

Literary Alternatives to Rational Choice

HISTORICAL PSYCHOLOGY AND
SEMI-DETACHED MARRIAGES

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IN *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society*, I traced a broad cultural shift during the second half of the nineteenth century from an Enlightenment conception of Reason as the mind's ability to understand and improve the world to rationality as the individual's chosen path towards a goal irrespective of the quality of the choice.¹ Under this shift, the Good, the True, and the Beautiful as universal or collective consensus, *sensus communis*, would give way to individual choice as Taste, or mood, or lifestyle. The goal of Rational Choice theory is not the particular substantive end or product but rather the formal mapping or modelling that leads to a desired end (whatever it is) in the form of subjectively ranked preferences. In these mappings and rankings, any attempt to comment on the quality of revealed preference is typically labelled "pater-

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¹ Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).



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nalism,” and the preferences are “revealed” by the choices. Any constraints on choice are typically left to one side as “exogenous.”

While Rational Choice theory was colonising most social science disciplines, when I published my book in 2000 it had received no other attention in literary and cultural criticism. Yet two philosophers in particular have used literature, specifically nineteenth-century fiction, to reflect on the limits of Rational Choice theory. In *Poetic Justice* (1995), Martha Nussbaum found that Rational Choice was inadequate to human experience in its reduction of quality to quantity; aggregation to total or average utility without concern for distribution; sum-raking or maximizing procedure; conception of self-interest as motivation; and exogenous preferences as simply given rather than socially mutable.² Nussbaum proposed literature as an alternative that allowed us to assess quality of life and that through sympathetic imagination involve the reader in the assessment. Reading literature, she thought, gave us a basis of sympathy with each individual life and a state of judicious spectatorship essential to human flourishing.

In *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions* (1999) and *Ulysses Unbound* (2000), Jon Elster argued that the main value of art is emotional, not cognitive nor perceptual, and that the emotions matter “because many forms of human behaviour would be unintelligible if we did not see them through the prism of emotion.” In his more recent *Closing the Books* (2004), he considers how transitional justice, or retribution and reparation after a change of political regime, may be shaped by the immediate urgency of emotion and by the decay of emotion over time.³ For Elster, the interaction between emotions and incentives is more complex than most cost-benefit models, and he called for an “historical psychology” that would include anthropology, sociology, and neurobiology, plus fiction for a “fine-grained understanding of real-life emotional phenomena.”⁴ In claiming that the “main value of art is emotional not perceptual nor cognitive,”⁵ Elster, and to a lesser extent Nussbaum, endorsed a dualism only too acceptable to social scientists. Interestingly, when Elster lists the disciplines to be consulted in historical psychology—anthropology, sociology, neurobiology—he does not then include literary criticism, but rather “fiction.” Yet the first three are disciplines; their objects are human kinds, society, the body. The last, fiction, is the object or field of the discipline of literary or cultural studies. Elster should have written anthropology, sociology, neurobiology, and literary and cultural studies or humankind, society, the nervous system, and literature, but not three disciplines plus raw fiction, the object of a discipline.

This article proposes a less dualistic historical psychology, in which reason is not the province of science and emotion not that of literature, and in which we are not asked to choose between what Elster sees as “the economic imperialism” that explains emotions by the Rational Choice paradigm and the “cultural-studies imperialism” that sees emotions as endlessly malleable social constructions.⁶ C. Wright Mills argued as early as *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) that the genre of biography joined historical change and social structure within the dynamics of particular lives and that only biography could make available to us the detailed processes of his-

² Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice* (Boston: Beacon, 1995).

³ Jon Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 404; *Ulysses Unbound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); *Closing the Books: Transitional Justice in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), see esp. chap. 8.

⁴ Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind*, 415.

⁵ Elster, *Ulysses Unbound*, 205.

⁶ Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind*, 415.

torical change.⁷ It is well known in management studies that consumers do not behave rationally and that real people's heuristics and biases identified by psychologists like Daniel Kahneman have frustrated the models of mainstream economists. Recent consumer research is thus using ethnographic methods to interpret lived experience. My argument is that literature (including biography) contributes to our understanding of historical psychology not because it is more emotional but because, unlike Rational Choice models, it is historical: it can show how choice develops through time in specific historical circumstances. A second argument of this article is that choice itself is historical and did not attain its modern meanings of *individual* choice and preference until the end of the nineteenth century, when it was already outdated among the most progressive members of society. The historicity of choice is significant because it can no longer be assumed that "freedom" or "choice" on the market is the end of history. Part I analyzes individual choice through historical conceptions of the will, and then Part II, focusing on domestic economies, looks at the evolution of choice beyond individual psychologies into more socio-political forms.

I. THE WILL: MORE THAN RATIONAL CHOICE

Friedrich von Schlegel considered literature as contributing three modes of thought. Reason or cause and effect was in the grammar; imagination in the images, figures, and tropes; and will or decision in the plot, action, rhythm, and meter.⁸ Much later the philosopher William H. Davis again provided such an analytic of the classic faculties: the reason opens up for us the world of possibilities and consequences; the moral and aesthetic sensitivities allow us to feel the Good and the Beautiful and imagine their relative values among the possibilities; the will enables us to select the possibility to actualize.⁹ Rational choice is our modern term for the will. Decision and Rational Choice theorists see human beings as deliberators, choosers, and agents and the will as that faculty or function that is directed to conscious and intentional action: the power of choice in regard to action. Although they are aware of breakdowns between belief and decision, or between decision and action, they have left it to philosophers to analyze the paradox of seemingly irrational will, that we believe we ought to do A but we do B. But as the psychologist Rollo May said about the concept of free will: "It is the whole person who is free, not a part of him or her such as will."¹⁰ The whole person chooses, not just the rational part of us. The whole person chooses, mind and body, and the constraints under which we choose are unequal. Literature is not only synchronic images, figures, and tropes; it is also diachronic syntax, plot, and rhythms, unfolding, like our choices, through time.

