"I venture to ask," a reader of the Ladies' Home Journal wrote the critic Hamilton Wright Mabie in 1906, "if you would be so kind as to give some idea how to start right to obtain culture. I have plenty of time and a good library at my disposal, but no money to employ teachers." Mabie's advice was straightforward—to "read only the best books." Yet the exchange depended on a number of unspoken assumptions: that culture could be dissociated from wealth; that it could be acquired; that the process of doing so entailed reading certain books and avoiding others; that becoming cultured required time; that cultured individuals (in this case, Mabie) commanded deference from those who timidly "ventured" to join their company.  

Those understandings were part of a definition of culture that had evolved in America since the colonial period. Even restricted to its association with "high" art (as opposed to its broader, anthropological denotation of a "way of life"), the term reflected the interplay of several distinct ideological traditions. At its base was a model of cultivation forged by the gentry who, in the eighteenth century, populated the "great houses" of the Eastern seaboard. The ideal combined the English
legacy of insistence on fine manners, proper speech, and elegance with the demand, in the American setting, for moral substance. Mere drawing-room performance—the display of wit, beauty, and similar attributes of refinement—was counterposed to "true gentility," in which those external signs corresponded to inner virtues such as propriety and dedication to reason.²

Diffused throughout the colonies, culture in these early years nonetheless remained largely an accompaniment of political and economic power. The elite who set the standard of "high style" were the same people who provided leadership for colonial governments. Similarly, not only was genteel culture compatible with wealth, it depended on it—because the pursuit of refinement was expensive. Aspirants to gentility were avid consumers of parlor furnishings, rare wines, fine china—and books—that bespoke their sense of propriety and grace. Moreover, practical businesswomen were also considered "men of letters" whose involvement in commerce did nothing to disqualify them as cultured individuals.³

Even so, by the 1790s figures like Eliza Hobbard Smith and Charles Brockden Brown had begun concluding that commercial success might impede, rather than nourish, literary and artistic achievements. Their discouragement about the loss of gain observed in the postrevolutionary era coincided with a larger development: the emergence, in both Europe and America, of the romantic artist as critic of industrialism. Reacting against an increase in initiative, mechanical production, romantics fostered an idea of "Art" as the domain of a "superior reality." Culture became linked with "imaginative truth." It was, as Raymond Williams has put it, the "court of appeal in which real values were determined, usually in opposition to the "ethical" values thrown up by the market and similar operations of society."⁴

Nineteenth-Century Definitions of Culture

After 1860 those two tendencies—to associate genuine cultivation with inward virtue and to counterpose it to materialism—deepened and spread. The democratization of property ownership and the rise of republicanism enhanced the prospect that Americans of more modest means could attain the respectability formerly limited to the aristoc.

may. Although the relationship between money and "the best people" remained ambiguous, many writers of popular advice manuals stressed that genteel conduct did not depend on financial resources. By the same token, when George Ticknor, a founder of the Boston Athenaeum, met the British entrepreneur William Roscoe in 1815, he saw as unusual and impressive Roscoe's capacity to combine literary and business acumen. By 1861 the term "gentility" described "all who were well brought up and well educated." Moreover, the same democratic doctrines which generated widespread aspirations to refinement disjoined gentility and political leadership. Winning votes became less a matter of possessing culture than of being able to juggle the needs of various interest groups, of which the genteel itself was one.⁵

As economic and social barriers to refinement fell, however, they also eliminated the reliability of privilege as a predictor of cultural behavior. Moreover, despite the growing element of antipathy to the marketplace within the official definition of culture, the greater availability of consumer goods meant that it was increasingly possible to contrast that part of the ideology in practice. That is, officially, gentility denoted moral and intellectual qualities that could never be bought. Yet middle-class Americans in the mid-nineteenth century scrambled to purchase replicas of luxury items (carpets, upholstery, watches) in order to mimic the upper echelons of society. Such goods made it both easier to acquire an aura of refinement—to regard gentility as a commodity—and more difficult to sift imposters from the authentically respectable. The problem was compounded by the faceless, confusing, potentially anarchic crowds populating the expanding urban environment. In response, Americans intensified their attachment to the idea that a person's actions certified the presence or absence of the inner qualities comprising "true gentility." Essayists, novelists, journalists, missionaries, and educators developed a language that honored the observer's sense of those qualities so that they would be readily recognizable.

The most important entry in this lexion was "character." In broad outline, the word denoted integrity, balance, and restraint, traits which well served the needs of an economy dependent on diligent producers. Animated by a firmly grounded sense of the self as interior, persons of character were also, paradoxically, selfless. Public-spirited and窸窸窣窣 of moral obligation, they were committed more to the fulfillment.
of duty than to uninhibited self-expression. Posse\s of character was prestige and "reputation" by exhibiting it to others. Yet the ideal approximated the set of attributes David Riesman labeled "inner direction" in the sense that its exemplars determined their behavior according to what Riesman called an internalized "psychological gyroscope." The conformist aspects of "inner direction"—the tendency to follow the gyroscope unthinkingly—were often implicit in expectations of character as well. But in some formulations, notably those of Emerson and Charles Eliot Norton discussed below, the ideal blank room for the frame was Riesmanized as hard to distinguish "inner direction", the exercise of independent, reflective choice he denominated "autonomy." By the mid-nineteenth century, Americans were deeply involved in invoking "character," "fineness," "taste," and "culture" in order to realize "vulgarity," and fend off the specter of the "confidant man." The popularity of grammars and dictionaries designed to defend refined speech from the incursions of informality and slang reflected that preoccupation. So did the high demand for etiquette manuals. Anchored in the premise that "manners are the outward expression of the internal character," etiquette writers taught how to discern and display inward civility in the form, for example, of discipline at the dinner table. Although the system of rules actually tended to weaken the very concept it was supposed to strengthen—by providing more opportunity for pretense without substance—overly, it shored up the reassuring assumption that appearance mirrored reality.

As roughly the same time the speech and etiquette authorities were dispensing their formulas for sorting genteel individuals from vulgar ones, other writers were emanating ideas of culture and character in a less worldly context. The Harvard moral philosophers who shaped Unitarian theology—figures such as Joseph Stevens Buckminster, Andrew Norton, and William Ellery Channing—articulated a complex moral and aesthetic vision of gentility. To them, the attainment of a cultured sensibility was part of a larger task: the achievement of salvation. Specifically, in place of the belief in innate depravity, Unitarians substituted the view that sin lay in the failure to sustain inward harmony. Virtue consisted in the practice of "self-mastery" and moderation. "Character," the hallmark of the ethical individual, was central to the Unitarians' vocabulary; one's obligation, they preached, was to engage in character development—which they also called "a progressive purification of the personality"—in order to do honor to divine creation.

