In his brilliant and polemical *Studies in Seicento Art and Theory* (1947), Denis Mahon identified Johann Joachim Winckelmann, one of the founders of modern art history, as the propagator of the catchword “eclectic”—“that veritable masterpiece of concise meaninglessness”—in a small work published in 1763, *Abhandlung von der Fähigkeit der Empfindung des Schönen in der Kunst, und dem Unterrichte in Derselben*. Winckelmann employed the term to denote the imitators of classical art; like the late Hellenic eclectic philosophers, these classical artist-imitators (*der Nachahmer*) caught reflections of the original masters in the inevitable cyclical movement of styles and forms through the centuries. Drawing an explicit parallel between *der Nachahmer* of late antiquity and the Baroque artists of recent history, Winckelmann initiated what in Mahon’s view would become a central misunderstanding in the history of art: the Carracci would play the part of the modern Nachahmer. In other words, according to Mahon, the dominant figures of Baroque art would carry the stigma of eclectic impurity and decadence. Their supposed theory of “selection” combined with an “erudite-sounding watchword” doomed the Carracci to the category of reactionaries out of touch with their times in the modern, individualist romance of the history of art.

As Mahon saw it, the “legend” of an Eclectic School in the seventeenth century arose from a misapplication of classical art theory (on the part of
Winckelmann) to actual works of art. Classical theory “should be looked upon in light of a propagandist polemic on behalf of a minority preserving a legitimist descent: an interpretation of art [. . . ] rather than an active principle animating it” (Mahon 197). Reduced to the confusing, imprecise, and negative term “eclectic,” the complicated style of the Carracci, developed from a myriad of influences, was lost, Mahon believed, in a theoretical fog. He conceded that the confusion over the Carracci’s use of theory began almost immediately, with their first biographers, Giovanni Battista Agucchi and Giovanni Pietro Bellori. While Mahon attempted to raise the reputation of the Carracci family by distancing them from theories imposed on their artistic productions after the fact (as he thought), earlier critics found reason to praise the Bolognese painters’ profound learning and its deployment in their art.

Mahon’s attitude toward eclecticism, and “classic theory,” was typically post-Romantic and widespread by the middle of the twentieth century. In 1960, in terms similar to those employed by Mahon in his defense of Baroque painting, the art historian Lincoln Rothschild attempted to find an interpretation of style that would “establish direct connections between the forms of artistic expression and the patterns of human life” (6). In trying to account for those periods in which the arts did not seem to reflect the prevailing spirit of the age, Rothschild enumerated four conditions under which the link between art and society might be weakened or even severed: first, during “transitions of growth” in which extremes of style passed through a middle ground; second, “transitions of change, in which vestiges of previous sophistication are inevitably involved in the formulation of new expression”; third, provincialism, in which artists tried “to reproduce a style away from the metropolitan center”; and fourth, eclecticism (112). While artistic products of the first three categories still fit neatly into Rothschild’s evolutionary model, clearly, the offspring of eclecticism did not. Rothschild’s vehement rejection of eclecticism establishes an important link between eclecticism and varieties of conservatism on the one hand, and between eclecticism and capitalism on the other:

A considerable variety of social maladjustments will support eclectic cultural expression as a mask or shell that may be donned complete, with little reference to the inhabitant shape. A ready-made culture suits people of immature responsibility, who can enjoy effortless leisure, freedom from necessary activity or obligation. Eclectic pretensions also frequently cast art in the role of shield or apologist for leadership entrenched beyond the limits of its social usefulness, or actively predatory and antisocial, like the personal elegance notoriously affected by racketeering gangsters; or the
Rothschild aimed his righteous indignation at two groups in particular: the newly rich, whose adoption of a “ready-made culture” or mimicry of an official or, worse, authentic culture proved that they “regard[ed] art as a pretentious assertion”; and the aristocracy, whose capacity to produce an authentic art had long since evaporated along with its “social usefulness.” After ridiculing consumers of culture for preferring eclectic art, Rothschild turned his attention back to the producers of culture. Artists who adhered to classical models were by definition eclectic and, ultimately, irrelevant. Eclecticism was generalizing, uncommitted, and vague; it was hypocritical, conforming, and weak.

While critics such as Rothschild and Mahon made “eclectic” and “eclecticism,” for a time, practically unusable terms in the history of art, the postmodern sensibility has again made it possible to examine critically the significance of eclectic periods in the history of art, architecture, and philosophy. The neglect of the term is not particularly surprising, in light of the critical and historical controversy I have just been recounting. What is surprising is that no other term has been advanced to replace it that would also describe the peculiar conditions surrounding the invention, production, and propagation of nineteenth-century art and literature. Rothschild wanted to disallow any link between eclecticism and cultural evolution; and yet the historical pattern emerging from an examination of eclecticism across cultures and across the arts suggests that it arises consistently in those times and places where there is a sense of cultural loss or stagnation and that it becomes the method by which artists and thinkers grope their way back to confidence and even, finally, to originality.

What Is Eclecticism?
Reconsidering Winckelmann’s Interpretation of the Carracci

The salient facts of the Carracci history tend to support the traditional eclectic-theoretical interpretation. Most critics writing before Mahon agree that the Carracci rejected the antinaturalistic, or Mannerist, style that was popular in the second half of the sixteenth century. They advocated
a return to the style and the principles of the High Renaissance and the painters they admired: Titian, Correggio, Raphael, and Michelangelo. To promote these principles among the young artists of Bologna, Ludovico Carracci founded the Accademia degli Incaminati (Enggass xi). According to Frank Mather in his 1923 *History of Italian Painting*, the Carracci Academy was influenced and anticipated by the Belgian Denis Calvert’s academy founded at Bologna on the same principles and with the same fund of “nostalgia for Renaissance grandeur” (458–59). These schools used then-progressive methods of comparative study, such as casts and engravings, in attempting to identify and assimilate the perfections of past masters.