The period considered here for such an historical psychology is the late-Victorian era when the key tension occupying public and private life was the relation of individual will or choice to the wills and choices of others. The psychologist Havelock Ellis analyzed Decadence in 1889 as when the individuation of parts led to the disintegration of the whole, and a Decadent style in literature as an anarchistic style in which everything was sacrificed to the development of the in-

⁷ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

⁸ Friedrich von Schlegel, *Lectures on the History of Literature, Ancient and Modern* (London: Bell and Sons, 1986), 106; cited in John R. Reed, *Victorian Will* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989), 7.

⁹ Reed, *Victorian Will*, 410.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

dividual parts.¹¹ Whether one thought this sacrifice of whole to the development of the part was a sign of Degeneration, or, as I think, of thought-experiments on the limits of Self and Other, this was the key tension of the period. Stylistically, how did the deep internality or particular perspective of a narrator or character relate to the larger, more social structures of plot or narrative? Socially, how did individual needs and desires relate to the needs and desires of others? How did nations or states relate to other nations or states? This tension of independence versus interdependence, specifically of individual development threatening the survival of the whole, constituted the anxiety of liberalism after a century of its development.

This was also the period when methodological individualism was being formulated by mathematical economists such as Jevons, Menger, and Edgeworth, and political economy shifted toward the more subjectivist methods of the so-called marginal revolution, or neoclassical economics. As I described in *Insatiability*, the social relations between factors of production and trade were eclipsed by individualistic paradigms of consumption and choice. In literature, the kinds of fiction studied by Nussbaum and Elster—high bourgeois realism—that typically focused on social relations were eclipsed by the more subjectivist, psychological literature of the Decadence and then modernism.

Another way of seeing these shifts is in concepts of the will. A combination of reason, imagination, and physical action, what the Victorians called “the Will” was largely normative, determining character development and through it the possibility of self-regulating individuals in a cooperative or competitive state. The author of *Victorian Will* (1989), John R. Reed, distinguishes the Victorians from the Romantics largely by the firm will and self-discipline of the former that drove forward but channeled the expanding circles of possibility of the latter.¹² The classic statement of a Victorian faith in the inevitability of progress is Herbert Spencer’s “Progress: Its Law and Cause” of 1857, in which the will’s role is to restrain and direct until restraint and self-regulation are naturalised—in fact, biologised:

Progress, therefore, is not an accident, but a necessity. Instead of civilization being artificial, it is a part of nature; all of a piece with the development of the embryo or the unfolding of a flower.... As surely as the tree becomes bulky when it stands alone, and slender if one of a group; as surely as the same creature assumes the different forms of cart-horse and race-horse, according as its habits demand strength or speed; as surely as a blacksmith’s arm grows large, and the skin of a labourer’s hand thick; as surely as the eye tends to become long-sighted in the sailor, and shortsighted in the student; as surely as the blind attain a more delicate sense of touch; as surely as a clerk acquires rapidity in writing and calculation; as surely as the musician learns to detect an error of a semi-tone amidst what seems to others a very babel of sounds; as surely as a passion grows by indulgence and diminishes when restrained; as surely as a disregarded conscience becomes inert, and one that is obeyed active; as surely as there is any efficacy in educational culture, or any meaning in such terms as habit, custom, practice; so surely must the human faculties be moulded into complete fitness for the social state; so surely must the things we call evil and immorality disappear; so surely must man become perfect.¹³

¹¹ Havelock Ellis, “A Note on Paul Bourget,” *Pioneer* (October 1889); in *Views and Reviews: A Selection of Uncollected Articles, 1884–1932* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1932), 52.

¹² Reed, *Victorian Will*, 190.

¹³ Herbert Spencer, “Progress: Its Law and Cause,” *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1883), 1:58.

Mid-Victorian writers repeatedly returned to the workings of will to restrain and direct emotion. For Samuel Smiles will was the root of the ever important “character”: practical, efficient force that had to be active if it were to motivate individuals and nations. Without will life would be “indefinite and purposeless—like a body of stagnant water instead of a running stream doing useful work and keeping the machinery of a district in order.”¹⁴ Smiles contrasted great national will with “bad patriotism,” which “shows itself in boastings ... howlings, gesticulations ... in flying flags.”¹⁵ Walter Bagehot’s *Physics and Politics: or Thoughts on the Application of the Principles of Natural Selection and Inheritance to Political Society* (1872) was the second volume in the most prominent scientific series of the age, Kegan Paul’s International Scientist Series, in which Tyndall, Bain, Spencer, Maudsley, Jevons, Huxley, Lubbock, Romanes, Sidgwick, and Clifford, among others, also published.¹⁶ *Physics and Politics* was an evolutionary psychology of national will forming national character, explaining how national types came to impose themselves and be imitated. In his final chapter (VI, “Verifiable Progress Politically Considered”) Bagehot concludes that one nation may be called better than another when it can impose its will on another, when it can control nature and its environment, and when it possesses more freedom to choose. For Bagehot, progress is identical with the proliferation of choice.

