story line and its language: “For years afterward when Amory thought of Eleanor he seemed still to hear the wind sobbing around him and sending little chills into the places beside his heart” starts the section off; but only a paragraph later, “But Eleanor—did Amory dream her? Afterward their ghosts played, yet both of them hoped from their souls never to meet. Was it the infinite sadness of her eyes that
drew him or the mirror of himself that he found in the gorgeous clarity of her mind? She will have no other adventure like Amory, and if she reads this she will say: “And Amory will have no other adventure like me”” (166). They meet in the middle of a thunderstorm, out in country fields where Amory has wandered, “reciting ‘Ulalume’ to the cornfields, and congratulating Poe for drinking himself to death in that atmosphere of smiling complacency” (167); Eleanor invites him to the dry safety of her haystack, quoting Verlaine, and the two strike up an immediate attraction based on imagination and quoting Romantics and Decadents: “Their chance was to make everything fine and finished and rich and imaginative; they must bend tiny golden tentacles from his imagination to hers, that would take the place of the great, deep love that was never so near, yet never so much of a dream” (173). The relationship ends when the summer ends, and, during their last night together, as they take a ride on horses late at night, Eleanor has what appears to be a kind of breakdown, where she threatens suicide by riding her horse off a cliff in order to demonstrate to Amory that she could easily die without yelling “loudly for a priest” (179, they have a heated disagreement over, among other things, faith). The narrative follows all the lines of the typical Mad Romance, up to and including the last sentence of the section: “Their poses were strewn about the pale dawn like broken glass. The stars were long gone and there were left only the little sighing gusts of wind and the silences between... but naked souls are poor things ever, and soon he turned homeward and let new lights come in with the sun” (180). After this sentence, two poems appear, the first sent from Eleanor to Amory (“Several Years Later”) and the other from Amory to Eleanor (“Which He Called ‘Summer Storm’” (180-1)); the two characters are reduced to mirrored poems.

Not only is Eleanor Amory’s mirror in terms of their penchant for romantic irony, she also reflects that critical element in him that has been corrupting genres from the beginning of
the novel. Because of this, “Young Irony” reveals a more profound instance of critical distaste, despite (or maybe because of) its location in the novel’s most profound instance of generic storytelling. Even though the progress of the genre is here assured, the section shows constant moments of second-guessing and reformulations. At the beginning of the section, Fitzgerald tells us that “Eleanor tried to put it on paper once” (166, my italics) in the form of a poem, over which the two “quarreled dangerously because Amory maintained that sea and see couldn’t possibly be used as a rhyme” (167). Immediately after that sentence, he writes, “And then Eleanor had part of another verse that she couldn’t find a beginning for” (167). “Young Irony” begins with fragments of aesthetic decision; even though the genre is fully formed, its language lacks the same assurance and stature, and begins in the middle of its own crumbling. Even the narration itself seems to be in a state of “revision”: “She belonged to the oldest of the old families of Ramilly County and lived in a big, gloomy house with her grandfather. She had been born and brought up in France...I see I am starting wrong. Let me begin again” (167). This sudden presence of the first-person in a clearly third-person narrative happens only one other time in the entire novel. Its sudden intrusion only reinforces the flimsiness of the section and its inability to remain coherent; a literal “revision” of itself mid-sentence—“I see I am starting wrong. Let me begin again”—fragmenting the sentence and the paragraph into multiple, this broken narration is of the same material as the “Eleanor tried” and “Eleanor had part of another verse that she couldn’t find a beginning for.” The section itself starts, in a way, mid-sentence: nothing but an attempt, an immediate revision, and lacking a beginning. It is already critical; it shows on its surface those lines of criticism that this dissertation has been concerned to show run deep: the elements of a work that reflect the decision or hesitation of the creation of that text. Already insecure in its generic performance, “Young Irony” continues to reveal the patches of corruption
and critical “decay” as the section slowly unravels. When Eleanor says that Amory looks “‘a good deal like the pictures of Rupert Brooke,’” Fitzgerald continues, “To some extent Amory tried to play Rupert Brooke as long as he knew Eleanor. What he said, his attitude toward life, toward her, toward himself, were all reflexes of the dead Englishman’s literary moods” (173, my italics). Not only is the “attempt” still present here, but the attempt Amory is making here is to embody his influence, to personally enact his literary influence. The wavering between Amory-Rupert Brooke shows the kind of criticism I’m interested in.

At a key moment in the section, this stuttering and hesitating and critical “trying” will show itself directly bound to the idea of an apocalypse of generic conventions. It occurs in the final section of “Young Irony,” when Amory and Eleanor are off on their midnight ride for the last evening they will be together. This section marks the moment when the genre finally seems to crack under its own weight, and there the pressure of that “distaste” seems to motivate both Amory and Eleanor into a revision of their perception. Eleanor begins by her sudden departure from the romantic narrative:

“Rotten, rotten old world,” broke out Eleanor suddenly, “and the wretchedest thing of all is me—oh, why am I a girl? Why am I not a stupid—? Look at you; you’re stupider than I am, not much, but some, and you can lope about and get bored and then lope somewhere else, and you can play around with girls without being involved in meshes of sentiment, and you can do anything and be justified—and here am I with the brains to do everything, yet tied to the sinking ship of future matrimony. If I were born a hundred years from now, well and good, but now what’s in store for me—I have to marry, that goes without saying. Who? I’m too bright for most men, and yet I have to descend to their level and let
them patronize my intellect in order to get their attention. Every year that I don’t marry I’ve got less chance for a first-class man. At the best I can have my choice from one or two cities and, of course, I have to marry into a dinner-coat.” (178)

Here, Eleanor’s distaste is political and social; not only does she express her qualms about the expectations made of her as a woman, she almost transcends that category entirely into something more transgendered: “oh, why am I a girl? Why am I not a stupid—?” The lack of final signifier here is telling, even if its implications are all too easy. Why am I not a stupid—?

Suddenly, the summer romance has abruptly ended, “It was much colder—so cold that it settled on them and drove all the warm nights from their minds” (177). Eleanor’s sudden outburst of distaste, with all its perceptive insight, furthermore finds its context in what she says in a preceding speech from the page before, precisely balanced on this “end of summer” cold. Since her reflections are already so on-point, I’m even more interested in the circumstances that had provoked her into making them:

“The end of summer, said Eleanor softly. “Listen to the beat of our horses’ hoofs— ‘tump-tump-tump-a-tump.’ Have you ever been feverish and had all noises divide into ‘tump-tump-tump’ until you could swear eternity was divisible into so many tumps? That’s the way I feel—old horses go tump-tump....I guess that’s the only thing that separates horses and clocks from us. Human beings can’t go ‘tump-tump-tump’ without going crazy.” (177)

The following pages seem to show Eleanor actually expressing a kind of madness (“I’ve got a crazy streak,’ she faltered” (179)), but my argument here instead sees in that “crazy” the critical distaste she will immediately express in her second speech and the same distaste that Amory has been experiencing throughout the novel: “Human beings can’t go ‘tump-tump-tump’ without
going crazy.” This repetitive “tump-tump-tump” suggests the repetitive and machinic “creation” I wrote about in Chapter 1; it furthermore reflects the “algorithmic” poetic logic I will further discuss in the next chapter. Here it is enough to demonstrate that Eleanor has broken through the romantic logic the section has slowly been building up by way of a recognition of the mechanical and “tasteful” motion that has been holding it in place. The Summer “breaks”; Eleanor has found that “caesura” of distaste and decadent critical moment that reveal the conventions giving shape to the Invisible King—whether she knows it or not.

Amory likewise understands the one insight without fully comprehending the social-political critique. After her second speech, Amory shows again the critical hesitancy that I’ve been alluding to:

“Of course, you’re right,” Amory agreed. “It’s a rather unpleasant overpowering force that’s part of the machinery under everything. It’s like an actor that lets you see his mechanics! Wait a minute till I think this out....”

He paused and tried to get a metaphor. They had turned the cliff and were riding along the road about fifty feet to the left.

“You see every one’s got to have some cloak to throw about it. The mediocre intellects, Plato’s second class, use the remnants of romantic chivalry diluted with Victorian sentiment—and we who consider ourselves the intellectuals cover it up by pretending that it’s another side of us, has nothing to do with our shining brains we pretend that the fact that we realize it is really absolving us from being a prey to it.” (178)

Although his final point here is Freudian (“But the truth is that sex is right in the middle of our purest abstractions, so close that it obscures vision....” (178)), it only bends specifically that way
because he “paused and tried to get a metaphor.” Ultimately, he ends in the same place as
Eleanor, comprehending that relentless, clock-like “tump-tump-tump” as “part of the machinery
under everything.” Interestingly, in his failure to find a metaphor, he attempts a strange one: “It’s
like an actor that lets you see his mechanics! Wait a minute till I think this out....” Though
“mechanics” certainly has multiple meanings, it’s so tightly bound up with the immediately
preceding “machinery under everything” that the impression Amory gives here is of a machine-
actor, an “actor that lets you see its machine parts.” Here the “actor” becomes a kind of machine;
and while that might feel like a bit of an exquisite stretch, it makes more sense when linked to a
much earlier speech from Monsignor Darcy on the difference between “personality” and
“personage,” as he attempts to make Amory feel better after failing an important test:

“A personality is what you thought you were, what this Kerry and Sloane you tell
me of evidently are. Personality is a physical matter almost entirely; it lowers the
people it acts on—I’ve seen it vanish in a long sickness. But while a personality is
active, it overrides ‘the next thing.’ Now a personage, on the other hand, gathers.
He is never thought of apart from what he’s done. He’s a bar on which a thousand
things have been hung—glittering things sometimes, as ours are, but he uses those
things with a cold mentality back of them.” (77)

The complex of interactions here between personality and personage seem to force out
something quite surreal: “personalities” are “what this Kerry and Sloane you tell me of evidently
are,” human beings, and yet personality is “a physical matter almost entirely; it lowers the people
it acts on,” and therefore is simultaneously something that “acts” on people. Likewise, Darcy
only considers the “personage” as a “He,” but in his metaphor makes the strange description that
the personage is “a bar on which a thousand things have been hung.” The personage “gathers”
and “does the next thing.” Even though it is a “He,” it is also a “bar on which a thousand things have been hung.” One of the interesting things Darcy does here is to separate the “personage” from any sort of human being; instead, it becomes a kind of personified, automated bar of gathered, glittering things. The “actor showing his machinery,” etched out of a similar material: they are both kinds of people-machines, people collections.

In “Young Irony,” when Amory refers to “the days when [he] resented that life had changed from an even progress along a road stretching ever in sight, with the scenery merging and blending, into a succession of quick, unrelated scenes” and to the fact that “He felt that it would take all time, more than he could ever spare, to glue these strange cumbersome pictures into the scrap-book of his life” (174), I think he is referring to this machinic image, this fragmentary and “inhuman” collection of “glittering things” which are, moreover, simultaneously “glittering genres.” The “tump-tump-tump” that Eleanor complains about signifies the perception and distaste of that consolidation when one of those genres overtakes its full collection and becomes absolute—when it becomes that illusion of “even progress along a road stretching ever in sight.” In this case, the romantic genre begins to encroach politically and socially on Eleanor’s autonomy while it remains, for Amory, the encroachment of that literary genre-shape onto his more chaotic and critical “figuring.” The novel, of course, is much more like a “succession of quick, unrelated scenes,” and the strange, scarecrow figure of the glittering bar, the “personage”—maybe even more place than person—constantly hovers over it, revealing the author’s “mechanics” under that familiar, tattered cloak. This insight for both Amory and Eleanor instantly connect them with “Young Irony’s” initial critical hesitation, and the following moments in the final section fully establish that critical distaste of genre. As Amory “paused and tried to get a metaphor,” and Eleanor reveals her distaste with the patriarchal and gendered
systems that hold her firmly in check, the entire Romantic machine seems to malfunction and that decadently critical space, humming and shattering and circling, opens up. When Eleanor challenges Amory’s ideology (“His materialism, always a thin cloak, was torn to shreds by Eleanor’s blasphemy” (179)) and decides to accept his challenge to die only after conversion (“‘And like most intellectuals who don’t find faith convenient,’ he continued coldly, ‘like Napoleon and Oscar Wilde and the rest of your type, you’ll yell loudly for a priest on your death-bed’“ (179)), she explodes into her “crazy streak” and rides her horse to the edge of a cliff:

“Will I?” she said in a queer voice that scared him. “Will I? Watch! I’m going over the cliff!” And before he could interfere she had turned and was riding breakneck for the end of the plateau.

He wheeled and started after her, his body like ice, his nerves in a vast clangor. There was no chance of stopping her. The moon was under a cloud and her horse would step blindly over. Then some ten feet from the edge of the cliff she gave a sudden shriek and flung herself sideways—plunged from her horse and, rolling over twice, landed in a pile of brush five feet from the edge. The horse went over with a frantic whinny. In a minute he was by Eleanor’s side and saw that her eyes were open. (179)

Eleanor’s “machine,” as she mentioned before, the mechanism that goes “tump tump tump a tump,” is sent flying over the edge of the cliff; she had already even compared this conception of machine to horses in that earlier moment, foreshadowing: “I guess that’s the only thing that separates horses and clocks from us. Human beings can’t go ‘tump-tump-tump’ without going crazy” (177). Indeed, the entire framework of this section, considering Eleanor to be a kind of “evil” affected by the devil, seems instead more attributed to the generic conventions that exist
below her own singularity and require an intense overthrow in order to even be *seen* to be criticized. Eleanor literally tries to ride her horse out of her own generic Romance as if it were an escape. If there’s a “crazy streak” to Eleanor, it’s this intense distaste that short circuits the romantic genre she is being absolutely subjected to. The section, already set into a kind of constant, critical revision by the first few pages, demonstrably indicates how this critical pressure has made the generic and overt Romance wither around the intensity of that initial distaste in the same way as the two protagonists in “The Yellow Sign,” and with the same costs, a kind of Romance death: Amory and Eleanor, at the end of the section, just “stood there, hating each other with a bitter sadness” (180). In their mutual criticism and distaste, the Invisible King shows up in a similar way, in Eleanor’s “crazy streak,” and the collapse of this section echoes the same collapse of the entire novel, the “straight linear path” into a “collection of fragmented and unconnected scenes.” But it is this collapse that draws the lines giving shape to the King, and reminds the reader that that set of conventional tastes holding together the generic “shoddy romanticism” can easily slip over into the absolute and establish a permanent narrative that will effectively siphon out the intensity and difference of the ephemeral moment, the *decadent* moment.

Two Poems

There remains one relic left over at the end of “Young Irony.” Both Amory and Eleanor are reduced to the romanticized poems they send to each other several years later: they are nothing more than twin *poem-machines* reproducing and containing the events of that particular summer and the tumultuous emotions unlocked there and then. However, the interplay between the two end-poems marks exactly that moment when the “distasteful”—here, the final encounter
at the end of the section, the critical malfunction that throws the tattered cloak off the invisible king—produces two entirely different machines in response. Both poems seem to be following the same logic of the section itself; that is, they reflect a weary romanticism—a decadent and Victorian romanticism, rather—and close the section in these elaborately etched doors. And yet the two poems are different. Eleanor’s, the first presented, offers a series of four stanzas, each with the same ABABCDCD rhyme scheme and each reflecting an elaborate style that more accurately represents the time the two young people spent together. The poem exhibits the past tense and Swinburnian rhymes:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{That was the day...and the night for another story.} \\
&Pale as a dream and shadowed with penciled trees— \\
&\text{Ghosts of the stars came by who had sought for glory,} \\
&\text{Whispered to us of peace in the plaintive breeze,} \\
&\text{Whispered of old dead faiths that the day had shattered,} \\
&\text{Youth the penny that bought delight of the moon;} \\
&\text{That was the urge that we knew and the language that mattered} \\
&\text{That was the debt that we paid to the usurer June.} \\
&\text{Here, deepest of dreams, by the waters that bring not} \\
&\text{Anything back of the past that we need not know,} \\
&\text{What if the light is but sun and the little streams sing not,} \\
&\text{We are together, it seems...I have loved you so...} \\
&\text{What did the last night hold, with the summer over,} \\
&\text{Drawing us back to the home in the changing glade?}
\end{align*}
\]
What leered out of the dark in the ghostly clover?