Annibale Carracci, considered by most contemporaries to be the greatest painter of the family, carefully studied the methods of Raphael, Tintoretto, and Correggio, and was “launched on the impossible quest of combining with the austere grandeur of the Roman School, the charm of Venetian coloring and the emotional instability of Correggio. [...] It was an attempt dictated by the times, and the inevitable choice of any superior spirit who wished to reknit the Renaissance tradition” (Mather 459). Lending support to the Carracci method, Agucchi, a contemporary of the Carracci, observed the successful operation of this principle in Renaissance art. *Idea* was the path to perfection for modern artists. As Rensselaer Lee explains, “Idea for Agucchi is an image of embellished nature which the painter forms in his mind by the empirical process of selecting the best from many objects” (206). In Agucchi’s view, the Mannerists precipitated a decline in taste because they relied on their own imagination, on fantasia; the Carracci restored painting, through idea, by following the antique and assimilating its perfections. Bellori closely followed Agucchi’s line on the Carracci, fifty years later. An intellectual and antiquarian, Bellori was profoundly interested in artistic theory and praised the Carracci for achieving an idealized form of beauty, “nature perfected.” The imitation of the ancients, who had “most fully grasped” “eclectical empiricism,” would lead modern painters to “the perfect combination of nature and art.” According to Bellori and others, Annibale had solved one of the stylistic dilemmas of the seicento by uniting disegno and colore, by combining technical perfection with fresh painterly colors (Enggass xvi). Carlo Cesare Malvasia praised the Eclectics in 1678 for taking the best from all the best artists, “form[ing] from them a brief compendium, rather a precious extract, outside of and beyond which little remained for the studious to desire,” and forming from all these styles one of their own which had nothing to envy in all the others (qtd. in Mather 471). Unlike Mahon, who wants to validate the unique style of Annibale by resisting the eclectic interpretation, earlier historians
of art approved it and could still allow for the development of a new style within the Carracci’s critical endeavor: Baroque Classicism—the perfect unity of line and color, painting informed by knowledge.

As Rensselaer Lee points out in his review of Mahon, neither Winckelmann nor the Carracci’s earlier critics would have considered their eclecticism a bad thing. The role of the Nachahmer was, in their view, admirably fulfilled: “When all reservations are made, the Eclectics had fairly done their work of correcting the disorder of the late Renaissance and of restoring something of the old decorum. They made possible the revival of the grand style at Rome, in the eighteenth century. [ . . . ] The Eclectics were the bridge by which the classical manner passed over into Western Europe, an indispensable link in the chain of the great Hellenistic tradition” (Mather 469). When Winckelmann explained more fully the use of “Eclectici” to describe the Carracci in his Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums (1764), he noted their resemblance to the philosophers of late antiquity “who [ . . . ] tried to combine the ideas of previous schools, owing to their lack of vitality” (qtd. in Wittkower 152). Far from denouncing the art of the Carracci, Winckelmann rather offered up “eclectic” as an interpretation of their particular historical situation: they collected and summarized the systems of their more talented predecessors.

For centuries the concept of genius was compatible with the practice of imitation. This relationship survived as long as imitation remained free of the taint of eclecticism. Though Winckelmann may indeed have been the first to perceive Carracesque imitation as eclectic, he yet believed that imitation (and, by extension, eclecticism) was the proper course to the revival of art. His famous pronouncement—“The only way for us to become great or, if this be possible, inimitable, is to imitate the ancients” (Reflections 5)—bears all the contradictions of his age. As Walter Pater would later recognize, Winckelmann’s classicism constituted a form of rebellion against the prevailing artistic culture of his day. To return to the source of culture (Greece, of course, for Winckelmann) and to partake of its vitality even in reflection might suffice to bring beauty back to art. In basic agreement with the theories of selection current for two centuries, Winckelmann believed “that the imitation of the Greeks [could] teach us to become knowledgeable more quickly, for it shows us on the one hand the essence of what is otherwise dispersed through all of nature, and, on the other, the extent to which the most perfect nature can boldly, yet wisely, rise above itself” (21). The greatest artists of the Renaissance had “to first feel and to discover in modern times the true character of the ancients” (39), and this recovery of an outlook no longer inevitable in modern times enabled them to produce an art both of their age and superior to it. Commentators
who wished to denigrate the productions of post-Renaissance artists would say that they were mere copyists, never getting at the ideal that the Greeks captured and that Michelangelo recaptured. “Imitation” in Winckelmann has frequently been understood as the “ancient Greek method by which general ideas of beauty led ultimately to the realization of the ideal” (Fried 90), while “copying” was thought to mean the realistic portrayal of a particular object. More recently, however, the art historian Michael Fried has brought to light an often-overlooked passage from the *Reflections* that should reverse our traditional prioritizing of imitation and copying. In the section Henry Fuseli titled (in his translation) “Workmanship in Sculpture,” Winckelmann tries to imagine how the Greeks managed to transfer their models from wax to marble, exactly reproducing the form of the wax model. The Greeks’ elusive perfection, Winckelmann seems to say, resides in a moment of copying, not of imitating, the ideal. Without the ability to make the perfect copy, the entire enterprise would have been a failure. Fried argues that Winckelmann does not therefore denigrate the “workmanship” of sculpture, as Fuseli seems to do, but values it as an absolutely integral part of the process of creating “inimitable” art—art that is deserving of imitation (94).

The theoretical interpretation of the Carracci that has now become so disreputable originated with the understanding that in order to accomplish the restoration of painting, the Carracci must have followed two important precepts: they had to study, copy, and accept as guides the models of the past, and they had to draw upon the traditional subject matter supplied by poets and historians, whether past or present (Lee 207). The only alternatives seemed to be the direct imitation of nature (practiced by Caravaggio) or the direct transmission of the image in the mind (practiced by the Mannerists). Was painting then only the “poor relation” of literature, destined to remain forever a subordinate art? Mahon affirms that “Whether or not [painting] made its mark was to a certain degree contingent on the amount of learning and erudition displayed; hence tradition and precedent played a considerable part” (159). The “academic” view of painting identified here was, according to Lee, “an accepted and even prevailing point of view among critics and amateurs of art at the beginning of the century just as it was Bellori’s at the middle and end” (207). When “academic” is equated with “eclectic” and “eclectic” with Annibale, however, Mahon and Lee part company: Mahon concludes that the classic-idealistic theory was retrospective in character, that it could not “have been the driving force behind any artistic movement” (196), and that the Carracci were not especially eclectic compared with Raphael or with Poussin (painters who are never saddled with the derogatory term). By contrast, Lee contends that
the Carracci were familiar with artistic theory that “counseled the method of eclecticism as part of a program for the improvement of the art of painting in what they considered its present state of decline” and that “Winckelmann, who followed Seicento opinion in this matter, was essentially right when he first named them eclectics and [. . . ] there is still justification for so regarding them today” (211). Thus, Lee considers eclecticism as a way of operating (at a particular moment in history) and the Carracci method of painting as eclectic; while for Mahon, the issue turns on whether eclecticism can have any descriptive utility.3

Conveying little more than a general censure of seicento art, especially of the Carracci, the term “eclectic” has for a good many years dropped out of use in academic art history. Despite strong evidence pointing to the widespread use of eclecticism as a way of operating in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century art, Mahon’s impassioned refusal of “eclectic” as a critical term influenced most writers on the Carracci either to remain silent on the issue or to repeat his reasons for not employing it.4 But Mahon had inadvertently drawn attention to a thorny problem for art historians: when is “selective borrowing” eclecticism, and when is it a means for the display of genius? For Rudolph Wittkower, who is best known for his work, Born Under Saturn, the issue hinges on whether the artist in question borrows silently or makes his borrowing part of a theoretical program: “the most common empirical procedure of art historians is concerned with the tracing of influences and borrowings, [. . . ]. But when confronted with this very issue as an explicit theory, the same art historians paradoxically retract and stigmatize it as eclectic” (“Imitation” 154). But as one defender of the apparently discredited idea of “eclecticism” put it, we should recognize the courage of the Carracci in facing the crisis of late-sixteenth-century art head on. Instead of imitating the masters, the Carracci imitated nature with their guidance; they had to thoroughly understand the masters and understand nature as well.5