Culture, or, as Channing emphasized, "self-culture," was integral to that process. Obtained through the reading of literature and other forms of study, it consisted "not chiefly, as many are apt to think, in
accumulating information" but instead in nurturing a mind and spirit consistent with "Christian character." Channing conceived of self-culture in organic imagery. "To cultivate any thing, be it a plant, an animal, a mind," he explained in 1838, "is to make it grow." This development, Channing believed, was intrinsically worthwhile, "The ground of a man's culture," he explained, "lies in his nature, not in his calling. . . His powers are to be unfolded on account of their inherent dignity, not their outward direction." But the end of growth was also a means to further ends that stood in contradistinction to personal aggrandizement. Channing briefly acknowledged that self-education was "practical" and could improve the worldly lot of those who pursued it. Nevertheless, real self-culture, he insisted, acted to "depress" those "desires, appetites, passions which terminate" in the individual, while exalting human responsibilities to ameliorate society and to serve God.12

In the Unitarian scheme, the possessor of self-culture exhibited two forms of taste: moral and aesthetic. Moral taste was the quality of taking delight in the perception of virtue. Aesthetic taste described a similar response to beauty. It is true that, for Norton and his colleagues, literature which was not morally sound could not be aesthetically pleasing either. Yet, in light of the changes the meaning of culture would subsequently undergo, what is striking about the Unitarian framework is the degree to which the Harvard philosophers at least attempted to sustain allegiance to art and goodness alike.13

As the Unitarians delineated their version of gentility, they also formulated a role for the "man of letters" charged with defining and exemplifying culture. Such figures were expected to comprise, in Daniel Walker Howe's words, a "literary moral elite." Although functioning as writers and critics rather than ministers, they were to provide the same intellectual leadership the clergy had traditionally supplied. This stance equipped critics to make literary judgments with untrammeled authority. Broadly speaking, the Unitarians' sense of purpose was closely coupled to antidemocratic rhetoric. Buckminster, for example, decried the "pernicious notion of equality" that undermined reverence for classical education, while Norton blamed democracy for "a poisonous atmosphere, which blasts everything beautiful in nature and corrodes everything elegant in art."14

These views, however, did not license retreat to smug disengagement.

---

"or, rather, "men of letters" were duty bound to remain immersed in democratic society—guiding, criticizing, and elevating it. Relying on their counsel, the "average man" would not so much surrender to their dictate as engage in "obeying his own instructed mind." In sum, the Unitarians' aristocratic prejudices coexisted with a drive to help all Americans, regardless of class, become, in Howe's words, "not only more religious, but also more cosmopolitan, more sensitive, and more compassionate—short, more fully human." That commitment propelled the Harvard moral philosophers to seek audiences for their messages outside their immediate circles: Channing's "Self-Culture," for example, was a lecture before an association of workingmen, while Buckminster helped find a periodical to promulgate the Unitarian outlook.

A short distance from the Unitarian stronghold of Boston, the so-called New Haven scholars, clustering around Yale College, provided, from the 1840s through the 1880s, a complementary interpretation of the requirements of culture. There Presidents Theodore Dwight Woolsey and Noah Porter attempted to foster in their students "inner growth" through "full and harmonious training." Drawing on the German ideal of Bildung, they sought to instill "not erudition, so much as culture; not facts, not reflection, not feats of memory . . . but the power of subtle and really thought, and of apt and finished expression." Distinguished from mere information, culture was, in the New Haven view, also a corrective to materialism. Woolsey and Porter assumed—indeed, hoped—that college graduates would exhibit the results of their "liberal" education in the public realm; the acquisition of prestige through the display of refinement remained a part of the New Haven ideal. One of the graduated functions, Porter explained in his 1871 inaugural address, was to "soften" the "vulgarities" endemic to American society and introduce "amenities into our social life." But Porter was quick to differentiate that form of social performance from the flaunting of "cheap glitter" and "showy accomplishments" in the service of economic self-interest.16

Attached to an exclusive educational institution, the New Haven scholars imbued their own role as facilitators of culture with the same tensions about democracy the Unitarians manifested. They, too, relied on the concept of an elite that would, by instruction and example, assist the masses in attaining salvation; to that end, they adopted a tone that
was unequivocal and definitive. Yet their presumption of authority was largely bounded by their locales. Connected to the New York publishing world through the firm of Charles Scribner, they nonetheless remained aloof from the metropolitan scene and the influence it afforded. Thus the "New Humanists" represented a tributary, rather than the main stream, that carried the ideology of genteel culture forward to the twentieth century. The broader currents emanated from Unitarianism, not only by extension of the Harvard moralists' outlook but also by way of reaction against it. They swirled with particular force through transcendentalism, creating in the thought of the figure who, perhaps more than any other individual, both typified and defined the cultured person for mid-nineteenth-century America: Ralph Waldo Emerson.

"Culture," Emerson declared in 1837, "implies all which gives the mind possession of its own powers." That formulation both perpetuated Emerson's Unitarian heritage and allied culture (or, again, "self-culture") with his own concept of "self-reliance." To cultivate the self in Emerson's view, was to achieve a sense of proportion, a state of spiritual harmony, and the intellectual independence that Riemann would later call autonomy. It was, in addition, to acquire the aesthetic sensitivity that Emerson, like his contemporaries, designated "taste." Such qualities were "interior," not "easily disturbed by outward events and opinion." Moreover, in Emerson's scheme, as in Channing's, culture was intimately linked with character; the latter term retained its meaning as the expression, in demeanor and action, of integrity and balance within.

Thus, Emerson added his voice to those who cast the true gentleman or lady as a genuine, not a pretender who exhibited merely a veneer of refinement. Self-reliance, attained through self-culture, shone in "the beauty which reaches through and from, by the manners to the soul." (Reversing the figure, Emerson also found the Quaker symbol of the "inner light" a congenial representation of the "outer culture" radiated outward.) Finally, both culture and character rested on the human ability to exercise "moral sense." As Emerson made the connection, "The foundation of culture, as of character, is at last the moral sentiment." That is, Emerson joined the Unitarians in coupling self-development with self-denial in order to improve the common welfare. "Taste," too, was embedded in morality: "Beauty," Emerson wrote, "is with Truth and Goodness the triple face of God."29

As the last phrase reminds us, however, Emerson went further than the Unitarians in insisting that human beings embodied not only ethical potential but also godliness. This premise, the radical core of transcendentalism, introduced alongside Emerson's depiction of the autonomous individual a competing vision of self-abnegation that went far beyond the altruism implicit in the moral obligation to advance the human race. As Emerson veered away from Unitarian rationalism, self-culture became a process designed to approximate God within the individual. An ultimate goal was to tear down the boundaries perceived between humanity, nature, and divinity. That objective might seem to sanctify the pursuit of pure experience as a means of entering the realm of the universal and infinite. Emerson's most famous passage, taking culture with a romantic, unfettered, expressive self appeared in the "introdutory" to his 1837–38 lecture series "Human Culture." "Culture in the high sense," Emerson declared, "does not consist in polishing and varnishing, but in so presenting the attractions of nature that the numbing attributes of man may burst their sleep and rush into day. The effect of Culture on the man will not be like the trimming and taming of gardens, but the educating the eye to the true harmony of the unassuming landscape, with horrid thickets, wide morasses, bold mountains, and the balance of the land and sea."30