God!...till you stirred in your sleep...and were wild afraid... (180)

Eleanor’s more patterned and elaborate poem also more cleverly describes the events of the summer and of the section itself: when she asks, “What leered out of the dark in the ghostly clover?” in unchanged font, she answers with the exclamation, “God!...” which is precisely the superficial reason why the two had their falling out. She, the atheist, had been forced into a challenge by his insistence on and simultaneous fear of the religious life. The composition of the poem shows more complication and control, as when she ends the poem with the lines,

“Whispering half-love over the lilt of the water... / Youth the penny that bought delight of the moon” (181), which reflects the first line of the poem “Here, Earth-born, over the lilt of the water” (180) into a line from the center, already quoted, in stanza two, “Youth the penny that bought delight of the moon.” Focusing on the craft of her poetry, Eleanor has more tastefully and accurately (to its degree) described her impressions of the summer the two spent together.

Amory, on the other hand, created something different. His lines are far more unwieldy and unrhythmic, and the content of the poem becomes more abstract and strange:

Faint winds, and a song fading and leaves falling,

Faint winds, and far away a fading laughter...

And the rain and over the fields a voice calling...

Our gray blown clouds scurries and lifts above,

Slides on the sun and flutters there to waft her

Sisters on. The shadow of a dove

Falls on the cote, the trees are filled with wings;

And down the valley through the crying trees
The body of the darker storm flies; brings

With its new air the breath of sunken seas

And slender tenuous thunder... (181)

The first lines here, full of an onrushing alliteration that seems to trip over itself, fades off into abstract images of clouds scurrying and sliding on the sun and the “body” of a darker storm flying through crying trees amid something he describes as “slender tenuous thunder.” Formed from two stanzas, the mostly regular rhyme scheme makes a strange overlap as the first stanza bleeds into the second with a rhyming logic that appears nowhere else in the poem: the lines “They tear me, teach me, strew the heavy air / Upon me, winds that I know and storm” rhyming with the first lines of the second stanza, “There was a summer every rain was rare; / There was a season every wind was warm...” (181). Instead of being a well-formed and contained poem, like Eleanor’s, Amory’s two stanzas get entangled in each other, bound together over their lines and in the prickling of alliteration and forced enjambments that seem to slow and break the rhythm of the poem. The final part of the poem simply dissolves into the abstract dream:

Now night

Tears from her wetted breast the splattered blouse

Of day, glides down the dreaming hills, tear-bright

To cover with her hair the eerie green...

Love for the dusk...Love for the glistening after;

Quiet the trees to their last tops...serene...

Faint winds, and far away a fading laughter... (181-2)
After the ambiguous sentiment, “Love for the glistening after,” the poem simply melts into “...serene...” Like Eleanor, Amory also circles back to his beginning line, “Faint winds, and far away a fading laughter...” But unlike Eleanor, Amory stops there; her poem shows the more sophisticated bowtie of a contained and established poem. Amory’s poem, more descriptive and abstract, clumsy in comparison to Eleanor’s, differs quite a bit from hers. Fitzgerald has already given a clue to the meaning of this discrepancy earlier in the section. Amory, on his own, in his “critical” way, “pondered how coldly we thought of the ‘Dark Lady of the Sonnets,’ and how little we remembered her as the great man wanted her remembered. For what Shakespeare must have desired to have been able to write with such divine despair, was that the lady should live...and now we have no real interest in her...The irony of it is that if he had cared more for the poem than for the lady the sonnet would be only obvious, imitative rhetoric and no one would ever have read it after twenty years....” (177). Fitzgerald enacts this idea (“The irony of it is that if he had cared more for the poem than for the lady the sonnet would be only obvious, imitative rhetoric”) in the novel itself with the two poems: since Amory wrote a seemingly less well-conceived and well-executed poem, he cares more about the lady than the poem; on the other hand, since Eleanor had “cared more for the poem” than for Amory, she ended up writing something with “obvious, imitative rhetoric.” In other words, because Eleanor cared more for the genre than the ephemeral experience, she succumbed to that genre and its coercion of conventions and its constellation of tastes.

Amory’s poem, on the other hand, shows a poem “in bad taste,” abstract and nonrepresentational and entangled together like vines or wild-grasses. Somehow, according to Amory’s idea, that “tasteless” poem signifies that Amory was more interested in the experience of the summer itself, now dissipated entirely to the spaces among and between two amateur and
earnest poems. Though Amory’s poem does not reflect a traditionally tasteful (at that point) form, it does, however, seem to catch a sense of the intensity of that “distaste” that both characters feel during “Young Irony.” Eleanor’s poem sophisticatedly and in good form papers over that intensity and reduces it to the very genre that it (the intensity) was giving them the space to free themselves from. But Amory’s abstract ambiguity ("Love for the glistening after") and strange caesuras follow suit from the critical malfunction that had occurred in the section itself; Eleanor succumbs to the “tump-tump-tump” while Amory holds fast to the intensity of its malfunction. And it is his commitment to this kind of “decadent criticism” and the ephemeral experience that it makes space for that allows Amory to see the Invisible King where others, like Eleanor, ultimately, cannot. His critical distaste marks the opening of intensity that scrambles the more conventional constellation of tastes that code narratives and genres and, as we saw with Wells, entire moralistic systems. It does not perform the opposite; it does not reduce everything to some kind of objectivity in the face of subjective arbitrariness. Rather, it short-circuits the hidden “Invisible King” command that intangibly conducts that subjective taste into an objective, absolute rule. Contemporary literary criticism, as I argued at the beginning of this chapter, serves to maintain those constellations—indeed, it renders them more and more permanent—and does so because it needs them that way in order to make its arguments permanent. As we saw with Lee’s major point, the entire methodology of establishing a category of Gothic Modernism seems entirely dependent on these taste constellations and the magical absolute it generates. The Invisible King, as Foucault noted, is alive and well in these particular machinations; and the folds and turns of his cloak are so many arguments and methods and categories that work to keep him utterly concealed.
This King precisely demonstrates the “Devil” and what the devil is doing in Fitzgerald’s first novel. Decadent criticism, on the other hand, also at work in this novel, reveals an open space of distaste that scrambles that connection between the King’s command and our own production, a connection which can easily hide intensities and potentials in texts that are deemed unfit or “bad taste.” It doesn’t mean to change tastes—I would never presume to represent or account for anyone’s individual tastes—and it doesn’t mean to remove tastes—this form of objectivity is merely limiting to our potential production. Rather, decadent criticism means paying attention to how arguments accumulate on the framework of steeled tastes, and allowing for an idea of criticism and, in particular, style, that produces alongside those “bad” tastes, instead of against them or in spite of them. This particular style will be of primary importance in the next chapter. In fact, it is interesting that Fitzgerald ends his novel, which at this point has become almost entirely a flow of unrelated and disconnected scenes, by positioning Amory between a graveyard scene and directly in front of his alma mater, Princeton. Where the graveyard gives Amory a sense of new potential and an exploration of intensity (“Amory wanted to feel ‘William Dayfield, 1864’” and “He wondered that graves ever made people consider life in vain. Somehow he could find nothing hopeless in having lived. All the broken columns and clasped hands and doves and angels meant romances” (212)), Princeton seems to symbolize the opposite (“As an endless dream it went on; the spirit of the past brooding over a new generation, the chosen youth from the muddled, unchastened world, still fed romantically on the mistakes and half-forgotten dreams of dead statesmen and poets” (213). The conventional formulation again is inverted: the graveyard represents a potential for intensity, whereas the university only offers a slow, abstract deadening. This same interaction and positioning seem to play out for
Chapter 3: The Grave Logic in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Even though F. Scott Fitzgerald’s first novel seems to reveal how overlapping genres might open up to this intense “disordering” of distaste, its purpose for Fitzgerald appears a little ambiguous. On one hand, Fitzgerald wanted to impress the family of his intended, Zelda, and to show that he could sell a novel; on the other hand, he has been hoping to write a novel for some time and wants to begin to establish himself as a “literary author,” intending to begin “his own quest for Great Author status” (Birch 56). Both of these uses frame the “literary technology” in a specific way, and they both seem to relate to the sibling poems from “Young Irony”: they use these stories/poems/novels to fabricate either a connection to another, living person (Zelda) and her culture in the form of Amory’s “bad” poem more centered on that “livingness” than the aesthetic quality; or they use them to manufacture the “literary self” of the writer, to produce the “author function” in, not only his contemporary world, but for all time—permanently. This is Eleanor’s poem, the perfectly crafted “artform” that more accurately and beautifully represents the Summer: a singular time taken from its time and transformed into the “work” of an established and accepted author. It means the *professional*, but in a more complicated, ontological way; partly it expresses itself in its relation to its opposite, the amateurism of Amory’s poem. It means a production of “art” and reinforces the notion of art as a general concept at the cost of, in Amory’s amateur understanding, the “life” of the people supposedly
represented by that work. As we have seen, this is bound up in the final pages of *This Side of Paradise*, where Amory oscillates between the potential intensities of the graveyard, where “Amory wanted to feel ‘William Dayfield, 1864’” (212), and the deadening repetition of Princeton, where “a new generation, shouting the old cries, learning the old creeds, through a revery of long days and nights [...] a new generation dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success; grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken...” (213). Something about the make-up, the material, or the place-ness of the “technology” of the graveyard opens up feeling or intensity while the university here represents the opposite.

William Faulkner’s novel *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) ultimately contains a similar content and a similar array: there’s its endpoint at Harvard, where Quentin and Shreve feverishly converse over the combinatorial historical (and otherwise) narratives that overflow from the Sutpen family’s potential past, and the decrepit and seemingly more “quiet” graveyard that appears at the center of the novel and which Quentin and his father stumble into in the rain. This chapter, looking at Faulkner’s novel and the style of the novel, is interested in how these two “places”—and their philosophical and political styles—offer two different expressions of (or critiques of) form for the literary author, or the literary “authorial” self. As in Fitzgerald, one “form” of this literary self means the creation of an established author: the repetition and dissemination of its style, the focus on craft at the expense of something called “life”; the shedding of anything “distasteful” and the further establishment of good taste in art. The University, of course, symbolizes and institutes this type of authorial self. The graveyard does something different. More interested in the “matter” surrounding any particular form, the graveyard contributes its style in a different way; it “decomposes” form into its own grave matter
rather than lifting out that form, prioritizing it, singling it out and pressing it into eternal meaning.

The “lifting out” and setting aside strategy of the university (in the context here) is directly reflective of Friedrich Nietzsche’s first type of history in his early essay “On the Utility and Liability of History for Life,” a type of historical understanding he calls “monumental history”: “That the great moments in the struggles of individuals form links in one single chain,” he writes, “that they combine to form a mountain range of humankind through the millennia; that for me the highest point of such a long-since-past moment is still alive, bright, and great—this is the fundamental thought in the belief in humanity that expresses itself in the demand for a monumental history” (97). The monumental means these spikes of human development and creation: after a great creator vanishes, “one thing will live on: the signature of their most authentic being, a work, a deed, a rare inspiration, a creation; it will live on because posterity cannot do without it” (98). It functions to enable later creators to use those historical spikes as a reference point and as a motivation. However, one of its major flaws for Nietzsche is that monumental history, in order to link those mountain-tops together, must inevitably ignore the context of each, the valley and the lower landscape—and its complicated inversion, its grave—of each mountain: “it will continue to approach, generalize and ultimately identify nonidentical things, it will continue to diminish the differences between motives and causes in order to present, to the detriment of the cause, the effectus as monumental—that is, as exemplary and worthy of emulation” (99). The monumental effectively disregards the singularity of each “mountain-top” and the contextual deliverance of each success embodied by the history. It lifts it up, as monument, and ignores the ground it stands in; furthermore, it also (and this is another flaw for Nietzsche) attempts, by lifting it out of its ground, to make it something permanent.
Faulkner’s novel, however, positions this “monumental history” against the decompositional “graveyard style”—which is not even quite a history alone, but something that lives, writhing and writing, within it. Style as life, not as a life.

The “graveyard” and the “university” (or monumental art) make for the endpoints of a spectrum in this chapter that attempts to show the drawing apart of the creative and the critical in terms of pure style. In Faulkner’s novel, the “decadent critical” style does not come across in such open, critical presentation as it does in other works in this dissertation. It does something different from the mere insertion of “critical language” into a fictional work. It makes use of a style that comes closest to that “critical intensity” described in my introduction: it is “style as criticism.” And that critical style, like the other operations in this dissertation, works to destabilize culture’s attempts at permanence: the monumental, a thing conceptually excavated and held to be, firstly, a thing of good taste, of permanent beauty; and secondly, reality itself. Here the trembling edges of “how-to-write” finally burst into the long, complicated and purple sentences that will ultimately consume them in what could be called writerly intensity; it is form lying buried in a deteriorating and decomposing matter of forms.

In order to better show how Absalom makes the case for decadence and the graveyard style working against this idea of the monumental, however, I want to put it into conversation with another style taking form at the same time in history. 1936, the year Absalom was published, also marks the year the University of Iowa established its creative writing program. As I’ll explore in the context of Mark McGurl’s important history of the program, The Program Era, certain aspects of its programmatic style (along with standard prescriptions such as “find your voice” and “show, don’t tell”), influenced by popular modernists such as Hemingway and, of course, Fitzgerald, served to give a foundation for the monument that will become “creative”
writing. Not only does the style in Faulkner’s novel seem to be doing the exact opposite work in almost every way—for example, the multiplicity of voices that crowd out any possibility of “finding” a singular voice, literally becoming instead a confusion of voices—but the very formlessness of this style seems to furthermore offer a new way to think about the “author function” that the creative writing program is slowly building as monument by way of a more monumental style throughout the 20th century. In this way, Faulkner’s “grave style” unfurls, in a peculiar way, Martin Heidegger’s understanding of Friedrich Hölderin’s line: “But where danger is, grows / The saving power also” (333). I want to use McGurl’s history of the program in connection with various ideas of Michel Foucault as a framework in order to better hold up and handle and, moreover, perceive exactly what is at offer in Faulkner’s novel and what is buried in that novel’s style. Furthermore, I want to investigate the ways that critical scholarship in the 20th century has helped to further implement this monumental style in order to create that literary self. Peter Brooks’ analysis of narrative in Absalom provides ample material for that particular understanding, and shows how both the creative and the critical fields work to distance themselves from each other, even while seemingly operating hand-in-hand. Though permeated with confusing sentences and voices, continuously “telling” and unfurling more “telling” in the complete absence of any “showing,” and basking in the enormous pleasures of exploring the imaginary potential of exactly what it is you don’t know, Faulkner’s graveyard style reveals a pure decadence and a decadent criticism of the “monumental” precisely by way of what it does not do, while also performing many of the superficial aspects of decadence as well. For that reason, it marks the last, and possibly most impressive and deviant, account of decadent criticism in this dissertation.
A Creative Framework

Nietzsche’s understanding of the *monumental history* gives over to what I want to call the *monumental style* of the creative writing program. This style is “monumental” in several ways: it is a style that intends on becoming normalized and reproducible through the clarity and brevity of simplified (critical) prescriptions (the “how to write” here is the prescriptive, imperative statement (whether it is effective or not), not the *question*); it is adamant in its disciplined and classical focus on the singularly perfect sentence at the cost of any “bad taste” excess; and it is furthermore monumental in its focus on becoming permanent through the creation of the author function: the style gives a certain code for the creation of an “author.” It attempts to “lift” both the style and the author from the morass of context surrounding them, simplified and dignified and aesthetically powerful: the perfect *monument*. The main thrust of this argument lies in the notion that Faulkner’s style in *Absalom* is completely at odds with the original writing style heralded by the program, a style that was developed, discussed, and argued about throughout the 20th century and up to this very day. There is, of course, no causal connection between Faulkner’s particular style for one particular book and the history of the creative writing program. Rather, I want to use this history—this creative mechanism—as a perspective looking backward in order to mine the implications of that “divergent” moment—dividing a singular novel from the more extensive program—and the larger potential of its wandering errancy. It is historical in the sense of the singular time in which both styles are “published”: 1936. Furthermore, this does not mean a simple divergence of styles merely in their particularities, though those (sometimes very abstract) particularities matter. The program’s production over the century can hardly be described as anything other than stylistically diverse, of course, but the interiority of the program does seem to carry a certain DNA; as McGurl puts it:
One way to flesh out this dialogue is to look at the familiar set of prescriptive slogans in which they are complexly encoded: “write what you know”; “show don’t tell”; “find your voice.” To be sure, no self-respecting creative writing teacher of the present day would be caught dead using such hackneyed phrases (except perhaps the last) without heavy scare quotes, but I believe they accurately frame the implicit poetics of the program. This principled avoidance of cliches—“write what you know” goes back at least to the nineteenth century, “show don’t tell” to the early twentieth, and “find your voice” to the neo-romantic 1960s—is no doubt admirable in many ways, but it is symptomatic of a general avoidance of systematic reflection on classroom protocols in the discipline of creative writing.