Defining eclecticism is notoriously difficult since there is no particular visual or literary style associated with it. Embracing eclecticism as a theory could destroy a reputation, since romantic art history turned the classical theory of selective imitation upside down. But practicing eclecticism has been unavoidable for writers, philosophers, and artists alike at least since the end of the eighteenth century. Derived from the Greek verb eklegein (to select) (Dillon and Long 4), “eclectic” names a process, that of selecting the best from among a collection of things. “Eclectic” as a negative aesthetic judgment can be traced to the particular outlook of Romantic art history in the first half of the nineteenth century. In fact, Mahon blames nineteenth-century art historians such as Henry Fuseli, Franz Kugler, and Charles
Blanc for the dissemination of the Carracci “legend” (and for the family’s subsequent relegation to secondary status in the story of the progress of painting). The Carracci may have served their purpose in the revival of taste, conventional wisdom would utter, but they produced nothing really original. But the Carracci reputation was still vital in this period, and no one writing the history of Italian painting, or tracing the development of revived classicism, could afford to ignore them.

The fragile literary foundation on which the Carracci theory of eclecticism was first erected was little more than an affectionate sonnet presented at the funeral of a fellow painter, Niccolò dell’Abate. It is variously attributed to Annibale, Agostino, or an anonymous friend:

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Whoever a goodly painter seeks to be
Should take the Romans’ drawing to his aid,
Movement from the Venetians, and their shade,
And worthy coloring from Lombardy,
The awesome Michelangelo must see,
The truth to nature Titian has displayed,
The pure and sovereign style Correggio had,
And of a Raphael just symmetry,
Tibaldi’s basis, and his decoration,
Invention of learned Primaticcio’s own,
And just a little grace from Parmigianino.
But leaving so much study and vexation,
Set him to imitate those works alone
Which here were left us by our Niccolino. (Holt 73–74)
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Whether a form of conventional praise for an artist (e.g., he combines the best qualities of all the best painters) or a glimpse into the “ideas [and] critical terms” of the Carracci school, the sonnet is certainly the most damning evidence of Carracci eclecticism as mere cookery. It has nonetheless, and in spite of several incorrect attributions, profoundly influenced the historical judgment of the school at Bologna.² Winckelmann, when he reintroduced the term “eclectic” to describe the Carracci method of painting, picked up the ingredients of the famous sonnet from Malvasia: “They were eclectics and sought to combine the purity of the ancients and of Raphael, the knowledge of Michelangelo, the richness and exuberance of the Venetian school, especially of Paolo Veronese, and the gaiety of the Lombard brush in Correggio” (“Essay on the Beautiful in Art” 99). Having remarked on the decline that preceded the Carracci, Winckelmann contends that although they “must be regarded as imitators,” they did “achieve [...] the fame of
their masters” (99). Henry Fuseli, whose translation of Winckelmann in 1764 introduced the term “eclectic” into English, took a more severe view of the eclectic recipe for success in his lectures to the Royal Academy: “Of such advice, balanced between the tone of regular breeding and the cant of an empiric, what could be the result? excellence or mediocrity? who ever imagined that a multitude of dissimilar threads could compose an uniform texture, that dissemination of spots would make masses, or a little of many things produce a legitimate whole? indiscriminate imitation must end in the extinction of character, and that in mediocrity,—the cipher of art” (II:108–9). Disgusted by what he judged the mechanization of art and the eclipse of originality, Fuseli tried to resist, in his reform of the Royal Academy, the “compendiary method [. . .] which [. . .] has ruined the Arts of every country, by reducing execution to a recipè, substituting manner for style, ornament for substance, and giving admission to mediocrity” (II:388–89). Eclecticism, the “compendiary method” praised by classic-idealists theorists of the previous three centuries, could have played no part in the “real progress of Art” (III:4). For Fuseli, only Genius could advance the cause of Art by the direct perception of Nature and its imperfect trans- mission (III:7–8). Mere craftsmen should, in his view, be asked to leave the Academy (II:388–91). But by making Art the exclusive domain of Genius, Fuseli calls into question the very existence of the academy that supports him (he’d been made professor in 1799). Founded during the waning years of the Renaissance, the academy of art served no purpose but the promo- tion of another rebirth through its criticism, something Fuseli reluctantly admitted: “All, whether public or private, supported by patronage or individual contribution, were and are symptoms of Art in distress, monuments of public dereliction and decay of Taste. But they are at the same time the asylum of the student, the theatre of his exercises, the repositories of the materials, the archives of the documents of our art, whose principles their officers are bound now to maintain, and for the preservation of which they are responsible to posterity, undebauched by flattery, heedless of sneers, undismayed by the frown of their own time” (III:58). That the Eclectic schools had likewise been involved in the maintenance and preservation of the “materials” and “documents” of art apparently escapes Fuseli, who reserves his admiration for productive geniuses whose places in the his- tory of art are secure. That Fuseli recognized in Annibale Carracci the standard for academic art (III:119) and despised him for it speaks volumes about the Royal Academician’s troubled relationship to the art of his own time. He wishes to take up at once the role of the critic and the role of the artist, a dual posturing that would become typical of the eclectic duri- ing the nineteenth century. In the productive slippage between Fuseli’s
criticism and his art production emerges a self-conscious, critical art. For
the Academy to play any role in the future of art, it would have to main-
tain this difficult balance between promotion and invention.

Like Henry Fuseli, Franz Kugler believed that his art criticism would
further the recovery of art in his own age. In his preface to the second
edition of his Handbuch der Geschichte der Malerei seit Constantin dem Gros-

sen (completed by Jacob Burckhardt in 1847), Kugler credits a period of
“wide-spread dilettantism” early in the century with the rediscovery of the
art of the Middle Ages and with the subsequent researches into all periods
of the history of art (iv). Nourished by the “romantic” art thus brought to
light, modern “romantics” yielded to an aesthetic position as extreme as the
classical that had preceded it. If he had needed a reminder that style was a
choice, this was it. Kugler felt that a revised edition of the Handbuch was
necessary to qualify his early intolerant opinions: “The more the sources
of knowledge and judgment enlarged, the more it became apparent that
the modes of conception peculiar to the romantic period had confined our
views within too limited a space, and that even so late as ten years previous-
ously such views had partaken too much of that contracting influence” (iv).
First published in 1837, his Handbook of Painting was enormously influen-
tial in categorizing the different regions and periods of Italian art. His aes-
thetic judgments followed from this taxonomy and were thus immediately
available to amateurs and professionals alike. Though he was not the first
to observe the divergent tendencies in the art of the seicento, he established
definitively the existence of two schools: the Eclectics and the Natural-
ists. Just as he was trying to mediate the extremes of the classical and the
romantic, he tried to lead his readers into a position between eclecticism,
which he regarded as an intense form of idealism, and naturalism: “Each
class exercised in its development a reciprocal influence on the other, par-
ticularly the Naturalisti on the Eclectics; and it is frequently impossible to
distinguish, with perfect precision, the artists of one class from those of the
other” (II:481).