Yet even such metaphors of fervid awakening and unrepressed wildness did not, in fact, signify the abandonment of control, proportion, and self-sacrifice. As David Robinson has argued, Emerson in the late 1830s prescribed a more active form of discipline than the Unitarians did—be it insisted that individuals fully exercise, rather than stifle, the "latent power" within them—but self-denial remained for him an essential attribute of the cultured person. So encumbered, one could never quite enact a complete surrender to self-analysing experience. At the same time, the organic image of culture as the "unfolding" of one's divine "nature," while encouraging the release of inner feelings, also implicitly checked the tendency to sanction self-expression for the sake of a given person's "growth" alone. Emerson's sights were always "on revealing the divinity in mankind as a whole." To pursue and exemplify the "ideal" was a "duty" that precluded hedonistic self-absorption.31

Emerson's understanding of the role of the critic was similarly complicated by a tension between his democratic individualism and his
concern to spur cultural change. That is, his announcement, in "Self-Reliance," that "nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind" summarized his rejection of the idea that readers owed allegiance to the judgments of a "literary nunnery." The distinguishing feature of the "Transcendental Scholar," as depicted by Emerson in 1837, was self-trust, not reverence for "accepted dogmas." At the conclusion of an essay entitled "Books," Emerson made that principle the basis for a thoroughly egalitarian model of book reviewing: in place of deference to critical expertise, he imagined a "literary club" in which members would "report" on a book, after which each listener would "decide whether this is a book indispensable to him also." Still, Emerson differentiated the "scholars" who comprised his "club" from the "farmer," the "tradesman," the "attorney," and others. Even in his early writings, he attributed to the former the function—and the special prerogatives—of "delegated intellect." Moreover, by the time Emerson wrote "The Progress of Culture" in 1847, he had begun endorsing a "knighthood of virtue" comprised of the "few superior and attractive men" equipped to "calm and guide" the people. Emerson himself enlisted in that cadre in both the substance and style of his prose. With specific reference to book selection, he offered "practical rules" for reading, mingling homage to personal taste ("Never read anything but what you like") with two other principles that elevated the classics: "Never read any book that is not a year old" and "Never read any but famous books." The heart of "Books" was an annotated list of the authors Emerson found "vital and sporadic"—a roster of "best books" (e.g., the works of the Greeks, Shakespeare, the "Bible of the world") presented without apology or reference. More generally, Emerson's interest in convincing his audience to pursue self-culture shaped his use of a literary strategy David Robinson has called "the Orphic voice": a predilection for the aphoristic sentence, delivered in the form of an "authoritative pronouncement" and "tinged with an aura of mysticism." This sermonlike quality in Emerson's prose reinforced the benefits of his tutelage and counsel in order to guarantee "the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture." Thus, the Emersonian contribution to definitions of the cultural person sustained earlier conceptions of refinement even as it strove to overturn the rationalistic theology which buttressed them. It looked forward as well to the stance of a slightly younger generation of critics and reformers—to those writers who, between the Civil War and the turn of the twentieth century, so insistently applied genteel structures to literature and society that they have come to be known, collectively, as the major codifiers of the "gentle tradition." As American poets and editors—Richard Watson Gilder, E. C. Stedman, Richard Stockard—who excluded prudishness and superficiality. But the Boston wing of the group, and the New York component which identified with it, were more intellectually rigorous and substantial. The "Bramah" version of gentility, expressed in such institutions as the North American Review, the Atlantic Monthly, and the Saturday Club, bridged both the Unitarian and transcendentalist viewpoints. Among the chief representatives, Charles Eliot Norton, the son of Andrews Norton, best symbolized the tie to Unitarianism, yet Norton managed to couple his disdain for the blandness of late transcendental thought with an affectionate respect for Emerson and a sense of their mutual connection to the Boston milieu. Together with such colleagues as George William Curtis, James Russell Lowell, Frederick Law Olmsted, and E. L. Godkin, Norton perpetuated the association of culture and character while strengthening the position of the writer as educator of public taste. As the central link in the Anglo-American chain of intellectuals David H. Hill has labeled the "Victorian connection," Norton provides the clearest reminder that the genteel vision of culture was not just a domestic development. Emerson's travels in England during the 1830s and 1840s, when he visited James Russell Lowell and Arthur Hugh Clough, helped pave the way for Norton's transatlantic relationships with both of those writers. Norton also befriended, among others, John Morley, Leslie Stephen, and Goldwin Smith. Those figures shared with Norton and his circle a commitment to John Stuart Mill's liberalism; they assigned to the "best men" (the themselves) the task of freeing society at large from superstition, conformity, meadlorness, and debilitating economic competition. The culture, from their perspective, was thoroughly severed from any automatic association with wealth; rather, its diffusion held the greatest promise of counteracting materialism. Thus equipped, individuals could resist the temptations thrown up by the pace and pressures of a rapidly changing world. "To restore the balance of our lives, in these
days of baste, novelty, and restlessness," Norton wrote in 1869, "there is need of a larger infusion into them of pursuits which have no end of immediate publicity or instant return of tangible profit—of pursuits which . . . should introduce us into the fraser, tranquil, and more spacious world of noble and everlasting truth." While Norton himself was no stranger to showmanship in the classroom, he still presumed a correlation between inward culture and outward manner: there is a "great need of men who may keep up the standard of cultivation," he declared in 1874, "without aiming at the cheap personal distinction for which men strive."

Character remained a synonym for culture in the vocabulary of this international community. Norton advised C. C. Stillman in 1869 to render "service" to others in the form of "influence" by "force of character." Elsewhere, he used the term to summarize the end of education as "the development of the breadth, serenity, and solidity of mind . . . the attainment of that complete self-possession which finds expression in character." That language—especially the phrase "complete self-possession"—indicted Norton's formulation, like Emerson's, with the capacity for independent choice associated with autonomy. But Norton's reference to "breath" also deserves special mention as an allusion to a relatively new and increasingly troubling phenomenon: the rise of specialization. Norton, who lived long enough into the early twentieth century to see professionalization in full swing, wrote James Loeb in 1907: "It is a great pity that so many of our American scholars, old and young, have preferred the methods which lead only to the acquisition of facts often of no importance, to those which lead to the nobler cultivation of the intelligence and of the taste, and to the appreciation of the true ends of the study of language and of literature." James Russell Lowell summarized the issue metaphorically: "Special culture is the gymnastic of the mind, but liberal culture is healthy exercise in the open air." Thus, members of the genteel tradition took a stand as unreconstructed gentiles, appropriating culture and character as weapons in their cause.

Perhaps even more important in the lexicon of the "Victorian connection" was "discipline," which was closely allied with the notion of "training." Both words figured in Norton's 1867 definition of culture as "whatever discipline or training fits a man to make the best use of all his faculties"; the latter appeared as well in Thomas Wentworth Higgin-son's pronouncement that "culture is the training and finishing of the whole man." Similarly, E. L. Godkin described culture as "the breaking-in of the powers to the service of the will." In particular, "discipline" and "training" described the means by which the literary critic gained both ethical and aesthetic discrimination. Those qualities were as inter- twined for mid-Victorian genteel intellectuals as for their Unitarian predecessors. Norton's chief concern was that critics take responsibility for the "condemnation of pretension and inaccuracy, of false reasoning, and corrupting thought." This capacity to join "uprightness of character and justness of mind," Norton made clear, demanded "long and careful preparation"; the "ideal critic"'s powers had to be "trained" by "faithful study" of "the best products of literature in ancient and modern times."