By the end of the century, Charles Godfrey Leland in *Have You a Strong Will? How to Develop Will-Power, or Any Other Faculty or Attribute of the Mind and Render It Habitual by the Easy Process of Self-Hypnotism* argued exhaustively that hypnotism should not be used as power over another but as power to do things for oneself (empowerment rather than domination); he instructs how to self-hypnotise, self-fascinate, and in general to direct the will in methods of self-empowerment, whether in love or attentiveness to detail. Although Leland was known as a gypsiologist and occultist, he is insistent that acts of mesmerism and hypnosis, fascination, and so forth are within the limits of science and matter, that there is no magic that contravenes natural law.¹⁷ *Have You A Strong Will?* was published in George Redway’s series on psychic literature, to which many leading scientists of the age contributed, such as Alfred Russel Wallace, James Braid, and Arthur Edward Waite. Published in 1899, it heralded a new century in which “Man” would do right naturally “through the gradual persuasion of the nervous system into habit.”¹⁸

Mid-Victorian psychologists struggled to balance such normative notions underpinning religion, ethics, ontology, epistemology, social policy, and education with their own experimental science. As the latter gained force, the higher “faculties” of the Scottish School (i.e., will, reason, and consciousness) were subsumed into the physiological domain of the “lower” (i.e., appetite and sense). The mid-century capitalisations of “the Will” and “Consciousness” were intended to buttress the romance of reason precisely because they were in danger of losing their distinction from appetite and sense. Alexander Bain balanced the older faculties with new evolutionary psychology—in the year that Mill published *On Liberty*—in his *The Emotions and the Will* (1859), while Spencer more boldly advanced by reducing the will to a developed reflex. Evidence for cortical localization of function—correlation between specific mental processes and discrete re-

¹⁴ Samuel Smiles, *Character* (London: Murray, 1897), 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ It was recently reprinted in response to the revival of ideas of moral character in global politics. Walter Bagehot, *Physics and Politics*, ed. Roger Kimball (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999).

¹⁷ Charles Godfrey Leland, *Have You a Strong Will? How to Develop Will-Power or Any Other Faculty or Attribute of the Mind and Render It Habitual by the Easy Process of Self-Hypnotism* (London: George Redway, 1899).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

gions of the brain—suggested a clear dependence of mind on brain process. Data on functional neuroses—radical alterations in the body brought about by psychic trauma, mental suggestions, mesmeric trance and the like—suggested a clear dependence of brain process on the mind.¹⁹

Even as science replaced humanism, however, the science was evolutionary or historical. In a lecture of 1868 on “The Conditions of Mental Development,” W. K. Clifford linked the work of the new psychology to that of novelists:

Is it not regarded as the greatest stroke of the novelist that he should be able not merely to draw a character at any given time, but also sketch the growth of it through the changing circumstances of life? In fact, if you consider it a little further, you will see that it is not even true that a character remains the same for a single day: every circumstance, however trivial, that in any way affects the mind, leaves its mark, infinitely small it may be, imperceptible in itself, but yet more indelible than the stone-carved hieroglyphics of Egypt. And the sum of all these marks is precisely what we call character, which is therefore continually being added to, continually growing, continually in a state of change.²⁰

In George Henry Lewes’s *Problems of Life and Mind* (1874–1879), Lewes distinguished humans from calculating machines through the effects of history and experience (the “compost heap” figure for human memory that also appealed to Lewes’s partner George Eliot). What “history” offered was what is now called exogenous: it told how the rankings of Rational Choice Theory come to be organised.

One factor driving Mill’s liberalism in *On Liberty* (1859) was his perception that “Pagan self-assertion” should now be equal to “Christian self-denial.”²¹ “There was a time,” he said, “when men of strong will needed to be subdued for the good of the collective, but society now has fairly got the better of individuality; and the danger which threatens human nature is not the excess but the deficiency of personal impulses and preferences.”²² To counteract the uniformities produced by mature industrialisation, Mill sought liberty or choice through Reason, or the mind’s ability to pursue a course to achieve an end. But for Mill, Reason was always in the service of an objectively good end. In recent research on the history of psychology, Daniel Pick illustrates how between the career launches of the two Vienna-based doctors, Franz Anton Mesmer in the 1780s and Sigmund Freud in the 1880s, Mill’s vista of mental autonomy came under intense scepticism.²³ On the one hand, a tradition of biological determinism informed positivist criminology and psychiatry after 1870 and threatened the idea that the social deviant could be considered as a self-possessed individual. On the other, mesmerism, which potentially implicated both normal and deviant, led to new doubts about mental autonomy. In a tradition that extends from Mesmer to Braid, Charcot, Bernheim, and Tarde, to Freud, the rational self began to be undermined via evolutionary naturalism and degenerationism. Alongside research into atavism and savage survivals from the past, and hypnotic enslavement by those with tainted

¹⁹ See Rick Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Robert H. Wozniak, “Henry Maudsley: Body and Mind (1870),” in *Classics in Psychology, 1855–1914: Historical Essays*, <http://www.thoemmes.com/psych/maudsley.htm>.

²⁰ Cited in Rylance, *Victorian Psychology*, 133.

²¹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Three Essays*, introduction by Richard Wollheim (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 77.

²² *Ibid.*, 75.

²³ Daniel Pick, “Body and Will,” in *The Many Faces of Evolution, c. 1860–1914*, ed. Patrick Dassen and Mary Kemperink (Leuven: Peeters, 2005).

constitutions, a preoccupation emerged with the irrational peculiarities of normal psychic life. Unconscious memory, somnambulism, and multiple personality challenged the notion of the autonomous self.²⁴

Having initially held Spencerian convictions of an inevitably progressive moral will, Doctor Henry Maudsley in *Body and Will* (1883) seemed to lose confidence in the rational will. He called for “a close objective study of the unconscious operations of thought-generating organic matter” to reveal the will’s workings.²⁵ In the highly influential *Diseases of the Will* (1884), Théodule Ribot (Professor of Experimental Psychology at the Collège de France) began such a taxonomy of volitional pathology: wills rendered useless from outside or inside, incapacitated through torpor or other people, through heredity and environment, through inexplicable states of psychic paralysis. Trying to disaggregate normal from pathological fields, he found maladies of the conscious will everywhere in everyday life. Whatever the will was, it was not solely rational; whatever emotion was, it had the power to choose.