But distinguish them he would. Kugler’s definition of eclecticism and
his classification of the Carracci as Eclectics, derived from Bellori, Malva-
sia, and even Winckelmann, remained unquestioned for over a century.
“The greater number of artists of this time (that is the end of the sixteenth
and first half of the seventeenth century) are known by the name of Eclec-
tics, from their having endeavoured to select and unite the best qualities of
each of the great masters, without however excluding the study of nature.
This eclectic aim, when carried to an extreme, necessarily involves a great
misapprehension with regard to the conception and practice of art, for the
greatness of the earlier masters consisted precisely in their individual and
peculiar qualities; and to endeavour to unite characteristics essentially different at once implies a contradiction” (II:481). Not nearly as negative in his judgment as Mahon contends he was (219), Kugler actually seems sympathetic to the goals of the Eclectic school. What he describes is a scholarly practice that both takes account of the best art of the past and returns for inspiration to the original—to Nature. Though the “eclectic aim” might be carried too far, Kugler has generally good things to say about all the Carracci, even turning them into romantic heroes who “opposed fresh ideas to the exaggerated mannerisms then existing” (II:484). Of Ludovico Carracci, Kugler writes: “He passed his youth in constant and close attention to studies which had become a dead letter among the artists of the time, and which thus exposed him to much ridicule and contempt; but this only made it the more evident to him that reform was desirable, and that it had become necessary to introduce rules and well-understood principles into art, to counteract the lawless caprice of the mannerists” (II:482). Kugler had reproduced the rise-and-fall pattern of Italian painting established by Bellori in his Lives by denoting the fifty years prior to the Carracci as a period of decline. In his story of the progress of painting, the three Carracci were trailblazers. In youth they might have tried to realize their “patchwork ideal,” but their extraordinary talent helped them to surpass “mere plagiarism” of the great masters and achieve a “thoroughly-understood and artistic appropriation of their highest qualities, bearing the character rather of rivalry than of imitation” (II:484). Like Winckelmann, Kugler saw the Carracci-as-Nachahmer as supplying an urgent need for order and as marking a high point in the history of painting. They might never be considered artists of the first rank, but they had prepared the way, both through their scholarship and through their painting, for another Renaissance, the one through which Kugler imagined he was living.

The popularizing French art historian Charles Blanc, in his Histoire des peintres de toutes les écoles (1865–77), also acknowledges the Carracci’s role in preparing for the future of painting, but at the same time seems to denigrate them as “coldly calculating artists who had simply imitated the more truly inspired artists who had preceded them” (Goldstein, Visual Fact 1). Nonetheless, Blanc, like Winckelmann and Kugler before him, believes that what the Carracci produced from their eclectic style was vastly superior to anything else being done in Italy at the beginning of the seventeenth century. They put forth, in systematic fashion, an “eclecticism” that would...
ces qualités diverses, en les combinant, de plus, avec l’étude de la nature, un style mixte, qui serait excellent puisqu’il n’y manquerait rien et que toutes les parties en auraient été puisées aux meilleurs sources. (xiii–xiv)

[[ . . . ] choose in each of the masters of the first order that which he has done best, to study the drawing of the great drawers, the color of the great colorists, the rules of these ones, the effects of those ones, and to comprise, from these diverse qualities,—combining them, furthermore, with the study of nature—a mixed style, which would be excellent seeing that it would want for nothing and that all the parts had been drawn from the best sources.] (my translation)³

Blanc’s attitude is typical of French thought in the nineteenth century; eclecticism as a method always serves a particular historical purpose. Not all periods in history are equally creative, and there are some artists whose role it is to give birth to genius and to the new age. But he cannot wholeheartedly endorse the method, any more than Fuseli and Kugler do. The romantic ideal of originality was by now firmly entrenched, so even the Carracci’s volitional eclecticism seemed to violate the principles of art and it could not be promoted or preferred as an artistic method. By the time Blanc was writing his history of painting, many artists were in revolt against academic, that is, eclectic, methods of instruction.

Given this antiecclectic tradition, Denis Mahon naturally was at pains to recover the reputation of the Carracci (particularly in relation to their now more popular contemporary, Caravaggio) via their interaction with the art of their own time, in the union of naturalism and imagination that he identifies as the essence of the Baroque. By contrast, nineteenth-century historians of art constructed a retrospective theory of eclecticism to explain a way of operating shared by the Bolognese painters, while still acknowledging the pivotal role of the Carracci and their Academy in the advancement of art during the seventeenth century. They may not have been the recipe eclectics ridiculed by Fuseli, but they did self-consciously and deliberately reinterpret the elemental forms of classicism into a living language. Undaunted by the inferiority their eclecticism implies, Rensselaer Lee recognizes that “Annibale was a scholarly painter who succeeded in his eclectic aim” (212). Occupying a central position between the two poles of the classical and the Baroque (Mahon 204), the Carracci output reveals eclecticism at work, trying to reconcile contradictions and longing to hold on to the past even as the present encroaches.