However, not only do these cliches cover the “implicit poetics of the program,” they furthermore function to allow the possibility of the program to even have an implicit poetics: the fact that a series of “encoded” prescriptions works here implies a specific efficiency of production. This makes sense with the program’s initial focus on discipline and the manner in which that discipline can lead to the form of writing meeting that coded criteria—formulating out all the excesses. For example, when McGurl discusses the habits of Flannery O’Connor, an important “program” writer, he notes that, for her, discipline “was a kind of religion, an article of faith arguably as basic to her thinking and writing as her specifically theological commitments. Discipline meant obedience to the rules, and rules were established and maintained by institutions; and to submit to the authority of these institutions, while painful, was also a source of great potential pleasure, aesthetic, and otherwise” (135). Even though O’Connor makes for an epitome of the case, she still, for McGurl, remains “one of the prime rhetoricians of the
transformation of literary modernism into a discourse of institutional being” (136). Whatever one says about the quality of the program’s output—and McGurl goes to great lengths to show that so much of 20th century writing was, in fact, most definitely associated with the university program in some manner—it does not seem anybody questions the “discipline” and “institutional” aspect of the program.

Being inherently a technology that, operating off of its coded instructions—its “style”—the program works to produce its particular product. This particular, encoded style—“write what you know,” “show don’t tell,” “find your voice”—reflects its modernist (and otherwise) influences, of course, but it also seems to reflect the very process of that discipline and its institutional production. Because of both its easy simplification into prescription and the specific reductive style itself—the way, McGurl explains, “the poetics of ‘show don’t tell’ would gradually evolve into a more general understanding of good fiction as founded on discipline, restraint, and the impersonal exercise of hard-won technique” (99)—it will ultimately make for an ideal reproducibility and institutionalization in terms of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*. In his analysis of the historical “programme,” Foucault notes the “correlation of the body and the gesture”: “In the correct use of the body, which makes possible a correct use of time, nothing must remain idle or useless: everything must be called upon to form the support of the act required. A well-disciplined body forms the operational context of the slightest gesture” (152). Instead of the physical body, the creative writing program operates its own body in terms of style: “discipline, restraint, and the impersonal exercise of hard-won technique.” Each sentence or line must work to efficiently carry the meaning of that discipline within the workings of the fiction or the poem. As McGurl writes, again for O’Connor, “the discipline of narrative form can be seen as a masochistic aesthetics of institutionalization” (135; for similar reasons as McGurl,
and because I am comparing this production to Faulkner’s novel, I am more interested here in prose than poetry; though I think much of this argument carries over). “From the master of discipline to him who is subjected to it the relation is one of signalization,” Foucault writes, “it is a question not of understanding the injunction but of perceiving the signal and reacting to it immediately, according to a more or less artificial, prearranged code” (166). It is, I am claiming, that prearranged code that matters here, not the production of the program itself: “All the activity of the disciplined individual must be punctuated and sustained by injunctions whose efficacity rests on brevity and clarity” (166). Initially, the style lauded by the early program— Influenced indeed by modernists and the New Criticism—seems to overlap with the procedures of institutional discipline in Foucault’s understanding.

Discipline is the style: craft the best, cleanest, most correct sentences and trim away the excess. Classical and conforming with some modernist traditions (and surely the most popular ones), this particular style also works in terms of efficiency and reproducibility. Taste and discipline collide to create a lasting style. The fact that various other aspects of Foucault’s historical understanding include such important parts of the creative writing community as awards (“Discipline rewards simply by the play of awards” (181)), the ever-present self-surveillance of the writing workshop and its effective normalization only deepen the connection (for example, one reason a New York Times article quoted Ellen Tremper as saying, “we try to see if a person seems rational and, frankly, unneurotic, because if you get someone with a screw loose, it can be disruptive to the group” (Simon)). Again, the writers of the program—and those otherwise connected with it—continuously and historically revolted strongly against these measures of discipline, creating varied and unique works of literature; but I am very interested in the fundamental installation of this discipline and its chosen style at the origin (excepting the
later imperative of “find your voice”) of production. The encoded style is a very particular one, a classical, monumental style intent on both quality work (according to the taste of those who established it) and easy reproducibility in the service of a new niche industry.

The fact that the program has yet produced such interesting and varied works attests to the second and, possibly more interesting, idea that the “product” of the program is not the writing itself, but rather the creation of authors—of “writing selves.” Two specific points of Foucault’s important essay “What is an Author?” pertain to this notion: “(1) the author function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses...” and “(4) it does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects—positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals” (113). “Critics doubtless try to give this intelligible being [the author] a realistic status, by discerning, in the individual, a ‘deep’ motive, a ‘creative’ power, or a ‘design,’ the milieu in which writing originates,” he writes, and continues: “Nevertheless, these aspects of an individual which we designate as making him an author are only a projection, in more or less psychologizing terms, of the operations that we force texts to undergo, the connections that we make, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize or the exclusions that we practice” (110). Foucault separates the actual, textual production from the author function, which represents moreover “several selves,” and not “purely and simply [a] real individual.” Foucault’s understanding of this author function includes exactly how a particular culture frames its producers and their products; a talented writer of fan fiction, for example, not only does not enjoy the same public prestige as even a less-than-bestselling author published by one of the big five publishing companies, but their status as an “author” at all seems entirely limited in a similar way. Though this specific situation involves, of
course, problems of intellectual property, professionalism and amateurism, and a knot of many other social and cultural complexities, there furthermore remains the very real fact that the creative writing program, at least, will afford writers the possibility of publication or of forming networks and connections in order to make it easier. As McGurl points out, referring to the teaching of creative writing, “No one has ever proved that creative writers make the best creative writing teachers, but that sort of proof is evidently beside the point. What the literary artist is presenting to students in the classroom is a charismatic model of creative being” (36). And, furthermore, “The exaggerated but telling sense that ‘everyone’ across the land is writing or, even more frequently, not finding time to write ‘their novel’ indexes something more than the wide distribution of a certain kind of literary ambition. Those relatively few, but nonetheless great many, writers who actually manage to produce and publish a novel speak to and for a broader existential urge to be living a significant—literally—life” (xi). But is this existential urge reflecting a desire to simply write? Rather, it seems moreover to fulfill the conditions of the “author function,” which implies quite a few things more than simply writing, which most anyone can do. These ambitions are not specifically related to fan fiction websites (though something quite interesting is going on here, as well), but rather to the set of conditions that sets forth the “author” as its own kind of “creative being.” This existential urge represents that potential for the author function—it is an existence seemingly flowering from the author function, produced, in part, through the work of that function more so than the work of writing itself.

This is the other implication of the monumental style as presented and maintained—indeed, as a form of a “technology of maintenance”—by the creative writing program. Professionalization matters—people want to be professional, paid writers—but there also seems
to be an existential aspect to that desire to become a “creative being.” Especially when considering that one of those early tenets of the program was to “write what you know,” it’s easy to understand how writing one’s own story—and having it published under one’s name and read widely—might led to the validation of one’s “self” through the process. In our contemporary culture, then, the program helps to produce, quite literally, “creative selves,” or, possibly, just “selves” alone. Furthermore, once again, outside of the “writing” itself, is the importance of the author’s name; Foucault again: “It would seem that the author’s name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being. The author’s name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture” (107). A “creative being” here becomes bound to its “author’s name”: both are “modes of being” that are separated from the individuals themselves. But they are, “creatively” bound together and intertwined, “always to be present,” and, since “Our culture has metamorphosed this idea of narrative, or writing, as something designed to ward off death” (101), they are ultimately linked with an always-present deathlessness, *purely monumental*. One aspect of becoming an “author function,” then, is to become a monument, in specifically Foucault’s terms here and in Nietzsche’s, and, indirectly, in Fitzgerald’s notion of “art.” The book revealed as hard tombstone, with its “author’s name”—scratched or etched into it, forever marking its function in clear, hard “prose”—making for the singular monument of *creative being*, or, possibly, being itself. The “name” then is the perfect monument for the literary author. While the creative writing program is teaching and producing excellent prose and poetry, it is also, possibly primarily, fabricating selves and author’s names, often in the stone fashion of classical,
monumental style, and likewise, for that reason, maintains the process as a rigorous technology improving with every passing year. These are the main reasons I would like to think of the program’s style as *monumental*: the style the program elaborated originally, the encoded prescriptions of the program’s encapsulated style, and the end result that the program implicitly helps to reinforce—an endless production (in consequence of a transformation for only a lucky few) of seemingly permanent “author functions” and “creative beings” and “author’s names” along the cultural landscape, while any form or inclusion or shadow of “criticism” seemingly appears, at times, secondarily, or possibly not at all. In the way that the prescriptive “how to write” adumbrates both a quiet and fixed permanence as well as setting out a rigid architecture for housing the *author’s name*, it suggests an industry that is devoted necessarily to the separation of creative and critical writing.

Pater’s Stylistic Interlude

If we step back somewhat in the chain of influences leading to this point, there seems to be an interesting early connection to this “monumental” in Walter Pater’s essay on style, as well as its potential “opposite,” what I want to call the “grave” style. For that reason, Pater’s work makes for good interlude material between this particular understanding of the creative writing program’s monumental style and Faulkner’s novel. As Angela Leighton and others have noted, Pater’s influence on modernist style is largely revolutionary, since “Pater’s is the voice which, more than any other, gives to later generations of writers an account of art which then becomes a founding style or music” (Leighton ch. 4). His essay “Style” absolutely outlines the specific “conditions for good art” that become important not only for certain modernist tendencies, but also—through the chain of influences—important for the early creative writing program,
specifically regarding that “more general understanding of good fiction as founded on discipline, restraint, and the impersonal exercise of hard-won technique” (McGurl 99). In his essay, Pater puts emphasis on the disciplined extraction of that particular aesthetic form from its chaotic flux: “For in truth all art does but consist in the removal of surplusage, from the last finish of the gem-engraver blowing away the last particle of invisible dust, back to the earliest divination of the finished work to be, lying somewhere, according to Michelangelo’s fancy, in the rough-hewn block of stone” (Appreciations 19-20). Despite that multiplicity that seems quite potential in his famous flux, he nevertheless appeals to a unity and a specific “one” in terms of aesthetic creation: “To give the phrase, the sentence, the structural member, the entire composition, song, or essay, a similar unity with its subject and with itself:-style is in the right way when it tends towards that” (Appreciations 22), and, furthermore, speaking of Flaubert in an unsurprising way, “The one word for the one thing, the one thought, amid the multitude of words, terms, that might just do: the problem of style was there!-the unique word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, essay, or song, absolutely proper to the single mental presentation or vision within” (Appreciations 29). Furthermore, he seems to extend this specific excavation of art directly towards the “self” of the writer, as when he writes, “In this way, according to the well-known saying, ‘The style is the man,’ complex or simple, in his individuality, his plenary sense of what he really has to say, his sense of the world; all cautions regarding style arising out of so many natural scruples as to the medium through which alone he can expose that inward sense of things, the purity of this medium, its laws or tricks of refraction: nothing is to be left there which might give conveyance to any matter save that” (Appreciations 35-36). Just as with the “author function,” but with even more precision, perhaps, Pater understands that specific, extraction of form from the “multitude of words, terms, that might just do” or even the multiplicity of existence itself, to be continuous
with the self, “complex or simple, in his individuality”: careful, disciplined removal of “surplusage” in order to find that specific, clear and classical “monument” that reflects the “monument” of the writing self. In this way, his early essay, “Style,” very clearly prefigures certain aspects of the creative writing program of the next century, which certainly makes sense concerning his more general influence on modernism.

However, his essay, like the “Conclusion” from *The Renaissance*, likewise seems to be very cognizant of that flux or movement or multiplicity—or, more precisely for Pater, that *matter*—that specifically demands “form” to be itself an extraction or excavation. Though focused on the singular form drawn from that multiplicity, the good artist for Pater yet remains aware and wary of the multiplicity’s potential for sending flights in various directions:

Parallel, allusion, the allusive way generally, the flowers in the garden: he knows the narcotic force of these upon the negligent intelligence to which any diversion, literally, is welcome, any vagrant intruder, because one can go wandering away with it from the immediate subject. Jealous, if he have a really quickening motive within, of all that does not hold directly to that, of the facile, the otiose, he will never depart from the strictly pedestrian process, unless he gains a ponderable something thereby. (*Appreciations* 19)

Interestingly, and this happens multiple times throughout the essay, Pater offers *jealousy* as the “really quickening motive” for the curtailment of that singular form—jealousy of the form within the possible digressions, of the “allusive way generally”; a passionate coveting, a zealoussness. Furthermore, for Pater, the “matter” of that potential for digressions, or ornamental words, or errancy, seems to have a specific locale: “For to the grave reader words too are grave; and the ornamental word, the figure, the accessory form or colour or reference, is rarely content to die to
thought precisely at the right moment, but will inevitably linger awhile, stirring a long ‘brain-wave’ behind it of perhaps quite alien associations” (Appreciations 18). For the “grave reader,” then, words too are “grave”—and they linger awhile, creating a network of associations, some “quite alien.” And though, of course, Pater is referring to a “grave” seriousness here, it is hard to ignore the description of the ornamental word as “rarely content to die in thought precisely at the right moment.” Instead of dying, the word lives against its demise, out of its time, slipping deeper and deeper, woven in with the texture of the “grave” of words; the normal association of “grave”—death and dying—seems to be somewhat overturned in this sentence, indicating a kind of life-in-death, a grave of words being that very place where words refuse to die “at the right time,” and linger there as matter. This strange association makes sense in the context of the sentence, since Pater himself has just literally told his reader that these “living-dead” words often leave behind them “perhaps quite alien associations.” This play leaves us associating that matter of excess as grave—word-graves, or graves-as-words—serious for the serious reader and yet, as he has just exemplified, ready and willing to play at the same time.

And yet even beyond this specific moment of play, many scholars have noted how Pater’s language makes use of the “grave” in multiple ways in his work, both descriptively (the beginning of the imaginary portrait “Duke Carl of Rosenmold” leaves a vivid example) and stylistically. “As usual,” Leighton writes, “in Pater, the storyline does not matter much. What matters is something going on underground.” Furthermore, despite what “Style” seems to claim about the “writing self,” Leighton suggests that Pater’s style actually works the opposite effect: “Far from protecting the self and self-identity, Pater devotes some of his most searingly lyrical passages to describing the self’s disintegration”; “Instead, he subjects it to a grammatical erosion, even a vanishing, as he explores its all too permeable borders” (ch. 4). Again and again,
she describes Pater’s work as “grave” and “under the surface,” as she considers the specific characteristics of his style:

And that sense, the shifting of possible meanings below the surface, is what makes his work so subversive, so difficult to pin down into theoretical positions. Those long, constantly adjusting sentences, with their veiled suggestions, delayed gratifications, and etymological subplots, express the restlessness of a world where nothing can be saved, spiritually or physically, from the stream of time.