But while Norton believed that beauty was "the ultimate expression and warrant of goodness," he demanded that criticism make not only "thought accurate" but also "perception fine." That is, as they defined "the best," he and his colleagues, for all their moralism, insisted, in Daniel Aaron's phrase, "on the centrality of style, structure, form, clarity—on the craft of writing."

Hence, Norton valued Dante's use of language as much as his didactic message. Similarly, Higginson, in an 1897 essay entitled "Literature as an Art," identified stylistic attributes—"simplicity," "freshness," and "choice of words"—as the qualities that lifted books to the "domain of pure literature." Critical "training" encompassed acquiring the ability to read a variety of works with "delicacy of feeling" and "insight of imagination." As Lowell explained, a "true scholar" learned to appre- ciate Wordsworth "for his depth of sympathy with nature," Herbert "for the naked picturesqueness of his style," and Herrick for his "sensuous paganism." In short, in addition to ethical awareness, culture meant, in Higginson's words, educating "one's aesthetic perceptions to the very highest point."

These imperatives, moreover, did not simply govern the genteel critics' private sensibilities. The emphasis on moral and aesthetic "training" shaped their understanding of their public roles as well. Their purpose, as they saw it, was not just to exemplify culture but to replicate it in others—to help readers replace what Olmsted called the "lack of habits of discipline" with a grasp of the "standards" that would enable them to discern the "best." Thus, for example, Norton in the 1860s created a series of anthologies—the Heart of Oak Books—to help instill "a taste for good reading," an objective he connected with mas-
tering "control of the will" and "the quickening and growth of the most sympat{ies." Conveying his sense of mission, Norton described the office of critic as one of "public instruction," Lowell called it "a kind of priesthood."99

Both of those images rested on a paradox at the heart of the learning experience: that people in search of self-reliance could attain it only by becoming dependent on a superior authority outside themselves. The politics of Norton's circle expressed that paradox. Gentle leader liberalism, grounded as it was in a belief in individual freedom, entailed a commitment to the "interest of democracy"; yet, increasingly, the "Vatican connection" concluded that, without the guidance of an educated minority, the majority would all too readily find itself entrapped in what Norton labeled a "paradise of mediocrities." To ensure, in Norton's words, "the success of democratic institutions" required "the intellectual and moral training of the people" by an elite imbued with a sense of "patriotic duty." In that spirit, genteel critics made rigorous judgment the heart of their enterprise. To shrink from asserting their expertise—to exude "good nature" instead—was to shun "the great enemy of excellence in literature and reform in politics."10

One member of that self-appointed elite—Matthew Arnold—so fully epitomized the transatlantic genteel tradition that the term "Arnoldian," can stand as a summary of its attitudes toward culture, character, discipline, training, democracy, and critical authority. Arnold's thought was not initially as important to Norton and his colleagues as Mills; nor, when he launched his attacks on American society in the 1880s, did it always find favor among those who applauded his literary criticism. Yet eventually Arnold became the most influential disseminator of the genteel aesthetic. As he himself admitted, "I shall not go so far as to say of Mr. Arnold that he invented [culture], but he made it more definite than it had been before—he vivified and lighted it up." Arnold's famous definition of culture as "the best that has been thought and said in the world" became a slogan for allegiance to "standards," reverence toward the classics, and deference to critics skilled at sorting edifying books from the useless or harmful. Arnold's other well-known injunction, to pursue "sweetness and light," conveyed his double concern with beauty and truth. Like his American counterpart, he set those qualities over against materialism, or what he called the "faith in machinery" accompanying industrialization. An alternative as well to the mere display of "outward gifts and graces," culture was, finally, a barrier against the ultimate lack of discipline—the "abnormal" that stemmed from "doing what one's ordinary self likes" rather than pursuing the "best."12

Arnold's plan for resisting that threat captured the essence of the genteel tradition's politics: he proposed to "do away with classes" by designating "the great men of culture" as "the true apostles of equality." Such individuals, Arnold claimed in a key passage, "are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best form of their time; who have labored . . . to humanize [knowledge], to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and learned, yet still remaining the best knowledge and thought of the time." The last phrase was crucial: while Arnold's brigade of critics was always to remain engaged with the public, it was not to let its mediating function interfere with its converted knowledge of judgment. What is more, though he championed pedantry, Arnold made it clear that the process of pursuing perfection would not admit shortcuts; culture was "an object not to be gained without books and reading," which demanded "disinterested and active" attention.13

Armed with those convictions, Arnoldian intellectuals established museums, parks, symphony orchestras, and libraries. As Hall reminds us, Olmsted's career was a prime example of the "passion for diffusing": he not only designed Central Park but also served as a trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Along with Norton and Godkin, he was especially committed, as chapter 2 will relate, to inculcating genteel values through the mechanism of the "higher," or noncommercial, journalism. In that way, Arnoldian critics transmitted and solidified all of the premises that came to animate Hamilton Wright Mabie's Ladies' Home Journal correspondent. Her anxiety was a measure of their success.14