The mid-Victorian fiction studied by Nussbaum and Elster was inclined to uphold rather than challenge normative will, for reasons discussed below. Yet by the end of the century, first Sensation and then neo-Gothic fiction (*The Moonstone*, 1868; *Jekyll and Hyde*, 1886; *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891; *Trilby*, 1894; *Dracula*, 1897; *Heart of Darkness*, 1899) show the later period’s fascination with unconscious or diseased will. Philip Fisher has suggested—though Aristotle and Longinus suggested it much earlier—that literary genres map the larger temporal features of the passions.²⁶ The epic is controlled by the time of anger, the Gothic by fear, the novel of sentiment by pity and tears, the elegy by mourning and grief, and so forth. By such logic, we can state that the more morbid literature of the Decadence is controlled by nerves and stress, indicating self-conscious struggles between rational and irrational will. If we turn to the lyric as well, which is meant to express the psychic depths less controlled by narrative closure, we get an even fuller picture.

Staying with this model, we might call John Davidson’s poetry the poetry of bipolarity, a will lurching between abjection and the sublime. Davidson’s dramatic monologue “Thirty Bob a Week” (1894) portrays a will that is more biological than rational and provides an example of choice under constraints that are usually considered exogenous. Davidson’s persona, a clerk balanced precariously on the poverty line, anticipated T. S. Eliot’s Prufrock, Sweeney, Gerontion, and the masses of clerks pouring over London Bridge in *The Waste Land* (1922). Too experienced in the school of hard knocks to believe in Progress, but also too proud to believe that he and his family are socially determined, the clerk opts for individual will and Darwinian struggle (what Eliot, who confessed to being strongly affected by the poem, called the poem’s “complete fitness of content and idiom”²⁷):

And it’s this way that I make it out to be:
No fathers, mothers, countries, climates—none;
Not Adam was responsible for me,
Nor society, nor systems, nary one:

²⁴ See also Alison Winter, *Mesmerised: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

²⁵ Henry Maudsley, *Body and Will* (London: Kegan Paul, 1883), 13.

²⁶ Philip Fisher, *The Vehement Passions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 1011.

²⁷ John Davidson, “Thirty Bob a Week,” in *Poetry of the 1890s*, ed. R. K. R. Thornton and Marion-Thain (London: Penguin, 1997), Eliot quote, 89–90.

A little sleeping seed, I woke—I did, indeed—
 A million years before the blooming sun.
 I woke because I thought the time had come;
 Beyond my will there was no other cause ...
 I was the love that chose my mother out;
 I joined two lives and from the union burst;
 My weakness and my strength without a doubt
 Are mine alone for ever from the first.²⁸

This is self-help with a self-hating vengeance, an insistence on independence not just from society and parents but at the level of the sperm.

In the ideological battles between science and humanism, “materialism” often meant no more than taking the side against religion and Providence. Nietzsche had written in the notes that became *The Will to Power* (1883–1888) that “no one has given man his qualities, neither God, nor society, nor his parents and ancestors ... there is no being that could be held responsible for the fact that anyone exists at all, that anyone is thus and thus, that anyone was born in certain circumstances, in a certain environment.”²⁹ Yet while the clerk’s class has asserted this Smilesian self-help verging on Nietzschean ontological independence, his is no paean to Progress. Consumed with resentment, he knows that there is no reason on the part of his class for Reason, that there is nothing “proper”—his own—or fitting about his life on thirty bob (£1.50, in today’s values c. £100/\$200) a week. The poem concludes with a mere mechanical struggle for survival, the biological will ousting the rational will:

It’s a naked child against a hungry wolf,
 It’s a playing bowls upon a splitting wreck;
 It’s walking on a string across a gulf
 With millstones fore-and-aft about your neck;
 But the thing is daily done by many and many a one;
 And we fall, face forward, fighting, on the deck.³⁰

Davidson’s insight into the Darwinian struggle for lower-class men and their classic form of *ressentiment* eventually took possession of him in an unflinching materialism that saw itself as a will to power as knowledge. In his “Testament of a Vivisector” (1901), the protagonist begins in a spirit of scientific inquiry but then turns to the study of pain for its own sake, until there is only pain, and pain is knowledge.³¹ Having been abandoned by his wife and children, the vivisector pursues his obsession in rapt isolation.

Davidson’s poetry was highly praised by his contemporaries for its independence and authenticity. His last “Testament” was sufficiently authentic that it was entitled *The Testament of John Davidson*, and in it he chooses to die:

“None should outlive his power,”
 I said. “Who kills Himself subdues the conqueror of Kings:
 Exempt from death is he who takes his life:

²⁸ Ibid., 91–93.

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), par. 765, p. 402.

³⁰ Davidson, “Thirty Bob a Week,” 9193.

³¹ John Davidson, “Testament of a Vivisector,” No. 1 in *Testaments* (London: Grant Richards, 1901–1902).