There is, however, something deathly going on [...] Pater goes digging for meaning, excavating etymologies, as if that ground were some resourceful place which releases unexpected objects. (ch. 4)

Bound with that idea from “Style,” that “grave readers read grave words,” the “grave” of words becomes caught between the living and the dead, “as if that ground were some resourceful place which releases unexpected objects.” Despite the “surface” argument of “Style,” that careful idea of a careful extraction of a perfect form from the stone, monumentally, Leighton here provides a “graveyard” view of his style; in effect, Pater’s style seems to be doing something different from the way in which his prescriptions have been utilized throughout the 20th century.

The reason for this discrepancy might also be buried in Pater’s work. Linda Dowling notes and describes the same style in her essay on Pater’s “Demeter and Persephone,” more specifically in terms of etymology and Pater’s playful-grave revisions: “The effect of Pater’s etymological explorations is thus to overturn the received meanings of the words he chooses to excavate: ‘mystical’ means not impalpable, but earthy; ‘ethical’ means not moral, but sensuous. In short, his etymological digging brings us closer to the material earth itself, just as his choice of Greek words to excavate brings us closer to the actual birth of Western culture” (219). At the
same time, however, Dowling also meticulously reveals the way in which Pater frames his description of the historical worship of Demeter and Persephone, the first subject in his *Greek Studies*, “upon the description of the ruins at Cnidus provided by Charles Newton” (224):

To do this Pater must not simply dispense with the grotesqueries of Newton’s votive pigs and breasts; he must banish the darker elements that may be found within these “graves.” Pater’s suppressions are peculiarly personal, though hardly idiosyncratic: for example, he makes no mention of the evidences of animal sacrifice found at Cnidus. Nor does he reveal what Newton makes clear, that the serpent was one of the secret objects in the worship of Demeter—this doubtless because snakes, representing both generation and degeneration to Pater, were a matter of deep aversion to him. (229)

For Pater, then, choosing this specific “form” of the matter depends on elements that he intends on hiding or misrepresenting—shaping, as a kind of aesthetic misplacement: “Instead, Pater seeks in ‘Demeter and Persephone’ to cleanse these sepulchral precincts of any horror or corruption, ‘to connect [them] with impressions of dignity and beauty,’ and to people them with gracious forms” (Dowling 229). His further “effort to associate the statues of Demeter with familiar works of modern art: Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, Corot’s peasant women, Leonardo’s *Virgin of the Balances*” (Dowling 229)—comes then as no surprise. Pater invokes Nietzsche’s notion of monumental history—here in the form of the monumental, important works of Western art—in order to cleanse these graves of the aspects that he finds offensive or, in effect, bad taste; his appeal to the monumental derives from that sense of aesthetic jealousy the artist feels, as her art threatens to drift into “alien associations” and on diversions she cannot control. In that sense, “form” becomes simultaneously a way to escape the darker conditions of the grave. And though
Pater often enough indulges in that grave-like style, his prescriptions in “Style” continue to set forth and set aloft that form of the monumental. He clearly straddles the line, if there is one; but, indeed, both “styles” do seem present—even though buried—in his work. In this way, he provides an illustration that can help us to perceive both the “monumental” form of the creative writing program and Faulkner’s alternative, decadent “grave” style, critical and choking on matter, which seems to be overflowing itself for that singular moment in 1936.

In the same way that his prescriptions in “Style” seem to reflect our 20th century and contemporary aesthetics in terms of the monumental in creative writing programs, Pater’s “grave” style, described by Leighton and Dowling, furthermore seems to be a possible matter for Faulkner’s style in *Absalom, Absalom!* Indeed, Leighton’s general description of his work—“Those long, constantly adjusting sentences, with their veiled suggestions, delayed gratifications, and etymological subplots, express the restlessness of a world where nothing can be saved, spiritually or physically, from the stream of time”—are likewise an uncanny depiction of Faulkner’s own style in that particular novel, up to and including that “restlessness of a world where nothing can be saved, spiritually or physically, from the stream of time.” Though Faulkner’s work seems even more determined to follow the digressions and the “alien associations” of each grave word along the continuously blossoming grave world he envisions. And, also in a similar way with Leighton’s understanding of Pater, in *Absalom*, “the storyline does not matter much. What matters is something going on underground.” This particularly matters here, since the “storyline” will be the important adversary that the novel’s style seems poised to combat. From this point on I want to close read not only *Absalom, Absalom!*, but also Peter Brooks’ analysis of the novel. Brooks’ use of psychoanalysis in order to analyze narrative comes to a halt in *Absalom* because of the novel’s complicated “absence” of a clear, easy
narrative. And yet, he is still able to excavate a substitution for narrative by way of extracting Quentin from the grave matter of the text. By doing this he transforms Quentin into an authorial self in the same way that the creative writing program does in theory. I want to look primarily at two sections of the novel that Brooks analyzes—Judith’s letter and Quentin confronting Henry Sutpen—and give them my own readings to see how Brooks excavates from the grave and how the novel simultaneously resists that excavation and maintains the grave style in opposition to the monumental.

Judith

Judith herself gives the most important testament concerning the difference between the “monument” and the “grave” in the manner in which I’m interested. At one point in the novel, she gives a letter she received from Charles Bon to Quentin’s grandmother, who eventually passes it down to Mr. Compson and he to Quentin. When Quentin’s grandmother asks why she does so—“Me? You want me to keep it?”—Judith answers with an extended monologue and metaphor:

‘Yes,’ Judith said. ‘Or destroy it. As you like. Read it if you like or dont read it if you like. Because you make so little impression, you see. You get born and you try this and you dont know why only you keep on trying it and you are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them, like trying to, having to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs and the others all trying and they dont know why either except that the strings are all in one another’s way like five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one wants to weave his own
pattern into the rug; and it cant matter, you know that, or the Ones that set up the
loom would have arranged things a little better, and yet it must matter because
you keep on trying or having to keep on trying and then all of a sudden it’s all
over and all you have left is a block of stone with scratches on it provided there
was someone to remember to have the marble scratched and set up or had time to,
and it rains on it and the sun shines on it and after a while they dont even
remember the name and what the scratches were trying to tell, and it doesn’t
matter. And so maybe if you could go to someone, the stranger the better, and give
them something—a scrap of paper—something, anything, it not to mean anything
in itself and them not even to read it or keep it, not even bother to throw it away
or destroy it, at least it would be something just because it would have happened,
be remembered even if only from passing from one hand to another, one mind to
another, and it would be at least a scratch, something, something that might make
a mark on something that was once for the reason that it can die someday, while
the block of stone cant be is because it never can become was because it cant ever
die or perish.......’ (100-101)
Brooks sees in this monologue a privileging of the dynamic of narrative over the “status of
texts—woven or graven or written” and that Judith “concedes the evanescence or even the
impossibility of the ‘referential’ and ‘metalinguistic’ functions of language (in Roman
Jackobson’s sense) while arguing the continuing pertinence of and need for the ‘phatic’: the way
we use language to test the communicative circuit, to confirm the conductive properties of the
medium of words” (311); furthermore, he suggests that she “makes a claim neither for story nor
for plot, but rather for narrating as, in Genette’s terms, the narrative act productive of plot and
story,” and contends “that narrating is an urgent function in itself, that in the absence of pattern and structure, patterning and structuration remain necessary projects, dynamic intentions” (311). Brooks is interested in how Judith, despite being less interested in the message itself, seems determined to “pass on” the apparatus necessary for establishing a future narrative. There might not exist here a stable narrative, but Judith’s act represents the desire to transmit the empty space (now transformed into a producing apparatus) that can eventually allow for at least the possibility of a proper narrative. This point then leads to his conclusion on the role of narrative in Absalom in which he claims that “Faulkner’s present is a kind of tortured utopia of unending narrative dialogue informed by desire for a ‘revelatory knowledge.’ That knowledge never will come, yet that desire never will cease to activate the telling voices” (312). Concerning Judith’s spoken desire that the letter be passed on to someone, “the stranger the better,” Brooks describes the need for the thing passed to possess as “ontological gravity because it was written by a living hand, addressed from someone to someone, [suggesting] that the process of sense-making retains a tenuous privilege of which its products are drained” (311). In other words, he seems to be applying Marshall McLuhan’s formula to Judith’s desire: the medium—the passing-on—precludes the message.

For Brooks, there is a looping mechanism of “narrative-generation” enframed within Judith’s desire. It means a positive presence—a skeleton thing that is also a skeleton of reticular desires—a machine built out of a skeleton of commands set forth in order to loop the same “historical” text permanently through the series of text-enframed-bodies it consumes in order to reproduce:

Judith’s struggle with the tenses of the verb “to be” suggest the whole problem of narrative as recovery of the past and makes us note how in the passing-on of
Bon’s letter of 1865 (whose very inscription—on the finest watermarked French notepaper taken from a gutted Southern mansion, in stovepolish manufactured by the victorious Union and captured by the doomed Confederate raiders in the place of the food or ammunition they had hoped to find—is marked by the cosmic ironic laughter of History) the reader is linked not only to the reading but to the writing of “historical” documents, and how, as a belated reader of the document—following Judith herself, Quentin’s grandmother, grandfather, father, and then Quentin himself—he is summoned to take his place in the activity of transmission, to join the ventriloquized medium of history as fiction and fiction as history, perhaps finally to become, in a modification of Proust’s phrase, the writer of himself. (311)

The fact that Brooks envisions the chain of readers as necessarily becoming linked “not only to the reading but to the writing of ‘historical’ documents” and likewise necessitates Quentin as a “belated reader” and implies that he himself (Brooks) and the reader of Absalom (and the reader of his chapter, since he includes Charles’ narrative, if not the actual letter) also become complicit in this memorializing, seems to belie his remark that, for Judith, “the process of sense-making retains a tenuous privilege of which its products are drained.” Or, if his actual meaning were to persist, the “process of sense-making” and the actual “reading of those products” must somehow converge, since the chain of hosts necessarily for Brooks includes the actual reading of the documents. This is important. It is furthered in his project of “recovering” Absalom from the possibility of becoming lost to narrative—Brooks must preserve Absalom within a field of past-becoming-present narrative in order to preserve his main point about narrative itself:
The recovery of the past—which I take to be the aim of all narrative—may not succeed in *Absalom*, if by the recovery of the past we mean its integration within the present through a coherent plot fully predicated and understood as past. Yet the attempted recovery of the past makes known the continuing history of past desire as it persists in the present, shaping the project of telling. (311)

His task, as a critic, is to preserve *Absalom* as monumental, as monument, by linking it with a permanent and unchanging critical interpretation. *Absalom* has always threatened a kind of impermanence for the various reasons we have noted, yet Brooks wants desperately to preserve the novel through his interpretation of narrative. Even if the narrative act itself fails, he says, the positive apparatus that has penetrated through time—from Charles Bon through Judith up to Mr. Compson and Quentin—the machine, whose form and outline is shaped into “the project of telling,” furthermore finalizes the shape and form of Quentin, who becomes—as the last character in the chain and before the “readers” of the book itself—“the writer of himself.” Like those writers of the creative writing program, Quentin becomes the author of himself through a process that crystallizes the past and calls the finalized, permanent form: “author,” “monument”; only where the creative writing program disciplines MFA candidates *into* those self-written authorial monuments, the work for the fictionalized Quentin is here done by the critic Brooks.

The contemporary critic effectively practices the same “self-authorization” process as the creative writing program and does so vicariously through the fictional Quentin since Quentin reveals himself as the perfect candidate for such a use. The novel calls for chaos and disaster and the impossibility of the maintenance of historical narrative—it balances precariously on the brink and seems ready for, with more nature than a poise—and with even more delight in the idea of—falling; but Brooks saves the novel last minute by eternalizing Quentin’s self-authorship: the
body of desires shaped from Bon to Judith and onward in the writing that will end as Quentin’s own form, *Quentin-as-monument*.

In the end, in order to properly monumentalize *Absalom* for the study of narrative, Brooks allows for the sacrifice of the coherence of the narrative as long as he can salvage among that incoherence an interpretation—a meaning standing firm even from within the fallen history—built with a Freudian understanding of desire and the death instinct, and the claim that narrative must always show an attempt for the recovery of the past. He reads into—*forces* into—Judith’s monologue this positive and interpretative technical apparatus which immediately grips its context from the inside, so to speak, and transforms this context so that it can more fully monumentalize the final interpretation that Brooks intends to leave behind—permanent, immutable—as critic. Etched into the stone monument over the dead energy body of this book: *Quentin is thus the author of himself. The attempted recovery of the past makes known the continuing history of past desire as it persists in the present. All narratives are recovery of the past; even the ones that don’t seem like narratives. All narratives must, therefore, remain monumental forever.* However, as we have seen, the necessary transmission for this creation and therefore recovery of the past (and therefore recovery of the novel for narrative) hinges again on the necessity of Quentin *reading* the letter that every transmitting reader before him read and every reader after him must necessarily read in the future. In other words, the act of reading necessarily informs the endpoint of Quentin-as-self-made-author and the thesis that *Absalom* shows the necessity of narrative desire. But whatever the outcome of this transmission may be, it is ultimately never one that Judith actually had sought with her weird offering and her stoic desire—since, indeed, “reading” itself was never a necessity in the first place.
Instead, from the very beginning, Judith leaves her object in question. When Quentin’s grandmother asks about that purpose—“Me? You want me to keep it?”—Judith answers: “Yes...Or destroy it. As you like. Read it if you like or dont read if you like.” She persists during her monologue: “And so maybe if you could go to someone, the stranger the better, and give them something—a scrap of paper—something, anything, it not to mean anything in itself and them not even to read it or keep it, not even bother to throw it away or destroy it, at least it would be something just because it would have happened” (101). Brooks’ idea that Judith’s speech signals a kind of “necessity of narrative” that tests the “communicative circuit,” which, itself, requires readers being linked “not only to the reading but to the writing of ‘historical’ documents” and therefore to more readers reading and re-writing the text—all of this seems to show a compound foreign to what Judith actually means when we take into consideration what she disregards: As you like. Read it or don’t read if you like. It doesn’t mean anything. Don’t read it or keep it, don’t bother to throw it away or destroy it. Where Brooks considers Judith’s speech and its desire an act that attempts to fortify the monumental—to mark with the permanence of critical interpretation the textual “body” that will eventually find its full shape in the “self-written” body of Quentin, the positive apparatus returning and returning again—Judith’s actual words suggest something almost opposite. Don’t bother to throw it away or even destroy it. Let it lie. In effect, Judith seems less interested in anyone reading the letter than she does in the act of simply passing it on. We noted earlier how Brooks takes this mere “passing on” with a grain of salt: it possesses, for Judith, “ontological gravity because it was written by a living hand, addressed from someone to someone,” suggesting “that the process of sense-making retains a tenuous privilege of which its products are drained.” But even these facts—that the letter was “written by a living hand” and “addressed from someone to someone”—could not
matter less to Judith, since the letter itself can just as well be left unread—untouched, unacknowledged. One of the only things that Judith cares about is merely the act of “giving something—a scrap of paper.” She seems less interested here in text than she does in mere textile. Moreover, she seeks a stranger—“the stranger the better.” In fact, she seems to desire as much elongation as can be conceivable, and likewise for as little “connection” or “meaning” as possible. More interested in that particular possibility of absence than in the presence of any positive “meaningful” intrusion, Judith’s plea furthermore seems to want to remove any human agency at all on the receiving end—let alone “reading” or “writing”—as it positions the passing “scrap of paper” against the memorial “block of stone with scratches on it.” When she refers to the tombstone, she says: “...and yet it must matter because you keep on trying or having to keep on trying and then all of a sudden it’s all over and all you have left is a block of stone with scratches on it provided there was someone to remember to have the marble scratched and set up or had time to...” (101). Following in Brooks’ footsteps, Karen McPherson describes the monumental style in connection with “the impossibility of significant representation,” since the monuments are “forgotten or indecipherable”; for her, the “scratches” signify “the life struggle against containment or oblivion that manifests itself in the giving of a letter, in the listener’s voice, in the underlying ‘notlanguage,’ even in the wisteria blooming outside Miss Rosa’s window” (445). And yet the “scratches are not so easily defined as any sort of “life struggle”; they are not the scratches of a contained animal frantically clawing at its imprisonment, but rather, as Judith indicates, merely the chance that there exists “someone to remember to have the marble scratched and set up or had time to”—someone with enough free time and with enough ample means to establish the words on the monument. In Judith’s understanding, the tombstone—the marks on the monument—are bound to the phrase “provided for” and the
“someone” who must “remember” in order to “scratch” it up. “Someone” becomes responsible for that monument.