**Instruments of Diffusion—and Subversion**

As genteel critics and reformers joined novelists, theologians, and philosophers in shaping a nineteenth-century ideology of culture, the institutions they founded took their place alongside other agencies.
which served as sources for refinement or sites at which it could be calibrated. One such testing ground was the theater or the concert hall. Lawrence W. Levine has forcefully insisted that, in the antebellum period, popular audiences routinely embraced performances that later came to be seen exclusively with "high" culture. Shakespeare, for example, was as much a part of the working-class world as folktales about Davy Crockett. Shakespearean language and style accorded with the spirit of the camp meeting, the melodrama, and the political debate. Burlesqued and revised to meet the needs of the time, Shakespeare was integrated into the cultural life of the nation as a whole. Levine has related a similar story about opera, which at first absorbed such eclectic materials as popular tunes, sword fights, and hand renditions. Only later, in his view, after Armistadian elites engaged in the "sacralization of culture," did the stage and the opera hall come to exhibit the divisions between "high" and popular art twentieth-century Americans customarily draw. This argument contains a valuable warning against impugning to the uninitiated the analytical categories of the present. Yet, for all its merits, Levine's interpretation is still a picture of a one-way street. If, as is now clear, Shakespeare was not the exclusive property of an educated minority, the fact remains that, even in the years before the 1860s, when matters were more fluid, the exuberant spectacles of the popular stage were never permissible entertainments for aspirants to respectability. Those Americans sought from the early 1880s a theater of "refined sentiment" that blended decorum, obedience to authority, and reverence for European forms. As Levine himself has related, a figure like Washington Irving, for example, felt at odds with the frequenters of the gallery, who annoyed him by making animal noises and other disruptive sounds. To respond instead with polite applause was to differentiate oneself from the unenlightened. Richard Bushman's appraisal of the relationship between the vernacular and the genteel in the eighteenth century applies to the later period as well: "Exchange and assimilation went on constantly, but the porosity of the boundaries does not mean that no boundaries existed." It is true that, gradually, entrance juggling routines were excluded from evenings of Shakespearian, the opera became isolated from other musical events, and symphony orchestra conductors made a virtue of remoteness from the untrained listener. These developments, however, reflected not as much a new religion of culture as the elaboration of a doctrine that had long had faithful adherents. A second source of refinement—although it also had other consequences—was the burgeoning American publishing business. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, changes in technology and distribution methods made possible a revolution in the manufacture and sale of books and periodicals. The introduction of such innovations as the power-driven cylinder press and new paper-making machinery dramatically lowered the cost of book production. Improvements in transportation and communication, together with the consolidation and recolligation of the industry, made publishing after 1840 more and more a national, rather than a local, activity. Those developments eroded what remained of the authority of "steady sellers"—the devotional texts that had formed the core of traditional literacy in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England; they engendered in its place an abundant print culture characterized by the casual, widespread reading of fiction, journalism, and instructional volumes on myriad subjects. Publishers marketed books by subscription through traveling agents or mail order advertising to help satisfy the demand for such works. Undergirding the efforts of etiquette writers, Unitarians, and Armistadians alike, the transformation of publishing assisted the democratization of gentility by exposing more people to its moral and aesthetic ideals. That is, the market permitted what might be called a process of "desacralization," facilitating Arnold's directive to spread the "best" throughout society. From the beginning, the spread of print also carried an attendant risk: that audiences, misappropriating or even ignoring their genteel instructors' meaning and intentions, would seize on cheap novels rather than serious literature. Until the 1860s, however, proponents of culture tended to emphasize only the positive side of the publishing revolution. For example, Channing hailed "the multiplication of books, and their distribution through all conditions of society" as a force for "an unspeakable good to the individual" and the "stability of nations" alike. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the "desacralization" fostered by an expanding American book trade gained even more momentum. In the absence of an international copyright law, reprint "libraries" offering inexpensive editions of fiction mushroomed in the 1870s and 1880s. The distribution of such works through newsdealers as
well as book sellers added to their accessibility. Similarly, between 1815 and 1805 almost eleven thousand different periodicals were published in the United States. In roughly the same period—1850 to 1900—American book publishers produced a threefold increase in titles and adopted new, aggressive marketing techniques to peddle them to the public. Sales of books by subscription agents also continued to multiply. The growth of lending libraries made this surplus readily available to book borrowers as well as purchasers. Even when these trends tended to present refinement in unashamedly commodified values by dispersing them. The editors of popular periodicals, John Casson has written, "participated in the commercialization of American culture; but in their public purposes they resolutely directed their gaze above the coarse and vulgar realities of everyday life to the lofty reality of the ideal." Varieties of mass image reproduction—photographs, print engravings—could likewise serve to familiarize audiences with the genteel aesthetic.

At the same time, the expansion of publishing, by making it more difficult to discern "the best" amid the mountains of volumes published, partially enhanced the stature of genteel critics. As experts came to be viewed as the antithesis to bewilderment, Americans cried for more public officials and educators as advisers about book selection. Noah Porter's "Popular Books and Reading: Or What Books Shall I Read? and How Shall I Read Them?" (1871) was a response to that mandate. Porter's volume was characteristically reassuring: he issued his edicts about appropriate books in the unequivocal, definitive tone that Godkin and Arnold prescribed for disseminating literary judgments. The promised guidance inhered as well in later anthologies and collections of essays like Norton's Heart of Oak series and Charles Dudley Warner's thirty-volume Library of the World's Best Literature (1867), to which Norton contributed an article.

Yet Arnoldian critics were increasingly aware after 1870 that the spread of print could subvert as well as consolidate their authority. As recalcitrant audiences evaded genteel control by grabbing up "trash," Lowell observed: "It may well be questioned whether the invention of printing, while it democratized information, has not also leveled the ancient aristocracy of thought. . . . It has supplanted a strenuous habit of thinking with a loose indulgence of reading which relaxes the muscular..."
principle the advocates of practicability and research rejected a curricu-
um devoted entirely to specialized learning. "We must beware," Hop-
kirk's president Daniel Cott Gilman warned, "test we make our school, technical instead of liberal, and impart a knowledge of methods rather than principles." Many university presidents not only continued to champion the character ideal but also embodied it. Both Eliot (who was Norton's cousin) and Gilman radiated independence, moral virtue, and reason. Similarly, Robert LaFollette pronounced University of Wiscon-
sin president John Bascom "a man much of (Emerson's) type, both in appearance and in character." While the president's symbolism of pro-
fessional accomplishment aided the proponents of utilitarianism by contributing to modern conceptions of "career," their model equally served to reinforce the idea that the purpose of college education was the shaping of the "inner man."

In addition, there remained a group of educators who more actively opposed specialization: the partisans of "liberal culture." Giving "men-
tal discipline" a cosmopolitan, secular turn, this faction essentially represented the academic wing of the genteel tradition. As a member of the Harvard faculty, Norton was, of course, in this category; so, too, was his colleague Barrett Wendell. But numerous other instructors, at places like Williams and Amherst, Yale and Princeton, also resisted the attractions of scientism and the pressure for expediency. Instead, they offered students the opportunity to become exemplars of broad knowl-
edge, humanistic feeling, and proper conduct. The introduction of the elective system in the 1870s—which Eliot spearheaded—encouraged the advocates of specialization and research as the dominant influence on the nation's campuses, fortifying the university's capacity to under-
nine genteel values. Nevertheless, American higher education still offered to the proponents of "liberal culture" an opportunity for diffus-
ing their generalist creed. Believers but steadfast, those professors continued to defend their belief that the classroom was to be a refuge from narrow vocational concerns and a "retreat" from mediocrity and materialism.

A fourth institution—the public lecture system in which Channing and Emerson partipated—complemented the university by serving as a source of culture for a broader audience than the privileged population of Massachusetts. Locally sponsored between 1830 and 1845, and part of a growing national network thereafter, public lec-
tures appeared at such forums as Lyceums, mechanics' institutes, and, later, Young Men's Mercantile Libraries and Chautauquas. Although its literature occupied a significant proportion of the lecturers' subject matter, the system as a whole tended to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge rather than the accumulation of edifying information. Because all knowledge might someday be useful, mid-nineteenth-century lecture-
givers voraciously amassed disparate collections of facts—some about topics as remote from "the best that has been thought and said in the world" as "The Honey Bee" or "Chemistry Applied to the Mechanical Arts."

Moreover, like the dissemination of advice about speech and conduct, and the spread of print generally, public lecturing allowed people to adopt refined behavior without undergoing the process of moral de-
velopment the lecturers themselves had in mind. Emerson's addresses were a case in point. For one thing, because he was often judged difficult to understand, his audiences were smaller for topics like "Books" than for apparently practical subjects like "Wealth." But, in addition, by the 1850s some of Emerson's listeners at his more popular readings were transforming his critique of American materialism into maxims for commercial success. The more he gained in celebrity, the more it became possible to regard mere attendance at his lectures as proof of cultivation.