My time has come.”
 ... and thus are men supreme:
 No other living thing can choose to die.³²

The Testament of John Davidson is too long and complex to analyze here, but suffice to say that its “ordered complexity” of reason, image, and rhythm persuaded Davidson to throw himself off the cliffs at Penzance and persuades the reader that that was a rational response to his world. In Davidson’s work the choice is treadmill, survival of the fittest, or suicide, and action a physical force, like the force that drives the plant to grow, or the cancer to spread, or the species to multiply.

Davidson’s literary influences were Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. For Schopenhauer, inspired by Buddhism, the will was an ultimately meaningless striving for survival throughout nature. Because will is the fundamental metaphysical principle, our lives are dominated by willing, and consequently filled with struggle, conflict, and dissatisfaction. Human suffering is only given respite by art and only eliminated by the cessation of desire. The desperate quality of will in Schopenhauer and the reduction of will to desire in *The World as Will and Idea* (1819) are due to his emphasis on its manifestation in the individual body, specifically in the individual sexual body. The individual becomes one through his identity with his body, and desire or will is always located in this individual body: “I call the body the objectivity of the will.... It is called pain when an impression is opposed to the will and pleasure when it is in accordance with the will. Pain and pleasure are immediate affectations of the will in its manifestation, the body.”³³ In chapter XLIV, “On the Metaphysics of Sexual Love,” choice is no more than reproductive choice:

The state of being in love, though it may pose as ethereal, is rooted in the sexual impulse alone; indeed, it is only a more closely determined, specialised, and individualised sexual impulse. With this firmly in mind we will consider the important part played by sexual love in all its degrees and nuances, not only on the stage and in novels, but in the real world.... The ultimate purpose behind all love-affairs ... really is more important than all other purpose in human life, and is hence entirely worthy of the profound seriousness with which everyone pursues it. For what is decided by this means is nothing less than the composition of the next generation.... Just as the being, the existents, of these future people is conditioned by our sexual impulse generally, so their nature, essentia, is entirely conditioned by individual choice in the gratification of the impulse, that is, by sexual love, and is in every respect irrevocably determined by this. This is the key.³⁴

What presents itself to individual consciousness as sexual impulse is “simply the will to life” (ibid.) in what Schopenhauer calls the “greatest” and “truest” of all “Purposes” and “choices,” the creation of “the individual personalities of the next generation.”³⁵ As if parodying Foucault’s idea of sex as truth, these personalities seem reductively determined by the sexual act:

Can there, indeed, of all the purposes on earth, be any which is greater or more important?
 It alone corresponds to the depth with which passionate love is felt, to the seriousness with

³² John Davidson, *The Testament of John Davidson* (London: Grant Richards, 1908), 46.

³³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London: Trubner, 1883), 1:130.

³⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, ed. David Berman, trans. Jill Berman (London: Dent, 1995), 263–64.

³⁵ Ibid., 263–64, 265.

which it presents itself, the importance which it attributes even to the trifling details of its own time and place. Only in so far as this purpose is assumed to be the true one, do the difficulties, the endless exertions and annoyances endured for the attainment of the love-object, seem appropriate. For it is the future generation, in all of its *individual determinateness*, that is struggling into existence by means of those efforts and exertions. This future generation is already astir in that wary, *specific and capricious choice* made to satisfy the sexual impulse—the choice which we call love.³⁶

This “will to live of the *new individual*” is what makes sense of Davidson’s “I was the love that chose my mother out; / I joined two lives and from the union burst”: “From the moment when their eyes first meet with longing, this new life is kindled, and it announces itself as a future individuality, harmoniously and well integrated. They feel the longing for an actual union and fusion into a single being.... In this child the qualities passed on by both parents are fused and united in one being, and so they will live on.”³⁷

It was this individualism located in the wilful sexual body that Nietzsche and then Freud—not to mention D. H. Lawrence—took from Schopenhauer, and it was this element that accounts for their pessimism. Nietzsche followed Schopenhauer, via Darwin, in seeing the body as the objectivity of the will. The soul, he said, was only a word for something about the body, and the body is a configuration of natural forces and processes. Nietzsche’s world ceaselessly organizes and reorganizes itself as the fundamental disposition, the will to power, gives rise to successive arrays of power relationships. (Again, see Davidson’s “Testament of an Empire-Builder,” where the kingdom of loquacious beasts’ refrain is “Man overcomes.”) While Nietzsche was inconsistent in whether the willed power was of the enabling or the dominating kind, he was consistent on the biological or nonrational dimension of will. Returning to our temporal formula, we might say that Nietzsche’s writing is controlled by the time of desire.

It is illuminating to contrast another great proponent of desire and will, Nietzsche’s contemporary William Morris, whose task for art was “the education of desire—to teach us to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way.”³⁸ We could call the temporal dimensions of Morris’s writing the time of emotions educated. Morris was reconciled to marital abstinence from early in his marriage and directed his will toward the social whole, for communal and political ends, not the individual body’s. Their difference may be seen in their respective attitudes to art. For Schopenhauer, art was a product that provided momentary respite or disinterested satisfaction from the ceaseless round of interestedness we have called the will to sex, truth, and power. For Morris, art was a process rather than a product, the expression of pleasure in labour, and his goal was not to create another work of art but to infuse everyday life with pleasure, creativity, and the continuous revitalization of desire.³⁹ It was no less physiological than it was for Schopenhauer or the psychologists; he said that when he saw a work of good craftsmanship he felt a warmth in his tummy. But ultimately Morris raised the will to a level beyond the individual: the highest choice was for social choice.

³⁶ Ibid., 265 (my italics).

³⁷ Ibid., 266 (my italics).

³⁸ William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. Krishan Kumar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), xx.

³⁹ See Bradley J. Macdonald, *William Morris and the Aesthetic Constitution of Politics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999).