Her reference to her desired scrap of paper, however, works somewhat differently. There are no provisions; instead, once the scrap is given, it seems to become untethered entirely from human agency, itself—the scrap, the textile—floating in-between, offering the merest glimpse of “meaning”: “at least it would be something just because it would have happened, be remembered even if only from passing from one hand to another, one mind to another, and it would be at least a scratch, something, something that might make a mark on something that was” (101).

Untethered into the passive tense, the “scrap of paper” does not seem to indicate the “someone scratching,” but rather the scratch itself. It “would be something” because it “would have happened” and “would be remembered” if only from “passing” from... to from... building a delicate break between two passivities—that is, the mere and fragile movement of the scrap seems to be Judith’s primary concern. Even the scrap itself seems to diminish (“and it would be at least a scratch, something, something that might make a mark on something that was”), until all the hesitant grammar seems to hint more and more to the smallest trace (“at least a scratch”), at the very least it’s a scratch, seems to become lost between two more passivities (“something, something”), until it becomes an unsure mark itself—in fact, only might make a mark. The “object” of her speech and the “object” itself—this scrap of paper—coincide at an unsure, hesitant, impossible juncture—not the “letter” itself; not the writer of the letter; not what is written on the letter; not what the letter may mean to future generations—but rather the absent space between from and to in which a passive item may be transposed. Judith numbs agency out into this elongation of texture—feeling her textured object between every hypothetical “would be” and her final “something, something....” There’s no reader here to intercept her indicated
positive narrative apparatus and then be obliged to pass it on; instead, there’s only the velleity swept into the noise: her desire of freeing the scrap of textile into the non-presence and yet non-absence (there is still the texture) she can only gesture at through her material use of the grammatical text and her purple prose monologue. She *buries* it there, buries the textile in the text.

Time binds her double “object”—the scrap of paper itself as object and its almost agentless transposition as object—together into the singular absent objective and therefore time also has its own part to play. It means *movement gone into*—it means a double kind of solution. She makes this clear in the final part of her speech. Continued from where we left off last paragraph, this is a moment where she further differentiates the “object” of “transposition of scrap of paper” from the “object,” tombstone:

a scrap of paper—something, anything, it not to mean anything in itself and them not even to read it or keep it, not even bother to throw it away or destroy it, at least it would be something just because it would have happened, be remembered even if only from passing from one hand to another, one mind to another, and it would be at least a scratch, something, something that might make a mark on something that *was* once for the reason that it can die someday, while the block of stone cant be *is* because it never can become *was* because it cant ever die or perish. . . . . . (101)

Here Judith sets out a major difference between the scrap and the stone. It does not necessarily have to do with “writing,” as Brooks seems to suggest, or with “remembering” a thing or a person, or with the “object-ness” of the thing itself. Indeed, we have seen that both objects—both the scrap and the stone—are linked with all of these notions within her speech, even if her
grammar frames them quite differently. Both the scrap and the stone are “scratched” and bound to “remembering.” Here, above the ground is the same as what is buried beneath it. Rather, what matters for Judith is their composition in relation to temporality and their stubbornness in the terms of time. The scrap of paper is something “that was once for the reason that it can die someday, while the block of stone cant be is because it never can become was because it cant ever die or perish.” Brooks’ analysis of this final part of the speech sacrifices what Judith says to allow for the intervention of his interpretive technique: “Judith’s struggle with the tenses of the verb ‘to be’ suggests the whole problem of narrative as recovery of the past and makes us note how in the passing-on of Bon’s letter of 1865 ... the reader is linked not only to the reading but to the writing of ‘historical’ documents” (311). In order to set out a solution for the “problem of narrative” and its “recovery of the past,” Brooks reduces Judith’s meditation on her object—the scrap of paper, the thing that “was once for the reason it can die someday” and the stone, the thing that “cant be is because it never can become was because it cant ever die or perish”—into a “struggle with the tenses of the verb ‘to be’,,” into a kind of confusion which stops short at merely indicating Judith’s (and any reader’s) inability to reconcile the past fully within the present. However, Judith does not seem to be struggling with the tenses of the verb “to be” at all; she merely seems to be defining her terms. “To be,” for Judith, means an object’s passive transposition within a temporary framework that allows for that object’s capacity for no longer existing. There is no confusion on her point here; there is no struggle. Judith simply lays out the constellation of her offering: the scrap of paper—not the meaning of it, written within or written without; not the history of it in any possible way; not the implied inheritance or influence moving determinedly from writer to reader—the mere scrap of paper becomes existent for Judith, becomes is, because it can become was, because it has the capability and necessity of
moving from *is* to *was*. Because the scratched-up stone can never become *was*, it can therefore never have been *is* in the first place. Whereas Brooks assumes that the weight of Judith’s speech lies on something else entirely—it contains, “ontological gravity,” for Judith, “because it was written by a living hand, addressed from someone to someone”—it is now more than evident that this just is not the case. The “ontological gravity” does not mingle with the narrative importance of how the letter was written by a “living hand, addressed from someone to someone,” but rather it emerges merely from the fact that the scrap of paper will at some point in the future no longer exist and, moreover, is never expected by anyone to continue existing. The stone leaves its heavy permanence etched into things like a sentence complete as punishment and period: from there it draws all things into its singular, momentary-monumental authority. The scrap of paper, on the other hand, will pass into the annihilation that gives it its hesitant ontological *grave* in the earthy material between *is being* and *once was being*. Essentially Judith’s solution to her existential dilemma *is* time: it means a double solution—her scrap of paper must necessarily dissolve into the constellation of time’s *is* and *was*; but it also solves her problem of what to do with the falsity she suspects within the monumental stone. All that matters for Judith is that the scrap becomes *was* so that she can maybe—perhaps glimpse the possibility that it once was *is*—and the only guarantee of that transposition itself for her is for someone—the stranger the better—to pass it on to someone else—the stranger the better. Aside from this condition, nothing else substantially differentiates the scrap of paper from the stone: they both are linked to remembering and writing. But the difference is key both to Judith’s desire and, as should be clear at this point, to the notion of “monument” that I am trying to explore.

If the “monumental” describes the stone, then, in Judith’s understanding, it lacks *being* in the same sort of way. It means a “to be” of stone that seems to be attempting to mark some
important absence and this is where McPherson’s reading situates it (445); but this task alone has already failed: “...and then all of a sudden it’s all over and all you have left is a block of stone with scratches on it provided there was someone to remember to have the marble scratched and set up or had time to, and it rains on it and the sun shines on it and after a while they don’t even remember the name and what the scratches were trying to tell, and it doesn’t matter” (101). At this point, the monument has outlasted the noun that its very creation was meant to remember. For Judith, it becomes a culmination of the marionette confusion, where you “move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs and the others all trying and they don’t know why either except that the strings are all in one another’s way like five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug” (101). The monument is linked to the desire wherein each one “wants to weave his own pattern into the rug”—which translates to the desire for making that pattern permanent. In the attempt to reverse a perceived absence and render it into permanence, the making-monumental scratches its desperate code and language—which in turn unfurl into psychology, politics, epistemology—into the stone like a kind of enchantment, attempting to force the presence out of the absence. Instead, it raises into a new and actual “absence”—the absence that it has created in order to make room for the perceived lack—itself as “monument,” creating with this enforced memorial a hardening and solidification of “meaning” and “significance” in order to turn around and claim to possess all “meaning” and “significance.” From the obvious making-monumental of the headstone that Judith is here criticizing, its strategies spread out voluminously in order to colonize as many multiple assemblages as possible: colonizing not only Brooks’ critical efforts, but also the version of self-made-author Quentin that he presents within his criticism and the real life creative writing
program identities that his singular version of Quentin reflects and reproduces in fictional
miniature. Not the people, of course; but rather the constructed identities of self-authorship/self-
authority opposed to the people. Brooks takes advantage of the “absence” in Judith’s speech in
order to force inside a panoply of narrative desire—his interpreting machine/technique—so
that he can end by raising up the monument of Quentin as a permanent self-authored “writer”
who will, by way of critical ventriloquism, permanently and mindlessly trumpet the same
interpreting technique from reader to reader in its technical loop. Quentin—self-made author—is
the headstone marking the “absence” of narrative and presiding over—indeed, attempting/hoping
to replace—the dirty, purple “matter” that covers the pages of Absalom.

The monument wants to fully inhabit a moment and make that moment permanent.
Judith’s logic opposes this. Yet, of course, her logic will necessarily fail—since the letter’s
narrative contents will be preserved and the monument built up by Quentin and later critics. The
matter of her logic, however, remains; and this is what I want to think of as grave, opposed to the
monument. Judith’s object—the scrap of paper—fluctuates between tenses and other
grammatical harbor, but it can never be isolated in the manner that Brooks wants so that he can
transform Quentin into an “author.” From the beginning, Judith’s desire has already annihilated
any real “author”—self-made or otherwise—by only offering it as a temporary object within its
grave of text. She’s offering it to the earth of this language, that is; not to any reader. Where the
monument rises into empty space, the grave focuses downward. It doesn’t go into empty space,
but rather into the “matter” of dirt, earth—suffocating into language—that we saw with
Leighton’s understanding of Pater. “Is” for Judith means having the possibility of disappearing in
the earth and in time and in language; “Is” is that lostness in time, in matter. There is no “Is” for
the monumental. Instead, the monumental attempts to force a presence with the absence it
memorializes, and Judith, worried that the text and writing will monumentalize what she desperately wants to bury, has no other recourse but to attempt to sidestep “monumentalizing” her message (in the clarity of good, clean prose) by using Pater’s purple, material prose in order to hopefully decompose the body before it gets dug out by monumentalizing criticism. The same problem, I would suggest, motivates Faulkner himself. Judith’s speech—its lengthy, mixed metaphors; its convoluted “struggle” with the verb “to be”; its tortured grammatical play with “would be’s” and its repetitions and redundancies—shows a small example of the novel itself.

It’s all grave; all a mixture of forces freely unraveling in the matter below. Judith’s speech—and the novel itself—seems more interested in experiencing/relating the force of existence without trying too hard to formulate it and give it form. Brooks seems to be doing the opposite when he instead forces an interpretation into the cracked-open empty space. And Quentin himself seems to show an anxiety when faced with this particular understanding, leading him to behave in a similar, monumentalizing way.

Quentin as Self-Made Author

“Grave”—the grave purpose, the grave material—further seems to define this novel from a structural perspective, beyond its particular, decadent style. For example, one only needs to note how the lengthy section describing the actual graves on the Sutpen property comes at the center of the novel. The novel is no monument, even its architecture gestures downward. Instead of the proper “end,” the novel seems to carry its “endings”—its graves—within its heft of matter; it digests those endings within itself, decomposes them there. Again, the novel seems to resist Brooks’ psychoanalytic reading, where the narrative mirrors life and its end: “We emerge from reading Beyond the Pleasure Principle with a dynamic model that structures ends (death,
quiescence, nonnarrativability) against beginnings (Eros, stimulation into tension, the desire of a narrative) in a manner that necessitates the middle as detour, as struggle toward the end under the compulsion of imposed delay, as arabesque in the dilatory space of text” (108). The end of a novel and human death are hereby bound through Freud’s understanding of the oceanic; the middle beckons for delay through detours and deviance—and yet that ending, that death, still remains the overarching necessary desire. But *Absalom* seems to at least symbolically invert this structure. Faulkner places at the heart of his narrative discourse the array of graves of all the historical characters and stories that Quentin has been experiencing and will experience. While, famously, the end of the novel expresses only a moment of exasperated dialogue, the matter most pertaining to the actual human “ending” lies in this almost-exact middle. The “ending,” then, when coupled with Brooks’ critical understanding of death in narrative, occurs in the “middle” of the book. The discourse of it awkwardly emerges half-out-loud and half-internalized while Shreve and Quentin converse in their dorm at Harvard; the story of it concerns Quentin and his father and Luster coming across the graves in the rain. It happens on page 153 in my 303-page edition of the book:

> It was dark among the cedars, the light more dark than gray even, the quiet rain, the faint pearly globules, materialising on the gun barrels and the five headstones like drops of not-quite-congealed meltings from cold candles on the marble: the two flat heavy vaulted slabs, the other three headstones leaning a little awry, with here and there a carved letter or even an entire word momentary and legible in the faint light which the raindrops brought particle by particle into the gloom and released; now the two dogs came in, drifted in like smoke, their hair close-plastered with damp, and curled down in one indistinguishable and apparently
inextricable ball for warmth. Both the flat slabs were cracked across the middle by their own weight (and vanishing into the hole where the brick coping of one vault had fallen in was a smooth faint path worn by some small animal—possum probably—by generations of some small animal since there could have been nothing to eat in the grave for a long time) though the lettering was quite legible: Ellen Coldfield Sutpen. Born October 9, 1817. Died January 23, 1863 and the other: Thomas Sutpen, Colonel, 23rd Mississippi Infantry, C.S.A. Died August 12, 1869: this last, the date, added later, crudely with a chisel, who even dead did not divulge where and when he had been born. Quentin looked at the stones quietly, thinking Not beloved wife of. No. Ellen Coldfield Sutpen “I wouldn’t have thought they would have had any money to buy marble with in 1869,” he said.

“He bought them himself,” Mr Compson said. (153)

The description itself remains notably gothic. The light, “more dark than gray even,” and the “faint pearly globules” of rain which materialized on the headstones like “drops of not-quite-congealed meltings from cold candles” both offer a sense of the traditionally gothic and/or decadent. The story at this moment had shifted from Shreve and Quentin musing on Sutpen’s death to a digression in which Shreve asks Quentin about seeing the graves with his father; perhaps not surprisingly, the shift that occurs also almost imperceptibly sleight-of-hands the perspective from a shared dialogue (Shreve and Quentin describing) to a third-person singular (Quentin alone). I say “imperceptibly” because the transition from the one to the other occurs mid-sentence: Shreve is talking, saying “You told me; how was it? you and your father shooting quail, the gray day after it had rained all night and the ditch the horses couldn’t cross so you and your father got down and gave the reins to—what was his name? the nigger on the mule?
Luster—Luster to lead them around the ditch’ and he and his father crossed just as the rain began to come down again gray and solid and slow, making no sound, Quentin not aware yet of just where they were because…” (152). Almost imperceptibly, but there is the small “irritation” when “you and your father” become “he and his father”—Again, we witness the “grave matter” of the text and the way it buries together various forms and disregards their separation. A gesture of touch, a line of contact, that moves across something known, like the skin of a human, and then suddenly, immediately transforms wholly into something otherwise, like the scales of a fish. The prose of the second part—“he and his father”—immediately elongates, swallowing Shreve’s dialogue of the first part—“you and your father”; the third person barely breaks free from the second person; the thoughts from the voice. One set of “modes” or “forms” decomposes while the other takes a new shape with the same “matter.” There is no hard outline or form that resists decomposition here within the style alone.