Despite these features, however, the lecture system also expressed and shared with genteel premises in several ways. First, lecture audi-
ces typically demanded that facts be interpreted—that speakers present them in a manner capable of inspiring as well as educating and refining. Thus, listeners evinced some desire for a refined sensibility as well as a command of data. Second, in terms of personnel, many of the best-known figures on the lecture circuit were also eminent in genteel literary circles: not only Emerson but Lowell, George William Curtis, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and, representing the New York con-
tingent of the same tradition, the popular poet and travel lecturer 
Bayard Taylor. Their roles as acclaimed speakers enlarged their cultu-
ral authority. Most important, the lyceum movement, at least in the antebellum period, shared with the genteel ideology of culture a com-
mon assumption about the self. That is, the popular lecture served the process of "individual self-creation": it promised not to equip listeners with job skills but, rather, to endow them with the resourcefulness and
inner strength the boundless conditions of American life seemed to require. Although lecturers’ messages could be applied in ways at odds with genteel expectations, the mid-nineteenth-century view of “useful knowledge” rented on and reinforced the conviction that self-reliance was possible.  

Further Challenges to Self-Reliance and Liberal Learning

By the late 1890s, however, even as the theater, the publishing industry, the university, and the lecture system were continuing to strengthen genteel definitions of character and culture, accelerating forces in American society were challenging that faith in self-reliance and intensifying the problem of reconciling audiences. On the broadest level, mass immigration, urbanization, and industrialization severely limited the extent of compliance with genteel structures. New immigrants, holding fast to their heritages, often remained impervious to the efforts of genteel critics to impose “discipline” and “standards.” Along with other urban workers, they flocked instead to amusement parks, dance halls, vaudeville shows, and similar forms of uninhibited popular entertainment. Likewise, as immigrants and workers gained political power, they threatened traditional patterns of deference to white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Beginning in the 1890s, ethnic groups demanded representatives sensitive to their quest for the American dream—a quest carried out on their own terms. In response, both upper- and middle-class Americans, Levine has written, felt lost in a “new universe of strangers,” beset by “a sense of anarchic change, of looming chaos, of fragmentation.”

More specifically, the inhabitants of that universe experienced growing difficulty sustaining a belief in the autonomous self. Technological advance created a diffuse malaise about “overcivilization”; the intrusion of doubt into Protestantism weakened its call to duty as well as its theological framework; and the rise of an interdependent national market made it more difficult to believe that anyone could be “self-made.” In this context, even Norton lamented that “the man of to-day . . . cannot get along alone” and was more “helpless” than his predecessors. Yet, to the end of his life, Norton was guided by a conviction that “self-possession” was desirable and attainable. By contrast, many fin-

d-self observers concluded, in Jackson Lears’ words, that “modern man seemed to lack any irreducible core of individuality; selfhood consisted only in a series of manipulable social masks.” William Dean Howells summarized that view in a memorable analogy: human beings were like onions—“nothing but hulls, that you keep peeling off, one after another, till you think you have got down to the heart at last, and then you have got down to nothing.”

To reintroduce Emerson’s terminology, by the turn of the century “other direction” tended to supplant “inner direction”; concomitantly, the character ideal gave some ground to a vision of the self predicated on “personality.” Although they shared with representatives of character an interest in self-development, exemplary personalities (as the word was most widely used after the early 1900s) sought “growth” for its own sake. Instead of achieving “self-control,” they attained “self-realization” and “self-expression” by the therapeutic release of emotion. “Letting go” and the pursuit of intense experience through immersion in “real life” superseeded boundlessness and restraint. In that sense, the emphasis on personality lodged a protest against the potential for the culture of character to discourage spontaneity and sensuousness. At the same time, successful personalities continually sought confirmation that they were on the road to “well-being” by gauging the responses of others. The man of woman with “magnetism” and attractiveness knew how both to please and to stand out from the crowd. Thus, while it contained laudable elements of liberation, the advice manual author’s declaration that “Personality is the quality of being Somebody” entailed its own form of repression: enslavement to the judgment of other people—with Nobody inside.

Two caveats are in order here: one about context, the other about chronology. To begin with, the concept of personality as what V. S. Pritchett described as “an endless series of successful gestures” did not always or exclusively capture the meaning writers who employed the word had in mind. As already noted, the Unitarians invoked the term in their call for service to divinity. Similarly, the Protestant theologian Walter Rauschenbusch upheld the commitment to character development but labeled it “personality,” or “the fullness of humanity that permits breadth of sympathy and maturity of judgment.” Moreover, Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, and others in the so-called Seven Arts group of intellectuals appropriated the same word to advance the
cause of radical politics, using it to signify their opposition to the stultifying effects of capitalism on creativity. Within that framework, "experience" likewise served spiritual and political purposes larger than individual gratification. John Dewey talked of "self-realization" but saw it through the framework of character; he advocated not a conscious quest for personal growth but a sense of selfhood arising out of moral action undertaken to benefit society as a whole. W. H. Whitman's declaration, in "Democratic Vistas" (1871), that culture "must leave for its spiritual meaning the formation of a typical personality of character" provides a striking reminder of the difficulty of sorting out the associations with the two terms and of taking account of the particular setting in which they appear.62

In addition, as the example of Emerson's lectures audiences shows, even the most common twentieth-century understanding of the imperative to build personality had its nineteenth-century antecedents. Likewise, Emerson's romantic leanings foreshadowed later quests for "real" life. Nor, it must be reiterated, did the notion of character preclude garnering social approval. Still, while its elements were incipient else-where, what Warren Susan called the full-fledged "culture of personality" differed from the official norms of the mid-1800s in two key respects: First, the type of social performance that increasingly preoccupied Americans after the First World War bore no necessary connection to inward traits. Second, the modern seeker of personality typically shed the larger moral justification for self-culture that figures like Channing and Emerson always maintained.

Furthermore, although the precise pernicious involvement was a matter of controversy, the rise of personality as a standard of self-definition was inextricably linked to the expansion of mass consumer culture.63 Beginning in the late nineteenth century, such developments as corporate organization, efficient, large-scale distribution networks, and specialized advertising made an unprecedented variety of goods available to working-class as well as middle-class Americans. That climate of abundance overtook the producers' ethos of scarcity, encouraging instead the search for infinite "growth." That is, the emphasis on control and self-sacrifice attendant on the concept of character served an economy that required continual spending on proliferating goods. Additionally, Lear's has noted, "the therapeutic injunction to 'let go' eased adjustment to the rhythms of life under corporate capitalism"—to a cycle of "degrading" work and "revitalizing" leisure. Perhaps most fundamentally, in the widening consumer culture "the fragmented self became a commodity like any other, to be assembled and manipulated for private gain." In a faceless, corporate milieu, the ability to attract attention and seduce others by constructing "winning images"—to be, in other words, a "confidence man"—acquired greater value than discipline or industry. As part of that process, the fabulization of a performing self equipped to create favorable impressions in variable circumstances came to depend on the acquisition of products and services. By the 1920s and 1930s these included essential leisures, charm courses, and beauty aids. Advertisers made the prospect of self-realization through pleasing others the heart of campaigns for items ranging from home furnishings to toilet paper.64