II. HOUSE OF LIFE, EARTHLY PARADISE, DESIRABLE MANSIONS, AND BOHEMIA

If the body is the objectivity of individual will, the home is the objectivity of social will. And now I turn to the historicity of choice through the example of domestic choice. Just as the late-Victorian period saw a shift in conceptions of the will from the normative to the individual or even the aberrant, and from mental autonomy to the physiological, so it also saw a shift in conceptions of the domus. In Britain today, the so-called “property ladder” typically runs from the flat, to the terraced house, to the semi-detached suburban house, to the detached house, all with their corresponding structures of community, from the interactive tenants’ bloc of flats organized against the landlord, to communal streets with private gardens, to the “detached” bourgeoisie, theorized by Bourdieu as distant from necessity and characterized by, precisely, their detachment.⁴⁰ In the mid-Victorian period, the choices perhaps implied by this contemporary domestic economy did not exist; indeed choice itself did not exist in any of its contemporary uses. Judith Flanders’s *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed* (2003) begins with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s approbation of the uniformity of life in Leamington Spa’s terraced houses, which were then, in 1857, typical of the middle-class habitude:

A nice little circle of pretty, moderate-sized two-story houses, all on precisely the same plan, so that on coming out of any one door, and taking a turn, one can hardly tell which house is his own. There is a green space of grass and shrubbery in the centre of the Circus, and a little grass plot, with flowers, shrubbery, and well-kept hedges, before every house, and it is really delightful ... so cleanly, so set out with shade-trees, so regular in its streets, so neatly paved, its houses so prettily contrived, and nicely stuccoed, that it does not look like a portion of the workaday world. “Genteel” is the word for it.... I do not know a spot where I would rather reside than in this new village of midmost Old England.⁴¹

Flanders emphasizes that she is writing about the regularity and system of the entire middle class: “Middle-class houses—from the four- to six-room house of the lower middle class to the twelve rooms or so of the upper middle class—all conformed to a pattern.”⁴² In “Thirty Bob a Week,” the clerk’s ironic “pillard halls” is half-let and he and his wife cough so their kids will not hear their lovemaking. In housing, the poor had no choice, and the aristocracy were bound by tradition; but the middle class actively rejected choice.

What is interesting from our perspective is not only that the houses were so architecturally uniform indoors and out, but that the habits of those within them were equally regulated and systematized. From birth, to school and work, to marriage, to death, middleclass Victorians did not aspire to exercise choice. Between social conventions and social pressures, independence and individuality were not perceived as virtues. The rules of entertaining, visiting, eating, mourning, and dying were experienced as Gissing’s character in *New Grub Street* experienced them: “She had never conceived of life as something proper to the individual; independence in the di-

⁴⁰ Of course there are also the travellers who bear their houses with them, either traditional vardas or New Age versions of the gypsy caravan. But economists have always had trouble accounting for propertyless travellers, and we shall not pursue them here. But see Regenia Gagnier, “Cultural Philanthropy, Gypsies, and Interdisciplinary Scholars: Dream of a Common Language,” 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 1, no. 1 (2005), <http://www.nineteen.bbk.ac.uk>.

⁴¹ Judith Flanders, *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), lii.

⁴² *Ibid.*

recting of one's course seemed to her only possible in the case of very eccentric persons, or of such as were altogether out of society."⁴³ What Flanders describes is the sort of mindless adherence to opinion and manners that enraged Mill in *On Liberty* and that led him to the view, also noted earlier, that "the danger which threatens human nature is [now] the deficiency of personal impulses and preferences." It is also what made Wilde's lines in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) so funny: "We live, as I hope you know, Mr Worthing, in an age of Ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits, I am told; and my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest."⁴⁴ Wilde's trivializing of the formalisms and conformity of Victorian middle-class life was the source of his wit. His "eccentricity," his individual choices, were the cause of his imprisonment. Even the most radical were not immune from the powers of convention at mid-century. Anyone familiar with the life and correspondence of Karl Marx will know how obsessively he worried about domestic economy and how much he postured and manoeuvred to conceal his poverty for the sake of his three debutante daughters.

The rules were fixed and followed rigorously because, in a time of unprecedented social mobility, people had to feel confident that they could be learned. If the rules could be learned, then social aspirants, which included almost everyone, could follow them and progress up the ladder. As Bagehot explained in *Physics and Politics*, uneducated people will imitate; at times of social mobility, they need connected and coherent habits. But formal manners and politeness decline as society becomes richer and individual choices become the expectation. Manners and politeness were "altogether bad," he concluded, "in the freer western states of America."⁴⁵

While such domestic "patterns" were represented fully in mid-century fiction of George Eliot, Dickens, Trollope and so forth, by the end of the century the patterns of respectability were beginning to decompose. Where there was more choice, it was because there was more disposable income, and by then more of the middle classes had the education and income to feel more comfortable distancing themselves from convention.⁴⁶ Whereas at mid-century the independent woman was not an admirable individual but a failed wife, by the end of the century she was a New Woman, a modern woman with choices and possibilities. In the sensation fiction of the 1860s, independent women were consigned to madhouses and attics; at the end of the century they are publishing their own stories about relationships. This is the position at which families like William Morris's and Edward Carpenter's had arrived, families who chose to live their lives with the creativity of art.

When Edith Lees Ellis, the lesbian wife of the sexologist Havelock Ellis, referred to her marriage as "semi-detached," she figured a union that confounded the domestic and economic thought of her time: husbands and wives would be emotionally attached, but sexually and financially looking outward.⁴⁷ Other unions and households of the fin-de-siècle literati challenged domestic econ-

⁴³ George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1968), 274.