And yet, throughout this section, Quentin insists on following the trail of tombstones and their “scratched” messages. His desire almost matches Sutpen’s desire to monumentalize himself with his own tombstone, since Sutpen himself had apparently “ordered them from Italy, the best, the finest to be had…and this while on active service with an army which had not only the highest mortality rate of any before or since but which had a custom of electing a new set of regimental officers each year…so that for all he could know, before his order could be filled or even received he might be already under ground and grave marked (if at all) by a shattered musket thrust into the earth…” (154), and finally “put one of the stones over his wife’s grave and set the other upright in the hall of the house, where Miss Coldfield possibly (maybe doubtless) looked at it every day as though it were his portrait” (154). Quentin is surprised that Miss Coldfield “never mentioned the stone to him at all” (155) and continues his search: “‘But that
“Who would have paid for them?” Mr Compson said. Quentin could feel him looking at him. “Think.” Quentin looked at the three identical headstones with their faint identical lettering, slanted a little in the soft loamy decay of accumulated cedar needles, these decipherable too when he looked close, the first one: Charles Bon. Born in New Orleans, Louisiana. Died at Sutpen’s Hundred, Mississippi, May 3, 1865. Aged 33 years and 5 months. He could feel his father watching him. (155)

Quentin’s “lesson” here reinforces his required reading of the monumental. Pushing aside the matter and the decay, the dogs who unwittingly attempt to interrupt his search—“Get away,’ he said, thrusting the dog back with one hand while with the other he brushed the cedar needles away” (155)—Quentin isolates and attempts to seek out the absence of the historical figures through the presence of their tombstones. It comes as no real surprise that when Faulkner lessens the metaphorical weight of the stones themselves, it comes packaged with two prominent examples of decadent figures as Mr. Compson continues to narrate:

It must have resembled a garden scene by the Irish poet, Wilde: the late afternoon, the dark cedars with the level sun in them, even the light exactly right and the graves, the three pieces of marble...looking as though they had been cleaned and polished and arranged by scene shifters who with the passing of twilight would return and strike them and carry them, hollow fragile and without weight, back to the warehouse until they should be needed again; the pageant, the scene, the act, entering upon the stage—the magnolia-faced woman a little plumper now, a
woman created of by and for darkness whom the artist Beardsley might have
dressed, in a soft flowing gown designed not to infer bereavement or widowhood
but to dress some interlude of slumbrous and fatal insatiation, of passionate and
inexorable hunger of the flesh, walking beneath a lace parasol and followed by a
bright gigantic negress carrying a silk cushion and leading by the hand the little
boy whom Beardsley might not only have dressed but drawn... (157).

Here the theatrical weight is given to those tombstones—that is, no weight at all—and the
“farce” of a British decadence frames the possibility that, for Mr. Compson and possibly
Faulkner himself, “decadence” and the grave are bound together in their own mockery and
dismissal of the “monumental” tombstone. But Quentin’s participation in this search and this
exchange has already set him in the direction of that monumental elucidation, and he continues
to ignore the mass of matter for that singular inscription. Force for form... He continues to
register the “absence” by attempting to fill in a make-shift, permanent presence. This, I would
suggest, is the key to his anxiety.

Perhaps it’s not the “grave” in the middle of things that causes anxiety for Quentin, but
rather the tombstones and the “monument” they can never quite formulate for him. Brooks
claims that Quentin’s anxiety is one “never to be mastered, a past come alive that never can be
laid to rest” (307); and while this makes sense, it is also true that, for Quentin, “laying to rest”
signifies moreover the product of an encapsulating, reductive, “monumentalizing” narrative—the
clear elegance of words and sentiments scratched permanently on the tombstone. Quentin’s
anxiety rests in his constant seeking for that singular, monumental narrative. For most of the
novel, he’s the timid new author, anxiously categorizing and collecting the best methods for
organizing his history’s dirt into a permanent pillar—whether he realizes it or not. Knowing that
a “proper” form has its important middle, he stumbles across what Faulkner puts there for him to find: the “grave,” or, in Quentin’s initial perceiving, death. He discovers the graves in the middle of the novel; they send him on a search for tombstones. The structural relationship showing the grave as the center of this book as a whole also roughly corresponds to a later moment in the novel. Not long before Quentin leaves for Harvard, Miss Coldfield carries him with her in her cold vigilance to the Sutpen Hundred, where Quentin finally faces the missing Henry and where the two men have a strange exchange, both in content and, particularly, in the prose itself:

And you are——?

Henry Sutpen.

And you have been here——?

Four years.

And you came home——?

To die. Yes.

To die?

Yes. To die.

And you have been here——?

Four years.

And you are——?

Henry Sutpen. (298)

The miniature dialogue appears this way, italicized, at the almost-center of the page. I want to examine the context in a moment, but first I want to extract the fragment itself and approach it in light of Brooks’ comments. He takes up the task himself by also extracting the fragment after a brief reference:
Here we must refer to a scene that ought to be a revelatory moment in both the story and its plot: a scene held in suspense nearly the length of the novel, and one that ought to offer key insight into Quentin’s relationship to the narrative since it marks the moment at which the time of the narrators intersects with the time of the narrated—the moment at which it is revealed that one of the protagonists of the past drama lives on into the present of narration, offering the promise that the past can be recuperated within the present. This is of course Quentin’s meeting with Henry Sutpen at Sutpen’s Hundred in the fall of 1909, just before his departure for Harvard. What happens in this meeting? (305-306)

After quoting the dialogue, he goes on to answer himself with another question:

Does anything happen here? The passage reads as nearly a palindrome, virtually identical backward and forward, an unprogressive, reversible plot. It seems to constitute a kind of hollow structure, a concave mirror or black hole at the center of the narrative. It generates no light, no revelation. If we have been led to feel that we understand the events that precipitated the fall of the House of Sutpen, we may sense that we are still at a loss to understand the larger plot that should link the sons to the fathers, motivate not only the story from the past, but the present’s relation to it. (306)

I include both of the surrounding sections to show the full contextual surgery in which Brooks extracts the dialogue from Absalom and cushions the fragment in his own critical text. After removing it, he “reads” the whole fragment as “nearly a palindrome, virtually identical backward and forward, an unprogressive, reversible plot” that constitutes a “kind of hollow structure, a concave mirror or black hole at the center of the narrative. It generates no light, no revelation.”
He reads the fragment as a separate entity itself—a kind of mini-plot or structure that generates no “light” as it, instead, simply forces Quentin to endlessly replay this strange scene with Henry. It accounts for Quentin’s anxiety and causes the character’s outburst of thought in the novel, “Nevermore of peace. Nevermore of peace. Nevermore. Nevermore. Nevermore” (298-299). According to Brooks, “We do know, however, that Quentin’s narrating seems to impel him toward recollection and replay of the scene with Henry Sutpen, deferred to climactic position, disappointing in that it offers no revelation, yet evidently constitutive of compulsive narrative desire since the result of this scene for Quentin is ‘Nevermore of peace’... : an anxiety never to be mastered, a past come alive that never can be laid to rest” (306-307). Quentin’s “nevermore of peace” means no more peace because he knows that he has become locked in a repetition of this particular narration, his own meeting with Henry; the past has “come alive” in a manner that refuses being “laid to rest” and suggests with its particular form an endlessly repeating narrative. That is, it can be read not only as a palindrome, but also as a kind of recursive algorithm or “anxiety code,” since the final words of the fragment repeat the first words, and cues the dialogue as merely one fragment of an iterated pattern, making:

*And you are——?*

*Henry Sutpen.*

*And you have been here——?*

*Four years.*

*And you came home——?*

*To die. Yes.*

*To die?

*Yes. To die.*
And you have been here——?

Four years.

And you are——?

Henry Sutpen.

And you have been here——?

Four years.

And you came home——?

To die. Yes.

To die?

Yes. To die.

And you have been here——?

Four years.

And you are——?

Henry Sutpen.

And you have been here——?

Four years.

And you came home——?

To die. Yes.

To die?

Yes. To die.

And you have been here——?

Four years.

And you are——?
Henry Sutpen...

And so on, *ad nauseum*. Quentin’s notion of “peace” is lost, nevermore to be, colonized and violated by a programmatic narrative that endlessly produces itself; and, ultimately, according to Brooks, becomes a black hole, generating “no light, no revelation.” I’d call this some kind of “looped” reading, I’d call it *algorithmic*; it suggests programmatic and repetitive technique and it frightens Quentin because it allows for no “peace”—no lack of narrative movement as it endlessly spirals into an endlessly repeated resolution. Diminishing contextual space until it fills and eclipses that space, this simplified version demonstrates the case of narrative-as-monument. It has become fully technical, a narrative “raised” to permanence. It requires, of course, that we extract and expand the fragment as Brooks and, apparently, Quentin have done. Since, in this understanding, Quentin tends to recollect and replay “the scene with Henry Sutpen,” he defers a climax and becomes entrapped in this mini-plot that shows no real resolution because it does not end. And yet, for Brooks, this very situation leads him to conclude that the narrative act itself—this mini-plot—at least indicates the necessity of narration, whether it is successful or not: “Yet I think it would also be a mistake simply to note the ‘arbitrariness’ of the narrative and its undecidable relations of event and interpretation: so simplistic and sweeping a deconstructive gesture eludes the challenges the text poses to us. We should rather, I think, consider further how the text may suggest a remotivation of narrative through narration and the need for it” (307). As we have seen with Judith, the mini-plot here demonstrates the necessity of the act of narration, whether it is successful or not. These moments do their work of showing how scraps of narrative, perhaps, arise from the dirty matter of the past and bring alive the past things that can never actually be laid to rest. Since Quentin *keeps repeating the narrative* to the point of nausea, it must indicate that the compulsion itself is important; he *needs* to do it, therefore it must be
necessary. The past things are “evidently constitutive of compulsive narrative desire since the result of this scene for Quentin is ‘Nevermore of peace.’” But it seems plain that the only real need for this compulsion is to keep the past events memorialized, to keep them permanent in an endless repetition. Quentin’s anxiety might just mobilize in this way—the fear that the looping technique of narrative will colonize the past with its iterative coding, constantly repeating it algorithmically in order to write over with a faulty presence the possible threat below of any absence or of any loss.

How does Quentin react to this anxiety, then? Another option for reading the fragment is also put forth by Brooks in the same section, though perhaps unwittingly. He has conflated the “loop” reading with a more poetic kind. I mean here the “palindrome” reading: “The passage reads as nearly a palindrome, virtually identical backward and forward, an unprogressive, reversible plot. It seems to constitute a kind of hollow structure, a concave mirror or black hole at the center of the narrative.” Here the fragment becomes itself a “structure,” albeit a hollow one. This time the fragment gets fully extracted into a singular thing separate from the context around it. No longer a fragment, it becomes a “whole”; that is, instead of reading the dialogue as one repetition in an iterated chain, we read it as a singular whole dialogue unto itself. The last lines do not lead into a new repetition; rather, following the logic of being “nearly a palindrome,” they refer back to the beginning lines by creating a dialogic sphere, reflecting the beginning in the ending, a “concave mirror”—simply:

And you are——?

Henry Sutpen.

And you have been here——?

Four years.
And you came home——?

To die. Yes.

To die?

Yes. To die.

And you have been here——?

Four years.

And you are——?

Henry Sutpen.

It becomes a structure of its own. However, Brooks’ claim for “hollow structure” might be somewhat inconclusive. Unlike the repeated “loop” logic, this extract has a beginning and an end and therefore a center. Not only does the extract have a center, it seems to generally match what we have seen of the novel itself: the “center” of the fragment, like the novel, contains a reference to death. Even though Karen McPherson notes that this small whole contains only “absence,” since “At the very center there is no substance, no subject, no being, only a subjectless verb (an infinitive) marking the place of Henry’s absence,” (443) it still indicates a movement itself and, furthermore, a movement and connection to that center of the novel itself. The “graves” of the novel, the

And you came home——?

To die. Yes.

To die?

Yes. To die.

And you have been here——?
of the fragment both indicate a “graveward” movement—a V-shape that gestures downward, to the dead and to the interior of the earth. Both the novel and this tiny plot have “death” as their center. Maybe a small “structure,” only the slightest pattern, but a structure nonetheless. And it shows a structure with some slippage of meaning, perhaps, between the whole of the novel and the fragment that attempts to be a whole—that link between the graves, that is, and the “To die?” question from Quentin. In fact, it can be argued that it’s actually this center-knot of “to die” that troubles Quentin and helps to provoke his lament in the following paragraph, that “Nevermore of peace. Nevermore of peace. Nevermore. Nevermore. Nevermore” (298-299), instead of the repeated instantiation of the first “type” of reading. That Quentin is “reading” the dialogue with a particular meaning linked to it—a meaning derived from its extraction and the structure and semblance to “to die”—seems certain from its obvious reference to Poe’s “The Raven” and that poem’s famous lament, “Nevermore.” Brooks acknowledges this indirectly when he mentions the “fall of the House of Sutpen,” even though he does not reference “The Raven.” Unlike Brooks and his reading of Quentin’s usage, however, the narrator of Poe’s poem does not easily ascribe meaning to the word, “Nevermore”:

But the Raven still beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,

Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird, and

bust and door;

Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking

Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore—

What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird

of yore

Meant in croaking “Nevermore.” (84)
Ultimately, of course, the Raven’s repeated “Nevermore” seems to signify the permanence of the sensitive narrator’s memory of his lost Lenore and his inability to forget her or have her be “forgotten,” so to speak—

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted—nevermore! (86)
—establishing a narrative of permanence and the inability to “let something rest.” A monument on a monument—the Raven on the “pallid bust of Pallas.” This is not the past “coming alive” for the narrator, in the way it does for Quentin according to Brooks; rather, it is the monument “enforcing” itself, in a complex of poetry and matter, onto and inside the narrator’s solitary forgetting—his solitary dissolution. Caught between the “coming alive” and the inability to “let something rest,” the Lenore-bird-poem monument occupies the threshold between the two in the only way it can: supernaturally, rhythmically. This is a poem about permanence; and yet, as we saw in chapter one, its “poem-ness” does not alone constitute it. Rather, Poe’s “philosophy of composition” unhinges the poem from its permanence through its critical dismantling—it unsettles the illusion of a whole, reveals the hybrid “poem-criticism,” and further unveils that “poetics of decomposition.” Something similar happens in Absalom with this weird dialogue
“poem” that happens between Quentin and Henry. Like “The Raven,” the dialogue hides behind its “poem-ness” a “criticism by-way-of decomposition”—here, the style and nature of the book itself, its “grave” matter—until the dialogue-poem appears to occupy all the space itself, numbing its context, “becoming” in the space where it once was only buried. This is the “poem” reading of the fragment, opposed to the “loop.” The “loop” sets its prose narrative loose in a series of efficient repetitions: Quentin’s job (and his anxiety) is to continue that loop, to inherit its repetition and infection and “spread” it. The “poem,” on the other hand, short-circuits the loop and sets forth a fragment as a kind of meaningful whole: here, Quentin’s job is to read it, to reveal its meaning, to bind it back to “The Raven,” and to find the useful “to die” code embedded in its center—indeed, by giving it a center. And this causes a further strain of anxiety. In either case, the dialogue shows a moment in the text (and in both Brooks’ and McPherson’s criticism) where a fragment becomes extracted and extended (through repetition or through meaning) from its “earth”—it becomes lifted, raised—and its “monumentalizing” moreover means binding Quentin to a self—to that self-made “writer” that Brooks wants to make him—that can either inherit that repetition into permanence or interpret it by manipulating it into permanent, meaningful shape. The “loop” or the “poem” are the only two options; that is, if we are only dealing with the separate fragment ourselves.