Again, it would be a mistake to overstate the discontinuity this transformation entailed with respect to ideas of culture, because the essence of "taste" always implied examples of character in consumption. But one feature of the pervasive consumer ethos was that the distinction between "taste" and "fashion" tended to collapse. The same that the self was a series of purchases now sanctioned the inclination to regard culture as one more commodity; the emphasis on projecting images challenged the idea that one's possessions were to reflect an inward self-possession; and the stipulations that buyers should observe restraints, exercise discipline, and foster the moral order were subordinated to an endless search for items that would, above all, supply personal gratification and influence over others.65

A further threat to genteel ideology in the late 1800s arose as the trend toward specialization gathered momentum outside of, as well as within, the university. The rapid expansion of information and the splintering of occupations into discrete pursuits requiring particular skills cast serious doubt on the value of liberal culture altogether and narrowed the definition of "useful knowledge." In a society in which opportunities were increasingly circumscribed by a person's ability to display the learning and credentials that would impress other people, the best course might be not to build the capacity to meet any eventuality but to concentrate one's energies on acquiring immediately practical "know-how." To the extent that Emerson's listeners turned his "Orphic voice" into slogans applicable to business, they revealed this tendency in its nascent stage. By the turn of the century, numerous
other commentators had joined Godkin in bemoaning the "fad of imitation culture" and assailing the clamor for facts that competed with the demand for aesthetic and moral training. James L. Fire's satire on the pursuit of "culture" appropriately depicted the situation in metaphors of comparison and consumption: Americans, he complained, wanted "information...put up in small capsules, and sold in boxes containing one dozen each." These they could swallow in order to project a more attractive self at the dinner table. That frame of mind weakened the authority of generalist critics, whose stance as "experts" broadly versed in liberal learning now verged on a contradiction in terms.26

Arnoldian Criticism as Humanistic Reform

Given the strength of the various challenges to their outlook throughout the nineteenth century, it is easy to see, especially in the American context, a current of fear underneath the Arnoldian critics' principle position. Their insistence on "standards," on the importance of training, and on distinguishing true from false culture appears designed to stave off threats to their own power. Figures like Olmsted and Norton, Levine has explained, seized upon culture as "a life raft in an unpredictable and turbulent sea." Once abroad, they tried to navigate as much as possible according to rules of public decorum—rules which they alone determined. These they attempted to impose on a heterogeneous society at the expense of spontaneity and pluralism. Employed as a bulwark against change, genteel moralism might eventuate in the overweening attention to propriety of which Santayana and Brooks complained; at its worst, it could be used to support racism or claims of Anglo-Saxon superiority.61

Yet, as Levine acknowledges, to construe the genteel tradition entirely in terms of social control is to oversimplify the matter. Arnoldian critics deserve credit for their democratic convictions and their sense of civic responsibility. More than that, a thorough account of their viewpoint demands recognition of the degree to which genteel ideology was itself an attempt to wrest power from an entrenched establishment. Whether they saw themselves as educators or priests, genteel intellectuals were fundamentally reformers. The museums and journals they

sounded were efforts to assert authority apart from existing religious, educational, and literary institutions. Their estrangement from what they saw as the cruder aspects of popular culture militated against their impulse to plunge into the task of reform. But their antiestablishment origins made one thing abundantly clear: in Hall's words, the "Victorian connection" did not "begin with cultural hegemony and live in quiet desperation watching it decline."36

This is not to dismiss the regressive potential the genteel understanding of culture always entailed. Nor is it to ignore that another of its paradox that an exaggeration of the emphasis on "beauty" or form would lead to self-involved decadence.60 Yet, if they veered toward aestheticism, critics such as Norton at least made qualities of mind, rather than dollars in the bank, marks of the successful individual. More broadly, the genteel belief in aesthetic training was essentially humanistic. Grounded as it was in a vision of self-reliance, it presumed the capacity of all readers, once "trained," to grasp the elements of literary style and accorded them a basic right to have their lives enriched in so doing. Lastly, one must recognize that many Americans, themselves adrift in uncharted waters, turned to Arnoldian critics for comfort and guidance not only because they wanted thereby to gratify their desire for prestige or to differentiate themselves from the working class, but also because they sought stability, insight, and pleasure in the books to which they were directed. Although many social historians have often overlooked them, those hopes were as legitimate, as poignant, and as human as any of the fantasies played out at Coney Island or the movies.

Dr. Eliot's Five-Foot Shelf

In any case, the historical processes that undermined nineteenth-century suppositions about self and culture did not so much result in the "decline" or disappearance of the genteel tradition as endow it Arnoldian program with a set of characteristic tensions. While the book clubs, "great books" groups, radio programs, and similar efforts generated in the three decades following World War I offered the fullest view of those conflicts, it is worth a brief look at the most famous predecessor of such middletown forms to see the direction in which things were headed by 1909. This was Charles W. Eliot's "Five-Foot Shelf of Books," also
known as the Harvard Classics. During his Harvard presidency, Eliot had from time to time hypothesized in speeches about a five-foot shelf of books that would furnish a liberal education to anyone willing to devote fifteen minutes per day to reading them. When the publisher Robert Collier proposed that P. F. Collier and Son create such a collection, Eliot agreed to lend his—and Harvard’s—name to the venture, as well as to choose the books for inclusion and prepare an editor’s introduction.

The completed project captured Eliot’s intermediate position as a proponent of the elective system who nonetheless championed education “which broadened the sympathies and opened the mind.” It also marked him as a figure who combined respect for experts with the moralistic insistence that such authorities be “cultured men of old families” committed to “community, duty, and self-sacrifice.” The texts he selected revealed his persistent allegiance to the ancients and to venerable English writers. In his introduction, Eliot reiterated the connection between culture and the mid-nineteenth-century understanding of self-creation, identifying the goal of his reading program as the development of the “liberal frame of mind” that great books “enriched, refined, and fertilized.” The attainment of that goal, he contended, demanded self-sacrifice and “a resolute spirit.” Yet he also identified a liberal education with a list of great books, a more which, to some observers, smacked of the substitution of specific knowledge for a refined sensibility. Additionally, his willingness to quantify the time required for reading suggested cramming rather than training, undermining the idea that culture required sustained effort.

Hence, the early rhetoric surrounding the Harvard Classics satisfied the need for access to “the best” while simultaneously addressing the desire for information and making it consumable. Eliot’s continuing depiction of culture as interior, together with his refusal explicitly to associate learning with ease, signified that the “Five-Foot Shelf of Books” was, as initially conceived, predominantly an index of the taciturnity of genteel strictures, but the apparatus for loosening those strictures was present nonetheless. The same themes surfaced in the early advertising for the volumes. One of the first advertisements featured a portrait of “Dr. Eliot” beneath the banner “The Harvard Classics,” language that both traded on and perpetuated the prestige of the university and the importance of the “best.” Flanking the portrait were two quotations from Eliot, their symmetrical position mirroring the duality underlying the enterprise as a whole: on the right, Eliot’s comment that the “staidness and reflective recipient” of a liberal education would attain a “liberal frame of mind”; on the left, although joined to a qualifying phrase about “re-readings and reminiscences,” the reference to “fifteen minutes a day.” A more famous early advertisement, pictured Eliot reading to his grandson—an allusion, in a different way, to traditional values. The combination was a winning one, the sale of the volumes surpassing Collier’s expectations.