⁴⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *Plays* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1979), 263.

⁴⁵ Bagehot, *Physics and Politics*, 150.

⁴⁶ This may have been the secret of one of the domestic peculiarities of William Morris's family. Morris was born to the manor and by the end of the century was one of the richest men in England. He flaunted convention in his artistry with all the security of the well bred. His wife, on the other hand, was the daughter of a hostler, whose knowledge of her husband's culture was laboriously learned. Hence her legendary sphinx-like silence in the company of her artistic guests, letting her beauty speak when she had no confidence in her speech. See Jan Marsh, *Jane and May Morris: A Biographical Story, 1839–1938* (London: Pandora, 1986).

⁴⁷ Mrs. Havelock Ellis, "Semi-detached Marriage," in *The New Horizon in Love and Life* (London: Black, 1921), 23–31.

omy. When Dante Gabriel Rossetti chose to publish his book of sonnets called *House of Life* (1870), his path of decision displayed an “ordered complexity” of economic competition, self-interest, ethos of productivity, consciousness of product brand, and erotic emotion:⁴⁸

Rossetti had decided that his value to posterity lay more with his literary output than his paintings: as a painter he now felt he was being outperformed by Millais and Burne-Jones. In order to advance [his status] he urgently needed to publish a substantial new volume. To bulk out what he was planning as a 400-page edition he needed to reclaim his old unpublished poems. There was another reason [he needed to reclaim them]. The poems he was currently writing were almost all addressed to, or at least inspired by, Janey.⁴⁹

The “Janey” to whom the new poems were addressed was, of course, Jane Morris, married to William Morris. Rossetti’s own wife Elizabeth Siddal had died by an overdose of laudanum and in a moment of intense emotion Rossetti had buried his unpublished poems in her coffin. When he later wrote a new round of poems for Jane Morris, he could not publish them alone without a scandal, for then everyone would know that they were for Morris’s wife. So he had Siddal exhumed, the original manuscript retrieved, and interspersed his new poems with the old so that no dates could be known and all the poems would seem to have been written for his wife. They were then published and reviewed by—William Morris. Morris, that is, reviewed his rival’s poems that were inspired by his own wife. It was a very positive review, displaying Morris’s characteristic altruism.

Morris and Rossetti took Kelmscott Manor in a joint tenancy in June 1871. Early in July, Rossetti, Jane, and Morris’s children were installed. Morris visited briefly before thoughtfully departing on holiday alone—in Iceland. Morris’s unconventionality in his domestic life was as free from Victorian convention as economic independence and educated taste could effect. Equally important, he had just completed the first modern cosmopolitan poem in English, *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–1870), in which he retold cycles of classical, medieval, and Norse myth and legends, from which we know he learned to control his natural irascibility, extirpate anger, forgive enemies, and cultivate fellowship under inhospitable conditions. If his first work, *The Defense of Guenevere* (1858), imagined the psychology of the unfaithful wife, *The Earthly Paradise* made peace with rivals. As noted above, Morris’s writing is the literature of emotions educated or passions tamed. W. B. Yeats, who in his youth had visited Morris’s house in Hammersmith, home of the Socialist League, had said that “If some angel offered me the choice, I would choose to live [Morris’s] life ... rather than my own or any other man’s.”⁵⁰

Also appropriately titled for our purposes, Edward Carpenter’s *Desirable Mansions* (1883) was an attack on his parents’ comfortable middle-class life in Brighton.⁵¹ When his father dies he buys seven acres at Millthorpe, outside Sheffield, and shares it with working families who live close to necessity and have very circumscribed choice, which he contrasts with “aestheticism.” After a decade or so, and two separate sets of children are raised, the families move out and an unemployed Sheffield man moves in: “Merrill from the first developed quite a talent for house-

⁴⁸ Elster in *Alchemies of the Mind* calls such complexity “internal” and “external” explanations, relating to textual development and development within the author’s objective context.

⁴⁹ Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber, 1994), 251.

⁵⁰ Cited in William Morris: *The Defense of Guenevere and Other Poems*, ed. Margaret A. Lourie (New York: Garland, 1981), 22.

⁵¹ Edward Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams* (London: George Allen, 1916), 139.

work. He soon picked up the necessary elements of cookery; he carried on the arts of washing, baking and so forth with address and dispatch; he took pride in making the place look neat and clean, and insisted on decorating every room that was in use with flowers.”⁵² At seventy, Edward Carpenter and George Merrill are still “up at about 7 a.m. in summer, about 8.0 in winter.... For me there is my study to tidy up and ... George has his kitchen to attend to.”⁵³

While Millthorpe became a meeting place for the Social Democratic Federation, the Society for Psychical Research, the Vegetarian Society, the Hermetic Society, theosophists, antivivisectionists, socialists, anarchists, feminists, suffragettes, and trade unionists of all sorts, Carpenter founded with Edith Lees of the “semi-detached” marriage the Fellowship of the New Life. Lees then organized a cooperative boarding house in Bloomsbury, where eight to ten members of the Fellowship dwelt in a communistic utopia. (It was not entirely successful; where Morris was able to maintain throughout his life that “Fellowship is Life,” Lees quipped about their commune that “Fellowship was Hell.”⁵⁴ After her marriage to the sexologist, Lees took a pig farm in Cornwall, where she “fraternized” with farmers.)