This dilemma is readily apparent in Annibale’s contribution to the then-lowly genre of landscape painting. That Annibale painted landscapes
at all might have troubled his classicist admirers, but it no doubt delighted those twentieth-century critics who wanted to claim him for the romantic-naturalist genealogy. The companion pictures *Hunting* and *Fishing* (ca. 1585, both now in the Louvre) represent some of Annibale’s most ground-breaking work, despite his clear indebtedness to the tradition of Venetian landscape, especially to Titian. At first glance these paintings would seem to belong to the genre of mythological landscape that Titian made famous (Robert Cafritz sees a close resemblance in Annibale’s work to Titian’s *Pardo Venus*, painted around 1560, certain works of Domenico Campagnola, and decorative paintings by, among others, Niccolo dell’Abate [85–86]). Notably absent from Annibale’s work, however, is a single mythological figure. While the landscapes of both *Hunting* and *Fishing* are ideal, in the sense that they are “calculated to enhance nature aesthetically and morally,” they do not allude to “classical gods and heroes to transmute physical reality into poetic invention” (Lagerlöf 7). Instead, Annibale imbues ordinary activities with transcendent significance. Collecting food becomes the window through which we catch a glimpse of the divine idea underlying nature, stretching back to the beginning of time. The men and women represent various occupations and classes; dogs and horses are as numerous as people. The recessionary planes within both pictures provide glimpses of a general prosperity. Even those who are working hardest are fully integrated into the scene; in *Hunting*, the men in charge of refreshment and a poor hunter defending his catch from a dog frame the action of the noble riders and beasts, while in *Fishing*, a woman mending nets, two men dragging a net until their muscles bulge, a boatsman, and a fisherman occupy the center of the scene, which is framed this time by better-dressed merchants and leisurely fishermen. Both scenes manage to convey a classical sensibility (Annibale’s later landscapes would take up biblical and mythological themes), but within a naturalistic framework. They also share strong horizontal movement as the actions of hunters and fishermen carry them to the left or right of center. Annibale has thus taken from Titian his coloring, his composition, and his view of nature as benevolent and innocent, and he has given us a composite view, achingly nostalgic and Arcadian, and confidently modern.

In my view, Mahon’s assertion that the principles of selection allegedly employed by the Carracci were commonly known and used by other painters does not bolster his subsequent claim that the charge of eclecticism is misplaced. Eclectic methods of instruction were indeed prevalent in the academies, and eclectic theories of painting were widely circulated; to disavow the Carracci’s knowledge of theory in order to recover their original reputation (based, as we have seen, on the very eclectic method
now considered so discreditable) seems profoundly misleading. In the debate on the eclecticism of seicento painting, we witness the emergence of a discourse simultaneously critical and innovative, retrospective and speculative. Nineteenth-century critics of the Carracci tend to repeat, while denigrating, their eclectic-critical methods. Those who saw in the artistic efforts of the Carracci a phenomenon more distinctive than mere imitation or simple influence may have been thus predisposed by a series of formulations for coping with the disintegrative forces of coexistent romanticism (generally understood) and classicism; in other words, the eclecticism of seicento art represented an acceptable compromise between competing artistic ideologies.

Sir Joshua Reynolds and Eclectic Education

The history of the idea of eclecticism did not perish with the Carracci, nor did the eclectic instruction of young artists remain confined to their academy in Bologna. The man who would become the greatest promoter of eclectic education in Britain, Sir Joshua Reynolds, stood poised at the brink of a transformation in the arts that would overturn the centuries-old theory of imitation through selection on which his teaching was based. Though his *Discourses* delivered before the Royal Academy from 1769 to 1790 were, in John Ruskin’s words, “not well arranged, and not very recherché or original” (I:491), they constitute the major body of art theory in Britain with which nineteenth-century critics, including Ruskin, had to contend, and contain early arguments against nascent romanticism. Reynolds aimed the *Discourses* first of all at the students of the newly formed Academy. In fulfilling this directive, the first president of the institution solidified the course of instruction set out by the prestigious Italian academies of art. The educational (and status-raising) function of the Academy having been firmly established by the Carracci and others, Reynolds had primarily to justify adherence to a well-worn path, to argue for the value of an eclectic system of education that was already being challenged in the eighteenth century by great artists who had broken the rules.

To convince students—and the public—that only an Academy could secure the progress of the arts, Reynolds promoted a theory of invention based on the careful and prolonged study of collected artistic achievement. A centralized institution, organized under royal patronage, offered the surest means for bringing together the greatest painters of the age as teachers and contributors of artworks, “to create a repository for the great examples of Art” (81): “These are the materials on which Genius
is to work, and without which the strongest intellect may be fruitlessly or deviously employed. By studying these authentic models, that idea of excellence which is the result of accumulated experience of past ages, may be at once acquired; and the tardy and obstructed progress of our predecessors may teach us a shorter and easier way. The Student receives, at one glance, the principles which many Artists have spent their whole lives in ascertaining; and, satisfied with their effect, is spared the painful investigation by which they came to be known and fixed” (II:81). In founding the Academy upon these eclectic principles, Reynolds seeks to engage the “accumulated experience of past ages” in the service of the future; indeed, as Quentin Bell points out, Reynolds’s primary innovation in the Discourses consists in his assertion that great painters, building upon “authentic models,” discover their own styles. Thus, we might view Reynolds’s academic project as a form of “creative eclecticism,” an enabling process of selection and imitation, rather than the limiting of artistic freedom in the service of absolutism as later critics, such as William Blake, would have it.13

In Discourse II, Reynolds clearly outlines the process whereby the artist, submitting himself to years of study, at last achieves creative independence. In the first appearance of what will become one of his main tropes, Reynolds compares the acquisition of the mechanical skills of painting to that of the grammar of language. Beginning with the most basic skills, students would first learn to draw from the flat, then from the round. The human body was the subject of almost every study, and students had to copy noses, eyes, ears, and mouths, and then separate limbs and entire figures, from an accepted master such as Raphael. They would memorize proportions, the catalogue of human expressions, eventually learning light and shade and color, all from antique models. Lectures on anatomy and perspective, and the life class, would complete training in the grammar of the art, and “when the student’s mind had been so perfectly attuned to the beauties of antiquity that the imperfections of Nature would be automatically corrected” (Bell 14), he would graduate to the second degree of proficiency.

The academies of art did not consider their educational mission concluded until the student had mastered the historical canons of painting, sculpture, and architecture—“to learn all that has been known and done before his own time” (II:89). The middle period of an artist’s development requires, for Reynolds, a sort of full-blown eclecticism. The student seeks out the best art works ever produced and discovers their outstanding qualities; before he is a master, he must become a critic and a scholar. The eclectic synthesis of all that is excellent in each of his models enables the student to produce, according to his talent, a superior work of art: “Those
perfections which lie scattered among various masters, are now united in one general idea, which is henceforth to regulate his taste, and enlarge his imagination. With a variety of models thus before him, he will avoid that narrowness and poverty of conception which attends a bigoted admiration of a single master, and will cease to follow any favourite where he ceases to excel” (II:89). In the discourses that follow, Reynolds continually emphasizes the need for comparison and selection as the only sure means of avoiding deformity and exaggeration: “A man is as little likely to form a true idea of the perfection of the art, by studying a single artist, as he would be to produce a perfectly beautiful figure, by an exact imitation of any individual living model” (VI:163). This raises, of course, one of the problems attendant on an eclectic method—the tendency to deviate from nature in the pursuit of excellence; so it was not only the loss of originality that troubled critics such as Fuseli but also the loss of truth—a sacrifice that would be too great for one of Reynolds’s sharpest critics, John Ruskin.