That Brooks does indeed want to follow this through and cut the fragment from its context in order to further “critically build” Quentin into that self-made writer becomes clear when we return and look back at the specific context he weaves himself in order to replace Faulkner’s. If we look back at the surrounding sentences Brooks uses for his quotation of the fragment, we find the question “What happens in this meeting?” on one bank and “Does anything happen here?” on the further side, followed by the quote we have used several times:
“The passage reads as nearly a palindrome, virtually identical backward and forward, an unprogressive, reversible plot. It seems to constitute a kind of hollow structure, a concave mirror or back hole at the center of the narrative. It generates no light, no revelation” (306). Not only does Brooks sever the quotation from its source by quoting it (of course, one might say: a somewhat usual practice), but he also frames it with two doubting questions—What happens here? Does anything happen here?—and answers: No. Nothing happens here. This context—no less a “context” than Faulkner’s own, no less “meaningful” than Faulkner’s own, that is (or indeed, my own)—contrives to eliminate a part of its contents (the dialogue itself) before it even has a chance to take hold, using those front- and back-end black holes to buffer up the empty air of a quote for his own critical interpretation: This narrative fails. The narrative around it fails. But at least it tries to function as a narrative, and therefore, narratives matter. They matter like air; they matter in air; they are gestures in air. The earth is effectively removed from all sides and the quotation is more “exhumed” than it would be otherwise, if it was only—merely—a quotation. Brooks makes a “poem” out of the text, binds it to a “loop”—narrative as necessary human activity—and utilizes the shape of character Quentin and the harmony of his psychological anxiety to draw that loop-poem out of the text and into critical importance and critical history. This is how “poems,” maybe, get made: an invisible or semi-invisible critical

4 Interestingly, McPherson’s own reading of this scene in the novel reflects a similar de-contextualization, only doubled, containing the same Henry-Quentin dialogic “poem.” In the first instance, the fragment is bound between “The ‘doubling’ nature of his replies to the repeated questions leaves one with the impression of two reflecting mirrors, reflecting nothing” and “But how can one say that nothing is reflected? Is not this dialogue prototypically revelatory? Might it not be compared with a successfully executed interrogation in which all questions are answered without hesitation, information is imparted, facts are affirmed?” (442). The second decontextualization concerns the very center itself of the fragment, beginning with, “What is it all about? In Quentin’s meeting with Henry we find the echoing questions circling an internal palindrome” and closing on the other side with, “At the very center there is no substance, no subject, no being, only a subjectless verb (an infinitive) marking the place of Henry’s absence” (442-43). Just as in Brooks’ interpretation, the decontextualization requires its own enforced epistemological framework (“what is it all about?”) without situating it in the “grave” context surrounding it.
apparatus giving “shape” to a “poem” and calling it—_nature_. After the critical apparatus legitimates a context, shapes that context into a “thing having a center” and breaks and mines that center until the space that remains is mistaken for a space outside, in the lofty height or air—a place of pure absence—and crystallized as monumental work—after this apparatus spins and does its work, it seeks to camouflage its own contextual existence, its supplemental residue, below the sudden flood of awesome, limitless and unspeaking light that seemingly holds together that empty space up “above.” In order to maintain the monument of the thing—to “make” the poem—this type of criticism must work to establish the context that allows for that “poem” _while simultaneously_ making that same context invisible and mute so that it can seem to stand alone.

Here—Brooks uses the Freudian theoretical technique to scratch a hollow in the mess and dirt of the novel and clears out a space by using the tools of his own “context” in order to point at the words on the gravestone: _This is why narrative is necessary and immutable._ As we have seen with the fragment on Judith, he further exhumes that space into a Quentin-shaped, “self-made,” author—a new crystal creature that blasts away all the surrounding dirt and finally crystallizes that empty gravestone space into celestial writ—forever soiling the former context as just that—_soil, soul—mud, dirt, excess_. Even—possibly—despite Brooks’ intentions, he must attempt to preserve the monument because a particular habit of discipline continues to shape it and form it—the habit of discipline we all agree to when we build buildings around literature.

In the book, the actual possibility of this Quentin-shaped crystal becomes immediately buried in the environment of the fragment. If we look to either side of the “poem” we find (in my own fragmenting, of course) another “mirrored” image. First, Quentin walks through the house and finds Henry in the room:
...waking or sleeping he walked down that upper hall between the scaling walls and beneath the cracked ceiling, toward the faint light which fell outward from the last door and paused there, saying ‘No. No’ and then ‘Only I must. I have to’ and went in, entered the bare stale room whose shutters were closed too, where a second lamp burned dimly on a crude table; waking or sleeping it was the same: the bed, the yellow sheets and pillow, the wasted hands crossed on the breast as if he were already a corpse; waking or sleeping it was the same would be the same forever as long as he lived:

and, after the fragment, the scene shifts back to the Harvard dorm with Quentin and Shreve:

It was quite cold in the room now; the chimes would ring for one any time now; the chill had a compounded, a gathered quality, as though preparing for the dead moment before dawn. “And she waited three months before she went back to get him,” Shreve said. “Why did she do that?” Quentin didn’t answer. He lay still and rigid on his back with the cold New England night on his face and the blood running warm in his rigid body and limbs, breathing hard but slow, his eyes wide open upon the window, thinking ‘Nevermore of peace. Nevermore of peace. Nevermore. Nevermore. Nevermore.’ (298-299)

Furthermore, in the following pages, Quentin remains as “still and rigid” as he ends up in the above passage: “Still Quentin didn’t answer”; “Quentin lay still too, as if he were listening too, though he was not” (299); “Quentin did not answer; he did not even say, Miss Rosa. He just lay there staring at the window without even blinking, breathing the chill heady pure snowgleamed darkness” (301). In fact, his physical state seems to arrest Brooks’ notion that he (Quentin) is anxious at all; instead, he seems to be maintaining a rigid stillness, almost in direct relation to
Henry’s practically undead state before the poem fragment, whose “wasted hands crossed on the breast as if he were already a corpse; waking or sleeping it was the same and would be the same forever as long as he lived” (298). Quentin likewise takes the alive-yet-not-alive form, laying “still and rigid on his back with the cold New England night on his face and the blood running warm in his rigid body and limbs, breathing hard but slow, his eyes wide open upon the window” (298). Instead of being afraid or anxious through the memory of meeting the corpse-like Henry, Quentin seems to be here mimicking him—taking on his particularly strange and in-between, impossible form; and he furthermore seems to find a stillness and “peace” by taking on that particular hybrid form. His “Nevermore of peace”—the anxiety facing an uncritical, constantly repeating past that can never be laid to rest—comes untangled into its double genitive and opposite, the “nevermore” of peace, peace’s nevermore—the possibility that peace-at-rest means a “nevermore of remembering,” a nevermore of setting into place and monumentalizing.

Quentin’s stillness and his refusal to answer Shreve’s questions show that he, like Henry, has found himself “at peace and at rest,” buried in the crosscurrents of dialogue, remembered history, unremembered history, fiction, fantasy, thought—past and present, poetry and prose—and he’s accepting that burial rather than shaping it with shaping words on a gravestone. The text furthermore preternaturally binds together past and present at this moment with a metonymy, as Shreve’s musings on Jim Bond become externalized in the world:

“And I guess it had been him who had kept that closet under the stairs full of tinder and trash all that time too, like she told him to, maybe he not getting it then either but keeping it full just like she told him, the kerosene and all, for three months now, until the hour when he could begin to howl—” now the chimes began, ringing for one o’clock. Shreve ceased, as if he were waiting for them to
cease or perhaps were even listening to them. Quentin lay still too, as if he were listening too, though he was not; he just heard them without listening as he heard Shreve without listening or answering, until they ceased, died away into the icy air delicate and faint and musical as struck glass. (299)

The “hour when he could begin to howl” rings as the chimes for o’clock ring. They do not symbolize Jim Bond’s howling; rather, they temporarily bind this present moment to that past fiction through a metonymic ringing. They provide the opposite of the earlier disconnect, when “your” becomes “his.” For a moment, the “form” of this novel comes together—but it’s only for a moment—and that’s what gives this buried moment—precisely because it is buried in this text of noises—its momentary verve. In the same way, the reading I gave the form of the novel—with “death” at its center—furthermore unravels as the “poem” between Henry and Quentin dissolves back into its textual matter. It has that center only for that moment and is not intended to hold “monumentally.” In this case, death itself is not at the center of this logic of the grave. This point gets borne out in an unacknowledged metaphor as Quentin remembers his father’s final words from his letter concerning the burial of Miss Rosa:

\[
\text{It will do no harm to hope—You see I have written hope, not think. So let it be hope.—that the one cannot escape the censure which no doubt he deserves, that the other no longer lack the commiseration which let us hope (while we are hoping) that they have longed for, if only for the reason that they are about to receive it whether they will or no. The weather was beautiful though cold and they had to use the picks to break the earth for the grave yet in one of the deeper clods I saw a redworm doubtless alive when the clod was thrown up through by afternoon it was frozen again.} \text{ (302)}
\]
The worm, alive and unknown in the earth, loses its life when “thrown up” into the frozen air. Those small moments between the shifts and dissatisfactions of style in the text are moving and living like worms in the earth; take them up and out and they freeze into a kind of dead death—immobile and yet not still, hard and yet not rigorous, something maybe akin to “self-created authors.” Quentin, for a moment, finds a place beneath/within the chaotic flows of the novel when he allows himself to be buried there, mimicking Henry’s undead state. Neither “alive” nor “dead,” Quentin for the first time abandons the struggle to memorialize and lets the noise of fabrication and fabulation and history untangle his prescriptions into their purple, chaotic prose. He’s not Brooks’ “self-made author” who creates himself through “owning” the narrative. He’s the worm who finds life in the mulch and waste and excess and collapse of narrative possibility as it breaks down into the various matters of style.

He’s only wrenched from this stillness and burial back into his “self-made anxiety” when Shreve forces him, once again, to memorialize his opinion:

“Now I want you to tell me just one thing more. Why do you hate the South?”

“I dont hate it,” Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; “I dont hate it,” he said. I dont hate it he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!  

(303)

Noise and Force

The play of absence and presence complement the monumental while simultaneously disregarding the presence and intensity of the grave. McPherson considers this a novel about absence: “Absalom, Absalom! is a novel about absence […] And the tale, larger than its telling, escaping containment as a presence, becomes the powerful evocation of another absence” (443).
However, it only appears to be about absence when read from that “monumentalizing” perspective. Because it challenges the very notion of the “art form”—the poem, the fiction, the narrative—it appears as fully absent when that particular abstraction, the work of art, is the thing sought. Instead, all its substance is “underground”; but there, underground, is a full presence that essentially dissolves Quentin’s identity into the grave style. Whereas “absence” becomes a way to manifest the monumental at the expense of the grave, the sacrifice of that abstract “art-form” makes way for the potential of “matter” in its most intense aesthetic possibility: existence itself *as* aesthetic. In the same way that Leighton describes Pater, Quentin’s self becomes subjected “to a grammatical erosion, even a vanishing,” as Faulkner “explores its all too permeable borders” (Leighton ch. 4). Quentin, bereft of that art form, dissolves into the world. And here is precisely where Faulkner’s 1936 novel collides with the 1936 establishment of University of Iowa’s creative writing program. Of course, Faulkner’s own “author function” and “author’s name” is about as monumental as one can get; and, furthermore, his work has been immensely influential, especially in terms of a more “excessive style,” as McGurl points out, concerning “what we can summarize as the Hemingway/Faulkner dialectic, which is perhaps only to add proper names to a more basic struggle between literary minimalism and maximalism” (244). Yet to reduce *Absalom* and another of Faulkner’s long maximalist novels, *A Fable* (1954), to the same maximalism misses the stylistic context of each novel; it simply “monumentalizes” the work of Faulkner itself.

In some way, *Absalom, Absalom!*’s secret hope is that its “writer’s self” may vanish into grammatical erosion; that Faulkner’s name on the cover might as well be as loose and as fringe as the excess of matter within the pages inside: just another word in constant play and touch with every other, different word—nothing more, nothing less—all immersion/emersion. Its style
makes for an early stark alternative to the monumental style of the program: first, its emphasis on delineating the “art-form,” extracted, hard-won and stony pure and clear, from the ground; second, its reduction to a set of coordinates, its own constellation of tastes and codes, by which it is to be produced; and third, by way of that aesthetic and classical style, its production of a permanent “author’s self,” a creative being, set apart from the rest of humanity and the “snakes and pigs” of humanity, purposefully elaborated in a form designed to disconnect it from an undesired context. Instead, as we saw with Quentin’s section, Absalom’s grave style cracks and dissolves that form into an aesthetic texture; a pure intensity. Where Pater sensed a growing artistic jealousy as his great artist approaches the flux of digression and allusion, Absalom offers Quentin’s aesthetic intensity, extending into a living-dead stillness, as a response to the fears of that flux, and the confrontation with that fear.

Brooks’ understanding of Quentin in Absalom simply extrapolates that monumentalizing of the author’s self into scholarly criticism. By attempting to extract Quentin from the context around him—the digressions, the narrative disjunctures, that graveward crush of style—Brooks wants to perform the same type of action: he lifts Quentin from the earth in order to establish him as a “writer’s self,” and makes him into a monument for narrative. In effect, Brooks’ criticism is, here, perhaps unwittingly, in service to that slow separation of the creative and the critical. He invents Quentin as author in a similar way to how the program creates author functions, only Brooks uses psychoanalysis and critical acumen to extract that Quentin-as-author form from the earth of texture he (Quentin) is buried in. Showing that criticism can reinforce the same slow pull, Brooks establishes a critical model of that self’s extraction to go along with the “creative” version slowly forming in the program. This chapter’s version of Quentin, however, attempted to show an alternative way of viewing Quentin and his relationship to the earth around him—his
tenuous, dissolving, immersive, fearful and passionate relationship to the earth emerging around him, drawing him back in, not pushing him further out. Brooks’ reading seems complicit with the program’s attempt to monumentalize; it’s a criticism inherently different from the potential of a different kind of criticism. Absalom’s style is inherently decadent, and decadently critical: it conflicts with the attempt to monumentalize Quentin as a writer’s self; it carries within its lines, beyond Faulkner’s intention, and by way of its style, the potential for dissolving the “monumental”—especially its abstract penchant for permanence—into the matter of the grave. Decadence means a relationship to permanence and criticizes those technologies of maintenance that have outlasted their ephemeral subjects and become the things themselves. The program’s monumental style—much in line with the constellation of tastes from the last chapter—marks one of those technologies of maintenance working to create permanent “art forms” licit only for a limited set of author functions and authors’ names at the cost of Oscar Wilde’s decadent dream: everybody’s an artist. But there are examples of styles, like Absalom’s, that seem to present alternatives to that monumentalizing of the world; and, whether they are produced by a famous name (like Faulkner’s) or by someone nameless or simply by a “nameless nothing,” they should be sought out in order to better teach us out how to read that specific style. When Heidegger reads Hölderin’s lines, “But where danger is, grows / The saving power also,” he means specifically by danger the way technology, “as a revealing that orders” (324), tends to reduce the world into a “standing reserve” of resources to be exploited. But his understanding of the poem’s lines becomes quite interesting in lieu of my own project: “Let us think carefully about these words of Hölderlin. What does it mean to ‘save’? Usually we think that it means only to seize hold of a thing threatened by ruin in order to secure it in its former continuance. But the verb ‘to save’ says more. ‘To save’ is to fetch something home into its essence, in order to bring the
essence for the first time into its proper appearing” (333). Heidegger specifically keeps his verb away from any sort of technology of maintenance—“to seize hold of a thing threatened by ruin in order to secure it in its former continuance”—and offers it a meaning more in line with movement—“to fetch something home into its essence.” In the same way, Faulkner’s example of a grave style “grows” with the danger; it gives an opportunity to approach technologies of maintenance—and those practices that might be reinforcing certain technologies, such as the creative writing program—with a different perspective.

It will become more and more important to learn how to tolerate excessive noise and force—*sound* and *fury*—and, possibly, even to understand the potential of pleasure in that noise and force—as our culture and technology become more and more in debt to the restrictive power of the permanent. Foucault’s little nameless utopia in “What is an Author?”, when the “author function will disappear, and in such a manner that fiction and its polysemous texts will once again function according to another mode, but still with a system of constraint—one which will no longer be the author, but which will have to be determined, or, perhaps, experienced” (119), provides only a first hint of this possible potential. “All discourse,” he continues, “whatever their status, form, value, and whatever the treatment to which they will be subjected, would then develop in the anonymity of a murmur” (119). This utopia, it goes without saying, has all the ornaments and the potential intensity and the multiplicities of the graveyard; it simply requires we remove the headstones.
Conclusion: The Jammy-Rams at Work

Friedrich Nietzsche even more specifically engages the notion of “monumental,” I would claim, although without saying the word, in the middle of *Human, All Too Human*. He begins the section “Tokens of Higher and Lower Culture” with an aphorism entitled, “*Ennoblement through degeneration*.” This aphorism describes the conditions in which a healthy community of like-minded people needs “degeneration” in order to develop into something new. “Here,” he writes, “good, sound custom grows strong, here the subordination of the individual is learned and firmness imparted to character as a gift at birth and subsequently augmented. The danger facing these strong communities founded on similarly constituted, firm-charactered individuals is that of the gradually increasing inherited stupidity such as haunts all stability like its shadow” (107). The only possible way to change for these people, healthy though they are, rests with the “more unfettered, uncertain and morally weaker individuals upon whom *spiritual progress* depends in such communities: it is the men who attempt new things and, in general, many things” (107). He continues: “Degenerate natures are of the highest significance wherever progress is to be effected. Every progress of the whole has to be preceded by a partial weakening. The strongest natures *preserve* the type, the weaker help it to *evolve*” (107). The degenerate people inflict a “partial weakening” on the group as a whole; if it is strong, then, and healthy enough, it will absorb that sickness and become even stronger. The fact that Nietzsche alludes here to a kind of “sickness of the new” is interesting: “A people that becomes somewhere weak and fragile but is as a whole still strong and healthy is capable of absorbing the infection of the new and incorporating it to its own advantage” (107-8) and “Only when there is securely founded and guaranteed long duration is a steady evolution and ennobling inoculation at all possible” (108).
Using medical terms to describe a social body is, of course, nothing new, but the fact that Nietzsche connects “progress” itself with the “degenerate” type of person is interesting.