For Carpenter, Morris “represented this new society more effectively and vitally than any one else.”⁵⁵ Morris, whose affluence was due in part to his manufacture of domestic furniture and textiles, told Carpenter at Millthorpe: “I have spent, I know, a vast amount of time designing furniture and wall-papers, carpets and curtains; but after all I am inclined to think that sort of thing is mostly rubbish, and I would prefer for my part to live with the plainest white-washed walls and wooden chairs and tables.”⁵⁶

How did the socialist-aesthetes, who enjoyed both social commitment and free choice, and who fought throughout their lives for the very equality that would have removed their choice, assess their quality of life? Carpenter writes:

On one occasion [George] was standing at the door of our cottage, looking down the garden brilliant in the sun, when a missionary sort of man arrived with a tract and wanted to put it in his hand. “Keep your tract,” said George. “I don’t want it.” “But don’t you wish to know the way to heaven?” said the missionary man. “No, I don’t,” was the reply, “can’t you see that we’re in heaven here—we don’t want any better than this, so go away.”⁵⁷

While the Hegelian idea of “character” indicated a dominant will and a passion to choose, Walter Pater followed Schiller in noting that, for the Greeks, indifference was the enviable portion of divinity.⁵⁸ The gods’ smooth and vacuous faces were neither calculating nor decisive; in economic language, Olympus was not troubled by indifference curves. With their cooperative farm in Sheffield, Carpenter and Merrill thought that they had come as close to God as they could; they had no need nor desire for more. Carpenter’s great poem *Towards Democracy*

⁵² Ibid., 162.

⁵³ Ibid., 307.

⁵⁴ Ellis, *New Horizon in Love and Life*, xv-xxxvii.

⁵⁵ Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams*, 216.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 217.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 163.

⁵⁸ See Andrew Eastham, “The Ideal Stages of Aestheticism: Theatricality in the Fiction and Criticism of Pater, Wilde, and James” (PhD thesis, King’s College, 2004), chap. 1.

(1881–1902) concludes “it shall come about that at length / We shall need no other world, no other worlds.”⁵⁹

We conclude with these uneconomical households called House of Life, The Earthly Paradise, and Desirable Mansions, without breadwinners, with unpredictable breadmakers, and with choices that look like suicide, to remind us of the role of history in historical psychology and in contrast to the tidy rankings of Rational Choice theory. Choice, like will, is historically conditioned both with respect to individual choices and with respect to the meaning and value of choice in any given culture. The writers we have considered were sufficiently comfortable and educated to opt for equality. If they had achieved it, the most they would have lost would have been their wealth. It is noticeable that Morris dismissed Morris wallpapers as rubbish; Lees shrugged off the Fellowship’s inability to organize their finances cooperatively.

The legendary home of the gypsies in central Europe, Bohemia was the name first given in 1834 by the journalist Félix Pyat to young artists who moved around: cultural travellers. Bohemians were the artists and intellectuals who created alternative worlds within Western modernity. In her recent book on Bohemia in London, Paris, New York, and Weimar, Elizabeth Wilson wonders whether, when all of us in the city, suburbs, and country pursue individual choice and freedom from the state, religion, biology, and convention generally, we have all become bohemian. That is, whether Bohemia has been overtaken by the North American-style pursuit of happiness.⁶⁰

I think not. Bohemian excess was not in pursuit of pleasure but of self-discovery, even to the point, as in Davidson, of self-destruction. The Bohemians were even less interested in happiness, which smacked of middle-class comfort and security. As Nietzsche wrote in *Twilight of the Idols* (1889), “Man does not desire happiness. Only the Englishman does.”⁶¹ The Bohemian realm of life-as-art may be contrasted with, not compared to, our freedom to choose among commodities subject only to our individual economic constraints. If bound art was art for the socialist state, the unbound freedom of market democracies is freedom without any demands on the state. We are not all Bohemians, for our freedom is not the freedom of self-discovery and social possibility, but the freedom to pursue self-interest as regulated by the market.

Jean-Pierre Vernant has described modernity’s society of the will, in which “it is the constant choice to express oneself in words and deeds that manifest one’s authentic being.”⁶² “The artist,” he says, “becomes an important model of authenticity because ... he creates objects that more directly embody his uniqueness by means of acts of will than those who, in their working lives ... can find little or no trace of themselves in the objects that they produce.” Vernant concludes: “the artist is the hero of a society of the Will.”⁶³ If, as Vernant says, the artist is the hero of the society of the will, then the socialist-aesthetes or the artists of life should be the super-heroes, for they laboured to create free choice for all.

⁵⁹ Edward Carpenter, *Towards Democracy* (London: George Allen, 1912), 507.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Wilson, *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (London: Tauris, 2000). This converges with pop-economist and management theorists of the so-called “creative class,” who now look to their bourgeois bohemians (or bobos) to drive the economy and revive cities through their combination of talent, technology, and tolerance (“the 3 Ts”). See Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York: Routledge, 2005), esp. chap. 5, 113–29. Florida’s Bohemian Index measures tolerance, which attracts talent, which stimulates creativity, innovation, technology, and employment growth.

⁶¹ *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954), 466.

⁶² Cited in Fisher, *Vehement Passions*, 165.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Yet rather than end with the Bohemians, we shall end with John Stuart Mill's idea of social evolution. Like the Bohemians, Mill was highly—even spectacularly—educated and (as Gertrude Himmelfarb ceaselessly reminded us) of spectacularly high-minded tastes. Mill predicted as early as 1848 that as humankind evolved it would change its economic thinking: the world would move beyond the crude philosophy of getting and spending, and people would find themselves with higher thoughts than their own self-interest. In which case, compared to the historical psychology, Rational Choice theory simply reflects an earlier stage of development and the most evolved choice may still be for equality. [A]

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