The third and final stage of the artist’s training requires still more discipline: moving beyond the combination of various excellences to the discrimination of incompatible styles. Reynolds in effect answers the critics of Carraccioseque eclecticism who claimed that the Bolognese painters’ combination of elements of different styles created monstrous deformities, Frankenstein’s monster avant la lettre. Students of the RA would be trained in the art of “know[ing] how or what to choose, and how to attain and secure the object of [their] choice” (VI:160). Far from seeing the Carracci as servile imitators (their reputation had not yet suffered Romantic attack), Reynolds saw in their “liberal style of imitation” evidence of “men who extended their views beyond the model that lay before them, and have shown that they had opinions of their own, and thought for themselves, after they had made themselves masters of the general principles of their schools” (VI:165). In fact, Reynolds invokes the Carracci, especially Ludovico, as “model[s] for style in Painting” (II:96), praising his ability to take “only as much from each [school] as would embellish, but not overpower, that manly strength and energy of style, which is his peculiar character” (V:139); more importantly, Reynolds credits the Carracci with laying the foundation of the Grand Style at their Accademia when they revived the example of Michelangelo (XV:326–27). As later critics have suggested, Reynolds might have been mounting a defense of his own methods and demonstrably imitative, eclectic portraits.

The success of academic eclecticism depended, of course, on Reynolds’s belief that all truly great artists learn from the art of the past, that geniuses are not born, but made. Central to his refutation of Edward Young’s influential “Conjectures on Original Composition” (1759) was the notion that
“Invention, strictly speaking, is little more than a new combination of those images which have been previously gathered and deposited in memory: nothing can come of nothing: he who has laid up no materials, can produce no combinations” (II:91). Rather than relying on ineffable inspiration, the artistic genius sustains himself on “The daily food and nourishment [. . .] found in the great works of his predecessors” because “There is no other way for him to become great himself” (XII:273). Reynolds harshly refutes Young’s fashionable assertion that “genius is from heaven, learning from man” with practical knowledge: “It is very natural for those who are unacquainted with the cause of any thing extraordinary, to be astonished at the effect, and to consider it as a kind of magick” (VI:152). Only the “ignorant,” “from their entire inability to do the same at once,” could believe that great art is produced without effort (VI:152). While Reynolds acknowledges the power of imagination at work in his heroes, Raphael and Michelangelo, he continually emphasizes their diligent labor, the years of practice their work must have cost them. Convinced that “by imitation only, variety, and even originality of invention, is produced” (VI:154), Reynolds recommends that students follow Raphael’s example. Raphael’s first works reveal his devotion to his master, Pietro Perugino, but, says Reynolds, he soon formed “higher and more extensive views” and “imitated the grand outline of Michael Angelo; he learned the manner of using colours from the works of Leonardo da Vinci, and Fratre Bartolomeo: to all this he added the contemplation of all the remains of antiquity that were within his reach; and employed others to draw for him what was in Greece and distant places. And it is from his having taken so many models, that he became himself a model for all succeeding painters; always imitating, and always original” (VI:164). Reynolds’s reading of Raphael echoes and explains Winckelmann’s assertion in Reflections: one becomes great—inimitable—only by imitating the ancients. These critical contemporaries would agree: it was Raphael’s eclecticism that made him great, and only a falling off from the study of the art of the past could have brought the Renaissance to a close and ushered in the degeneracy of art that we call Mannerism.

Eighteenth-century critics such as Reynolds and Winckelmann would have seen in those deformed and exaggerated figures the operation of pure fantasy, of uncontrolled imagination. The opposite tendency, Reynolds felt, also had to be resisted: the Dutch painters produced exact copies of whatever appeared before their eyes, but in their servility to reality they made no appeal to the mind. And only by appealing to the intellect could painting achieve the status of a liberal art. The ascendancy of poetry over painting in the hierarchy of the arts had everything to do with the eclectic nature of literature compared with the mechanical nature of painting, and with
the fact that the production of great literature resulted from prolonged study of ancient models and the assimilation of an historical canon, while great painting (that is, works appealing to the eyes alone) could be produced by skilled copyists. In the academic view, painting could be neither a divine gift nor a mechanical trade. If painting were to become the equal of poetry, then its practitioners had to emulate the poets: Reynolds flatly declares, “He can never be a great artist, who is grossly illiterate” (VII:175). The store of humanistic learning had to be shared with artists who, in addition to mastering the mechanical part of the art and its supporting sciences, would be conversant in poetry, philosophy, history, and religion; they must be admitted into learned society, where their recreational reading would be supplemented with brilliant conversation (VII:175); and they must travel in order to obtain the storehouse of images and ideas necessary for the creation of great art.

One can easily imagine Reynolds’s paternal tone in Discourse XII when he addresses youthful art students about to embark on their first trip to Italy. Indeed, the Grand Tour was arguably a larger part of the humanistic training than it was of the artistic. Polonius-like, he enumerates the careless habits to be corrected, the forms of inattention to be avoided, the dangers of seeing too much, and the necessity of nourishing the mind upon variety. At last he arrives at the central issue: “young Students should not presume to think themselves qualified to invent, till they [are] acquainted with those stores of invention the world already possesses” (XII:277). To this iteration of a familiar point Reynolds adds a warning against emulating the Pittori improvvisatori whose spontaneous productions dazzle the eye and instead suggests beginning with an exercise called the Pasticcio. The student’s pastiche would “encompass the different excellencies which are dispersed in all other works of the same kind” (XII:278); not stopping there, the student would learn the art of selecting what is excellent in art and in nature (XII:279). The Pasticcio, while consistent with Reynolds’s eclectic program of education, raises the problem of the element of chance in shaping a synthesis of sources. In the introductory paragraphs of the twelfth discourse, Reynolds alludes briefly to a general condition of travel: “we must take what we can get, and when we can get it” (263). But how much more is this true of the process of canonization? How susceptible to chance is the selection of the models employed at the Academy itself? Though Reynolds never questions the classical norm on which he bases his teaching, the eclectic methods outlined in the preceding pages certainly could have led students to artworks and styles other than those selected by the Academy. Expansively, he admits that the artist must find the beauty in all ages and in all schools, in what is great and in what is little, in East
Chapter 1: History’s Diverse Beauties

and in West (VI:170). Given these conditions, academic eclecticism would undermine, eventually, its own standards of imitation and invention, of what is perfect in art. Conceding that what is recognized as genius varies over time, Reynolds must have entertained some doubt that genius would always manifest itself as neoclassical.