The Post–World War I Situation

By the time Eliot died in 1926, the United States was even more thoroughly and visibly an interdependent, bureaucratic, urban, secular, and mass society than it had been in the late nineteenth century. As numerous writers of the 1920s attested, the word “standardization,” formerly denoting uniformity in the manufacturing process, acquired fearful associations: the demise of the country storekeeper, the sameness of towns flashing by in train windows, the “slick-step” nation simultaneously eating “tabloid” dinners. The ability to muster a successful impression correspondingly seemed more urgent. In consequence, the pressure to acquire information in order to mold personality could easily overwhelm the impetus to build character through reading the classics. Culture, explained Albert Edward Wiggam in The Marks of an Educated Man (1925), involved “getting along with other people,” or “get along-ableness.” Reflecting that premise, the advertisements for Eliot’s volumes in the 1920s and 1930s shed most of their genteel overtones. Some attached purchase of the set to business rewards. But an even more frequent appeal linked an aura of cultivation to the achievement of social success. One advertisement intimated that acquiring the volumes would result in admission to a country club. Another substituted a picture of dinner guests seated around a table for the portrait of Eliot. As Everett Dean Martin described it, “There are two men and a beautiful woman. She is talking to the man on her right, and is evidently fascinated with his brilliant conversation. The man on the left sits dumb and miserable and unnoticed; he cannot join in such sophisticated and scintillating discussion. We are informed that the
poor man has neglected to read his fifteen minutes a day." The ultimate in such pitches appeared in 1932, when an advertisement revealed "How to Get Rid of an Inferiority Complex" by purchasing the set. (Around the same time, a blurb for a two-volume collection of Emerson's writings urged, "To fully realize what magnetism there is in your own personality, read culture, wealth, behavior, power.") Yet, however skewed toward "impression management," those appeals were still predicated on the assumption that readers would benefit—psychically as well as socially—from familiarity with the literary union genteel critics had constructed.63

Whatever the underlying strains the decade encompassed, the booming economy of the 1920s tended, in some quarters, to weaken even that barely Arnoldian stance. "Not long ago," James Truslow Adams noted in 1929, "a despatch from Washington announced that 'the highest standard of living ever attained in the history of the world was reached last year [1926] by the American people.'" That triumph, related not to the disciplined study of the classes but to technological innovation, practicality, and occupational specialization, made it tempting to dismiss culture altogether as irrelevant to success—now defined as the ability to buy consumer goods. This was the "flip side" of the dissociation of culture and wealth: status, one might conclude, belonged not to those refined, dutiful individuals detached from commercial pursuits but to those in business, iterate or not, whose "know-how" showed them to be the masters of modern conditions. The expansion of business education at the nation's universities reflected the new mood. As Adams complained, Arnold's definition of culture was "far removed from that of a degree in Bachelor of Arts to a student who has learned how to truss and dress poultry or has compassed the mysteries of how to sell real estate and run an apartment house."64

Alternatively, if they "bought" it at all, newly rich entrepreneurs, staking their claim to prestige on the basis of wealth alone, might see culture as merely good for the pochette. Intent on convincing the Boosters Club to support a symphony orchestra, Chum Frink explained in Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt: "I don't care a rap for this all-long-haired music. . . . But that isn't the point. Culture has become as necessary an adornment and advertisement for a city today as pavements. . . . The thing to do then, as a live bunch of go-getters, is to capitalize Culture to go right out and grab it."65

But other characteristics of the post–World War I era tended to buttress, rather than to erode, the ideology of culture as it had evolved throughout the nineteenth century. At many universities the ideal of liberal education still held its own, striking an uneasy truce with specialization; it even made something of a comeback at institutions like Harvard and Amherst. Thus, the dramatic rise in the number of college graduates between 1920 and 1929 from a half-million to more than one million meant, if not necessarily an increase in the study of classic texts, at least more exposure to the idea that broad reading was intrinsically worthwhile as well as socially rewarding. Similarly, the doubling of high school enrollment in the same period increased the number of people who wanted "to continue some contact with the better printed word." The continued growth of the book market, which the prosperity of the decade fostered, also made the materials of culture more accessible than ever: American publishers issued over ten thousand new titles a year in 1929, as opposed to just over six thousand in 1900. The shortening of the work week and the spread of the eight-hour day gave at least some parts of the population more opportunity to encounter those titles. To be sure, the book industry worried about competing with automobiles, movies, and radio for Americans' extra leisure hours. Yet radio itself, in the form of literary and other educational programs, also provided "the opportunity to guide reading without the painfulness of the review."66

The contested worth of culture by the interwar period magnified the ambiguities surrounding the role of the literary expert. More than America's well-known anti-intellectualism was involved. The widespread experience of success in the marketplace tended to overturn the presumption that their superior knowledge entitled critics to special treatment from unschooled readers. At the same time, the anonymity of modern life and the anxiety that "standardization" would lead to the "chain-store mind" made it more difficult for experts to insist that the route to autonomy lay in the self-allegation the genteel tradition had demanded. Instead, they increasingly leaned toward perpetuating the fiction, if not the reality, of their audiences' ready-made capacity for independent judgment. Moreover, the political developments of the early twentieth century had rendered the elitist aspect of the genteel outlook less tenable: As Progressives came to terms with pluralism, they heightened both the rhetoric and the practice of democracy; as
nation justified its participation in World War I, it repeatedly invoked the vocabulary of egalitarianism. In this context, critics who asserted "the best" without allowing for a reader's own preferences risked the charge that they were out of step with American values.65 But the conditions for enhancing critical authority were also present. The prestige of experts in the social sciences, at a high-water mark by 1917, continued to spill over into the humanities. Even more than in the nineteenth century, readers overwhelmed by spiraling numbers of book titles required guidance in selecting the "best"—if only to draw the attention of others. The rise of literary modernism, by challenging conventional uses of form and language, presented another source of confusion.

In addition, America's preoccupation with consumption triggered a debate about the nature of "civilization" within its borders. Was it possible, more thoughtful observers wondered, to be simultaneously a consumer society and a repository of artful achievement? Would such a society offer future artists adequate traditions on which to draw? As Adams queried, "Can a great civilization be built up or maintained upon the philosophy of the counting-house and the sole basic idea of a profit?" Harold Stearns's collection of essays Civilization in the United States (1922) was the most famous—and most negative—commentary on those questions. But the issue informed other documents of the period. Alarmed librarians studied American reading habits and urged their colleagues to make serious books more attractive to a straying public. Ironically, because it rested on the desire for increased revenue itself, O. H. Cheney's Economic Survey of the Book Industry, 1899–1931 condemned such entrepreneurial techniques as price-cutting, book-seller "ballyhoo," and the production of "excessive numbers of titles." To the segment of the population which shared those fears of rampant materialism, the critic who offered a way to maintain both affluence and standards commanded respect and gratitude.66

Given that matrix of rival impulses and understandings about culture and criticism, one can thus detect two styles of expertise among the middlebrow authorities of the early twentieth century: one divergent and subjective, the other pontifical and prescriptive. These styles sometimes coexisted in the same individual—just as the institutions to which middlebrow critics attached themselves mingled character and personality, autonomy and the "social mask," aesthetic training and