Even more interesting is the next aphorism: “Free spirit a relative concept.” Here he describes his famous notion of the free spirit: “He is called a free spirit who thinks differently from what, on the basis of his origin, environment, his class and profession, or on the basis of the dominant views of the age, would have been expected of him” and “He is the exception, the fettered spirits are the rule; the latter reproach him that his free principles either originate in a desire to shock and offend or eventuate in free actions, that is to say in actions incompatible with sound morals” (108). “Occasionally,” he continues, “it is also said that this or that free principle is to be attributed to perversity and mental over-excitation; but this is merely the voice of malice, which does not believe what it says but desires only to wound” (108). Finally, for the free spirit:

In the case of the knowledge of the truth the point is whether or not one possesses it, not from what motives one sought it or along what paths one found it. If the free spirits are right, the fettered spirits are wrong, regardless of whether the former have arrived at the truth by way of immorality or the latter have hitherto cleaved to untruth out of morality. —In any event, however, what characterizes the free spirit is not that his opinions are the more correct but that he has liberated himself from tradition, whether the outcome has been successful or a failure.

(108)

These two aphorisms, put together, demonstrate the main thrust of Nietzsche’s book—which is centered on the variations of perception and the resultant perspectivism—but I think this particular combination well shows our struggles when dealing with something like decadence.

Of course, both the “degenerate” from the first aphorism and the “free spirit” from the second are
the same person; but they reflect the varying ways in which that particular “role” dissolves into the context surrounding it. To the degree that “health” and “duration” (and how they equal each other) are important in the first, the second aphorism simply refuses to acknowledge them at all. But, moreover, and more importantly, other important aspects of the first do not show up at all in the second. For example, where the first aphorism suggests, “Every progress of the whole has to be preceded by a partial weakening. The strongest natures preserve the type, the weaker help it to evolve” (107), the second aphorism seems to care little about the relationship between the part and the whole, as well as the injunction to preserve or evolve. When it comes to the monumental—which is the primary “perspective” of the first aphorism—the main apparatus is not only to preserve, but to very carefully maintain that balance and reinforce itself through “absorbing”—knowingly—its weaker elements, its “infection.” All while doing this, it treats that “free spirit” as a “degenerate” and as a sickness, in terms that it will entirely appropriate for itself, i.e., health and duration—claiming, as Nietzsche does in the passage, the highest importance for each. It will regulate the conversation, make it a singular prescriptive voice.

On the other side, the “free spirit” cares little for the community—and especially for the notions that it employs in the highly elaborate ploy to keep itself running: the part or the whole; preservation or evolution; health and duration. Instead, the free spirit wants to “liberate himself from tradition”; “As a rule, though, he will nonetheless have truth on his side, or at least the spirit of inquiry after truth: he demands reasons, the rest demand faith” (108). Instead of the “technologies of maintenance” that the first aphorism makes use of—including using the “degenerate” as a technology for its own evolution—the free spirit is simply interested in truth. This discrepancy between these two machines—the first aphorism and its technologies of maintenance, the second and, I will extend the argument here, its technology of aperture—help
show why we so often separate the two—the monumental and the grave—and more often use the former to illuminate the latter, and not vice versa. It is a matter of perspective. Although skeptical of that notion of “truth,” I will still appeal to its potential for multiple intensities, and to the notion that it marks that _krinein_, or that critical moment of choosing. It’s the moment itself that matters, and not the choice—the vibration and intensity coming with the crisis; not the solidification of that decision into the FINAL one. David R. Bunch’s story from my Introduction makes that clear: the narrator completely entombs his potential for choice in the endless plastic of his world; once it becomes permanent, the choice becomes defunct. Moderan is a world of pure health and duration; it has eradicated not only the chance of a critical transformation, but also the very logic of the final “technology of maintenance” itself: the free spirit. As Nietzsche’s aphorisms remind us: the “monumental” community must knowingly control and make use of the free spirit as a technology of maintenance; but the free spirit, on the other hand, must remain aloof and unaware of the process. There is the paradox: capturing a spirit in the frailty of the human body. I would suggest that the way to do so is to attempt to perceive from the grave, and not from the monument. To perceive not with the heavy apparatus of those “technologies of maintenance”—at least not through that particular lens alone—but to isolate, rearrange and rethink many of those technologies—whether they mean health, or the relationship of whole to part, or, indeed, duration or permanence—and determine, from the perspective of the free spirit, how it is continually being exploited.

This is just a convoluted way of returning us back to Ghassan Hage’s admonishment that “the absence of a preoccupation with questions of decay is so systematic that one begins to suspect that mechanisms of repression, avoidance, and displacement might be at work there” (8). In literary studies and literary history—and, moreover, simply in the realm of “writing”—we
have let many of those technologies of maintenance become the actual things that they were always attempting to maintain. With my chapter on William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, I hoped to show, not that there is anything wrong with the creative writing program or the incredibly talented writers it releases into the world, but rather that we employ a set of technologies—already begun beforehand, tied up with industrialism and commercial capitalism—that work to produce, alongside those talented individuals, a category of author’s names and author functions that will forever exclude a large percentage of those who nevertheless, constantly are affected with the question-truth of “How to write?” Decadent criticism and decadence itself, even though they must reflect Vincent Sherry’s “poetics of the afterward,” and even though they most definitely fear—since the time of the origin of literary decadence itself and a Romanticism growing more and more pessimistic—the impossibility of revolution and the transformation of civilization, most likely inhabit those conditions precisely because the moment and the monument have so effectively reduced the real potential and intensity of that “open aperture” of criticism. I have tried to show overall in my dissertation how decadent criticism—in its own, small way—works to “criticize from within” those technologies of maintenance that hold fast the monumental community, working with more and more efficiency to blend both health and duration into a pure steel of permanence and eternality.

Unfortunately, I do not think that this permanence and monumentality is purely an abstract quality, or even purely theoretical. The very fact of permanence is becoming, more and more—every day—our permanent condition; and it is, I would suggest, an uninhabitable one. Of course, as one product of the globalization of capital and the spread of commercialism, we have entered the Anthropocene. Elizabeth Kolbert notes the homogenization of species, for example, across the entire planet: she quotes the oceanographer Ulf Riebesell, who says, “If you ask me
what’s going to happen in the future, I think the strongest evidence we have is there is going to be a reduction in biodiversity [...] Some highly tolerant organisms will become more abundant, but overall diversity will be lost” (120). About our ambitious global travelling and migration she writes, “The process of remixing the world’s flora and fauna, which began slowly, along the routes of early human migration, has, in recent decades, accelerated to the point wherein some parts of the world, non-native plants now outnumber native ones” (198). The end-point of this “remixing” and lack of biodiversity will eventually give us a planet that has only the same, few “highly tolerant organisms” spread throughout in a tight, permanent “monument”: “For the same reasons that local diversity has, as a general rule, been increasing, global diversity—the total number of different species that can be found worldwide—has dropped” (212). James C. Scott notes how the homogenization of politics and legislation will end in the same result, culturally and socially speaking:

The powerful agencies of homogenization, however, are not so discriminating. They have tended to replace virtually all vernaculars with what they represent as universal, but let us recall again that in most cases it is a North Atlantic cross-dressed vernacular masquerading as a universal. The result is a massive diminution in cultural, political, and economic diversity, a massive homogenization in languages, cultures, property systems, political forms, and above all modes of sensibility and the lifeworlds that sustain them. One can look anxiously ahead to a time, not so far away, when the North Atlantic businessman can step off a plane anywhere in the world and find an institutional order—laws, commercial codes, ministries, traffic systems, property forms, land tenure—thoroughly familiar. And why not? The forms are essentially his own. Only the
cuisine, the music, the dances, and native costumes will remain exotic and folkloric...and thoroughly commercialized as a commodity as well. (Two Cheers 55-56)

This homogenization of both the biodiversity of the planet and the diversity of cultural and social worlds remains tethered to that enforcement of the “monumental” onto our messy existential flux; the “technologies of maintenance” have become too overpowering to allow us to invite the fragile “free spirit” from Nietzsche’s second aphorism. In the way that those expressions of diversity connect us to the krinein of choice—the crisis of choice—their loss will amount to Bunch’s “plastic world,” where the permanence of the plastic covers over all intensity of criticism. Literature is merely one field where this seems to be happening; and since, anyone can be a writer, it seems like one of the more potential areas to rethink and reimagine these technologies of maintenance.

Of course, there is an even more suffocating sense of the “becoming permanent” of the world today, bound up with data collection, surveillance, and permanent technologies like bitcoin and non-fungible tokens. Shoshanna Zuboff, in her weighty The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, goes to great lengths to show all the ways in which our contemporary technology is working to permanently crystalize us into the data-fodder for advertising companies and pure financial speculation. Accordingly, she writes, “Machine processes replace human relationships so that certainty can replace trust” (351). This type of certainty is merely the product of a process that transforms humans into data for the privileged use of corporations and governments. It works according to what Zuboff calls “instrumentarianism,” based on its connections with B. F. Skinner’s behaviorism: “the instrumentation and instrumentalization of behavior for the purposes of modification, prediction, and monetization, and control” (352); and, furthermore,
“instrumentarian power operates from the vantage point of the Other-One to reduce human persons to the mere animal condition of behavior shorn of reflective meaning. It sees only organisms bent to serve the new laws of capital now imposed on all behavior” (382). In order to get rid of uncertainty, Zuboff claims that we are entering into a period where instrumentarian power will effectively transform society: “In the age of surveillance capitalism it is instrumentarian power that fills the void, substituting machines for social relations, which amounts to the substitution of certainty for society. In this imagined collective life, freedom is forfeit to others’ knowledge, an achievement that is only possible with the resources of the shadow text” (384). This “substitution of certainty for society” makes the same claims as the permanent: erasing context, organizing society according to simple prescriptive lines, “lifting” humanity from the ground into its crystal frame—and, most significantly, simply disallowing the moment of critical choice. With the critical choice goes the intensity of feeling that emerges alongside it. Zuboff quotes Hannah Arendt, who describes it best: “The trouble with modern theories of behaviorism is not that they are wrong but that they could become true, that they actually are the best possible conceptualization of certain obvious trends in modern society. It is quite conceivable that the modern age—which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity—may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known” (qtd in Zuboff 382). Data collection—connected with its monumental invention, “writing,” established (possibly) to maintain records of taxation—will finally be the digital “plastic” we drown our world in. Its logic echoes Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground and the narrator’s remarks concerning the “Palace of Crystal”:

Consequently we have only to discover these laws of nature, and man will no longer have to answer for his actions and life will become exceedingly easy for
him. All human actions will then, of course, be tabulated according to these laws, mathematically, like tables of logarithms up to 108,000, and entered in an index; or, better still, there would be published certain edifying works of the nature of encyclopaedic lexicons, in which everything will be so clearly calculated and explained that there will be no more incidents or adventures in the world.

Then—this is all what you say—new economic relations will be established, all ready-made and worked out with mathematical exactitude, so that every possible question will vanish in the twinkling of an eye, simply because every possible answer to it will be provided. Then the “Palace of Crystal” will be built. (Chapter 7)

Of course, the text only offers the “underground”—and by metonymy, I suppose, the graveyard—as a possible counter to the “Palace of Crystal.”

On the other hand, there are the many revisions of historical understanding which seem to slowly be disposing of that notion of a “monumental history.” Scott has written often on the necessity of altering our historical understand of the monumental. His “reinvention” of the typical narrative, “the dark ages,” is telling in Against the Grain: far less than “tragedies,” various dark ages were usually just retributions of population, and, “At a minimum, it seems unwarranted for the mere depopulation of a state center and the absence of monumental building and court records to be called a dark age and understood as the equivalent of the civilizational lights being turned off” (213). Since the Iliad and the Odyssey were, originally, oral epics, he extends the claim: “One might well argue, in fact, that such oral epics that survive by repeated performance and memorization constitute a far more democratic form of culture than texts that

5 Thanks to Tili Boon Cuillé for suggesting this passage.
depend less on performance than on a small class of literate elites who can read them” (216).

Although this might have been a roundabout way to return to the subject of literature, I do think all of these observations suggest the ways that enclosing permanence and the monumental are inflicting their terrible pressure on the world and on culture and, specifically, on the capacity to experience the critical intensity that defines us. Literature remains an important aspect of this crush because that “critical intensity” finds a home there, and a home that anyone can access. Furthermore, because changing our “literary conditions” remains a potential that we can more easily affect and create, because anyone who can read can read, and anyone who can write can write, there exists more of a hope that our notions can make some practical change. Of course, in this dissertation, I have only mentioned a handful of those technologies of maintenance that decadent criticism seems to interrogate. There are so many others—intellectual property, for example; the complex of the publishing industry—that need the same interrogation. The only requirement to reach them is the time (short of permanence) necessary, and the critical space (just at the edge of the ephemeral) to make our fading marks.
Afterword

The intent of this dissertation is both to explore a more nuanced embodied understanding of criticism and to show how that criticism works throughout the “life” of a text as a more ephemeral force, and less as a strategy to make that work of art survive forever as a monument. I believe this understanding is crucial in attempting to really grasp the pressures that are shaping and changing our society and culture in ways that point towards a future more and more in line with permanence and the monument. Literary decadence and critical decadence, though always flowing with a current of the ephemeral, become our saving possibility. But, being so fleeting, they are only there at the ends of our finger tips and at the edges of our minds; and, all the while, we continuously rigidify and imprison those possibilities in cells of morality and monument, always mistaking the decadent’s search for intensity and “pleasure” as, not one inherently interwoven with a liberating and falling pulse of criticism, but rather as something far too particular and selfish.

A fruitful extension of this project would be a further refinement and understanding of criticism and the various claims that exceptional voices have made throughout the 20th century and otherwise. One limitation of the dissertation remains that very particular lack; I had desired to connect criticism with an understanding of affect and anarchist politics on its own strength. And while I think this is a very fundamental aspect of criticism and how it is working throughout our processes with literary texts, there are many directions and places to take that incipient understanding and allow it to fructify. The narrative of critical development in the 20th century I use in this dissertation, while holding strong up to this very moment, in my opinion, has always had a range of vocal critiques from a variety of thinkers, and I think a further study of that
history would be paramount. One example: analyzing William Empson’s understanding of criticism and literary tools would bring nuance to the presentation of criticism given here in multiple ways. Furthermore, it is in my opinion that post-structuralist thought can easily be seen as a continuation and extension of this notion of decadent criticism. Jacques Derrida is already providing hints at a new possibility of specifically literary criticism as early as “Force and Signification.” Geoffrey Hartman’s *Criticism in the Wilderness* marks the important and *simultaneous* place where “literature” and “criticism” come to inhabit and overlap. An examination of this work is vital to any extension of the argument I have wanted to put forward concerning the “creative” and the “critical.” Furthermore, the challenges to conventional notions of criticism provided by thinkers such as Paul de Man would all be valuable additions to the understanding of decadent criticism and its forceful, fleeting motion that always flows aslant the endlessly monumental.
Works Cited


209


211