It is likely that Reynolds was aware of the dangers posed by an increasing knowledge of the history of art, and must have guessed that the problem of creating (or rather choosing) a style to express the age could only be compounded by eclecticism. In order to stave off the threat of competing aesthetic systems, the academies established standards of taste by promoting an internally coherent style. At first this had meant purging the excesses of the Baroque in an attempt to create a purer classical model. Selecting the most suitable models for imitation, the academies were able to produce a “grand style” or beau ideal that passed as universal. For Reynolds in Discourse III, intellectual dignity and ideal beauty superior to what is found in nature define the Grand Style. With a gesture that sweeps away Dutch and Flemish and any merely imitative art, Reynolds avers that “a mere copier can never produce anything great” and that the “genuine painter [. . . ] must endeavour to improve [mankind] by the grandeur of his ideas” (III:103). He proceeds to lay out the path to the Grand Style, a road, one might say, cleared of all its random growth and exhibiting only enormous landmarks in the form of past masters. As Reynolds repeatedly contends throughout the Discourses, the student must engage in a “laborious comparison” of these works so that he “acquires a just idea of beautiful forms; he corrects nature by herself, her imperfect state by her more perfect” (III:106). He learns to see nature through the eyes of the ancients and so arrive at a “central form [. . . ] from which every deviation is deformity” (III:107). Though he admits that a variety of figures may be beautiful, none of them exhibits the highest perfection. In The Schools of Design, Bell agrees that the creation of a composite perfection was central to academic training. He recounts the oft-told story of Zeuxis, the Greek painter commissioned by the people of Crotona to paint Helen. In order to create an image of the legendary beauty, Zeuxis chooses the twelve most beautiful girls in town, makes nude studies of each, and eventually picks the five most beautiful models of the group. At last he combines their separate features to make one figure more beautiful than any individual could be (Bell 3–4). Bell, who is favorably disposed to eclecticism, connects such a synthetic process with the cosmetic industry: “it is possible to imagine the beautification of a form through the readjustment of individual members” (4). While most Romantic and post-Romantic critics would reject the destruction of organic unity in the individual human body, academicians
such as Reynolds regarded the elimination of accidents and deformities (in nature as well as in fashion) as the mission of an art addressed to the mind.

In an essay on the *Discourses* typical of Romantic criticism, William Hazlitt exposes inconsistencies in Reynolds’s advocacy of the Grand Style and his belief in the power of diligent labor to produce great art. Hazlitt’s arguments in favor of the power of genius will be familiar: “all the great works of art have been the offspring of individual genius, either projecting itself before the general advances of society or striking out a separate path for itself; all the rest is but labour in vain” (127). The proof is in Reynolds’s pudding, Hazlitt claims, somewhat erroneously: does he not return continually to those originators who “unfold [. . .] new and exquisite powers of their own, of which the moving principle lay in the individual mind” (128)? So Hazlitt points to all those statements in which the academician notices the special genius of one artist or another, and argues that Reynolds is just leading his students on when he tells them that hard work will supply any deficiency in their natural talent. Much more complicated and important for the development of art criticism in the nineteenth century is Hazlitt’s contention that Reynolds’s precepts regarding the Grand Style are plainly flawed and illogical. Taking issue with the key passage in Discourse III, where Reynolds claims that “a mere copier of nature can never produce anything great,” Hazlitt poses an argument that Ruskin will expand in *Modern Painters*: Reynolds seems to discount the greatness of effect possible in nature herself, implying that she “is a heap of disjointed, disconnected particulars, a chaos of points and atoms” (Hazlitt 134–35). One of Reynolds’s own contemporaries, Edmund Burke, had suggested the extent to which a lack of clarity in atmospheric effects gives birth to the sublimest views in nature; but Reynolds was not very interested in landscape or nature generally because it seemed to him unintellectual, less likely to achieve the grandeur of *Istoria*—or to raise the status of his profession. As a recent editor of the *Discourses*, Pat Rogers, notes, Reynolds seems not to have been influenced by Burke’s aesthetic treatise and does not really attempt to integrate his famous distinction between the sublime and the beautiful into his theory of the Grand Style—a serious omission, and one that undoubtedly diminished Reynolds’s influence in the nineteenth century.

In this respect, landscape again makes for an interesting test of eclectic principles, as it did in the case of Annibale Carracci. In his 1993 essay “The Public Prospect and the Private View,” John Barrell attempts to reconnect assumptions about genre to their original context by considering the rise of landscape painting in terms of its ability to express public virtues. Taking
Reynolds’s comments on landscape as his starting point, where the academician asks whether landscape has the right to aspire so far as to reject depicting what painters call the “accidents of nature,” Barrell points out that landscape as a genre had usually been associated with private virtues. He summarizes two types of landscape representation that became dominant in the eighteenth century. First, there was the panoramic landscape, which was the analogue of the social and the universal, and which is surveyed, organized, and understood by disinterested public men who regard objects in the landscape in terms of their relations, and who are enabled to do this by their ability to classify and generalize. Second, there was its opposite, the occluded (or confined) landscape, belonging to the private man, whose experience is too narrow to permit him to abstract from it. The occluded view conceals the general view by concealing the distance; a characteristic image of this category would be a cottage within a stand of trees, whose larger setting appears only in spots through the foliage. For Barrell then, landscapes during this period are generally constructed as either private or public, and were understood to appeal to private or public interests respectively, or to two spheres in the life of a citizen.

Landscape would first gain in authority as it catered to public interests. Like history painting, landscape now aimed to appeal to the broad and comprehensive vision, and the ability to abstract representative from actual nature that would become the chief qualification for citizenship (rather than a disposition to perform acts of public virtue). Reynolds was profoundly interested in how changing generic distinctions within painting would affect the status of artists. In his Fourth Discourse, Reynolds compares the trends in landscape painting on the Continent. The Dutch School, he argues, though adept at producing faithful portraits of particular places, should not be imitated by students who wish to achieve greatness in painting. By contrast, Claude Lorrain had achieved in his landscapes something akin to history painting by representing general nature and avoiding local detail; his truth is founded on the same principles as those by which the history painter achieves perfect form. Reynolds’s advocacy of ideal landscape makes sense in terms of Barrell’s argument outlined above. Even though Reynolds would admit to liking the more particularized views of his contemporary Gainsborough, as the first president of the Royal Academy, Reynolds worked hard to raise the professional status of artists in general, and saw that the best way to achieve his goals for art would be to ally painting with literature and philosophy. In other words, the ideal landscape, informed as it was by literary precedents, provided a more certain route to professional acceptance. If a painter was obviously a scholar, then he was no longer a craftsman.
Throughout his discourses Reynolds acknowledges the tardiness of painting compared with its sister art, poetry. Painting must learn to appeal to the mind, rather than to the eye; that is why nature must be considered in the abstract, for particulars would only distract the eye. The painter, by studying the literature of all nations and periods, must divest himself of prejudices in favor of his age or country, which could lead him to depict the local and the temporary rather than the universal and timeless qualities of his subject. For a literary model of this process, Reynolds could look close to home. In *Windsor-Forest* (1713), Alexander Pope had described a particular place in language that elevated it to a representative type. Seeing “order in variety,” Pope unified all the parts of the landscape by the principle of *concordia discors*. Undaunted by nature’s incredible variety and changeability, the poet made the particular details of the place allude to a larger narrative of progress from waste to plenty, and the expansion of a nation from the old world to the new.

In spite of the persuasiveness of Reynolds’s arguments in the *Discourses*, the seeds of doubt that would make artists permanently anxious about eclecticism had already taken root. Depending on the elimination of particularities and the “accidental” deformities of nature, the Grand Style’s separateness from nature would form the basis of Ruskin’s critique of academic authority in *Modern Painters*. Though Ruskin would eventually return in his *Lectures on Art* to something like Reynolds’s eclectic outlook, he begins his career by tearing down the central theory of the *Discourses*, that in striving after perfection, the Grand Style reaches an intellectual dignity equal to the art of poetry, and in its appeal to the mind, raises humankind from a lowly condition. By contrast, Ruskin would argue that the Grand Style, which is eclectically constructed from nature and from the masters of the past, cannot mean anything in the present age: “if we are to produce anything great, good, awful, religious, it must be got out of our own little island, and out of these very times, railroads and all” (*Works* III:231). In the preface to the second edition, Ruskin attacks even more directly the idealizing ambition of academic painting. Painting something as it ought to be, rather than as it appears, is morally wrong, and he mounts his defense of modern landscape painting on the basis of its truthfulness; before Turner, the landscape painter attempted “to modify God’s works at his pleasure, casting the shadow of himself on all he sees, constituting himself arbiter where it is honour to be a disciple, and exhibiting his ingenuity by the attainment of combinations whose highest praise is that they are impossible” (III:25). The Grand Style displayed “clumsiness of combination,” and ultimately became a “monstrous creature,” opposed to nature. In attempting to perfect the forms of nature,
Ruskin complains, the painter has forgotten nature altogether—has left it out of the picture.

Ruskin would overturn Reynolds’s understanding of perfection by referring it back to nature: “Now there is but one grand style, in the treatment of all subjects whatsoever, and that style is based on the perfect knowledge, and consists in the simple unencumbered rendering, of the specific characters of the given object, be it man, beast, or flower. Every change, caricature, or abandonment of such specific character is as destructive of grandeur as it is of truth, of beauty as of propriety” (III:25). Even while Ruskin rejects any effort to combine separate beauties, he does not altogether abandon the Platonic ideal of archetypal forms. The deep study of nature will bring the painter “perfect knowledge” of the specific character of every living thing, a character reaching perfection if not subject to accident or disease. Again demonstrating his debt to Reynolds, even as he breaks with his core values, Ruskin does not advocate the servile imitation of nature, such as he perceives in the Dutch School. He calls them “professional landscapists” and “dextrous imitators of certain kinds of nature, remarkable usually for [their] perservering rejection of whatever is great, valuable, or affecting in the object studied” (III:188). He reacts to one of his contemporaries, Constable, much as Reynolds might have done, abhorring his “morbid preference” for low subjects, but respects his works for their honesty and originality, their manliness of manner. Ruskin cares nothing for a descriptive record of a place or a moment, but expects the landscape painting to provide him with a glimpse of God. Only by the incorporation of mystery, that obscurity he so loves in Turner, can a painter raise a “holy thought” in him. Ruskin thus agrees with Reynolds as to art’s mission—the improvement of the spectator—but eclecticism in its crass assemblage of parts fails to capture the essential perfection of a unified creation. This tendency to infuse style with moral meaning would be Ruskin’s most enduring contribution to the history of art, and certainly the feature of his writing that helped to make architectural eclecticism a cultural problem.

For the early critics of the Carracci, and for academic artists across three centuries, eclecticism was not an accident but a necessity, not failure but success. Post-Romantic critics uncomfortable with the designation, and all that it implied of derivation and recipe mixtures, gradually made the term unusable in the history of art, at least through the middle decades of the twentieth century. The situation in architecture shared many of the same features, but with these significant differences. The awareness of eclecti-
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cism in architecture came later than it did in painting, around the turn of the nineteenth century, arising with the Battle of the Styles, which brought with it the consciousness of stylistic choice. There was no sustained period of acceptance—within a half-century the playfulness of “Gothick” had been supplanted by the serious search for a purer, unmixed Gothic. The professionalization of the architect naturally played its part in the quest for authenticity, bound as it was to expand knowledge of historical forms and styles and to create a demand for demonstrable expertise. Debates about architecture were inevitably more public than debates about painting, and tended to make the issue of style a moral one, an index of national character. Twentieth-century critics of Victorian architecture did not need to overturn the judgments of their predecessors in order to claim their aesthetic independence; indeed, when they wished to denigrate the built environment of the previous century, they had only to invoke the angry critics who had been first on the scene. This is not to say that Victorian architecture was derided solely for its eclecticism, but that eclecticism—especially naïve eclecticism—was symptomatic of a lack of progress in the arts, the dominance of capitalist values, and the loss of a faith that, in earlier ages, had underwritten great architecture.

As J. Mordaunt Crook argues in *The Dilemma of Style*, choice has been at the root of architectural style, at least since the Renaissance, when it was first understood as “a conscious system of design, a visual code, a post-vernacular language of forms” (13). This transformation offered both freedom and the burden of choice—a burden that became heavier as the Victorians’ “acute awareness of history clashed with the results of evolutionary thinking” (131). For some architects this meant trying to recover the line of development that had been severed with the rise of classicism by adapting Gothic to present uses, but even those architects who embraced a broader, synthetic eclecticism had to decide “what to ‘eclect’” (126). Eclecticism as idea and practice is often used to explain what John Summerson in 1968 called “the problem of failure” in Victorian architecture. In accepting that it was “horribly unsuccessful” (“The Evaluation of Victorian Architecture” 2), he is relying on “the documented self-criticism of the age itself”; to find a point of view from which it all makes sense (and succeeds) would be, he argues, a “fraud” (18). Anyone who looks at Victorian architecture, therefore, has to confront “the problem of failure,” which is directly traceable to the pervasive “doubt” of practitioners and critics in the period, to the ambiguities in their conception of architecture, especially the question of style: “Every Victorian building of any consequence is a statement of stylistic belief—either a belief in one style, or in the peaceful coexistence of styles (eclecticism), or in the efficacy of a mixed style” (6). Sir Joshua
Reynolds would have recognized in these latter-day, latitudinarian architects a little of his own prescription with respect to history: “To find excellencies, however dispersed, to discover beauties, however concealed . . . can be the work only of him . . . who has extended his views to all ages and all schools” (VI:170). But Ruskin’s revulsion for the “monstrous creatures” of the Grand Style extended to the “accursed Frankenstein monster of, indirectly, [his] own making” (Works X:lvi). Of course, he was referring to the usually vulgar imitations of Gothic that had sprung up across England after the success of The Stones of Venice (1851–53). As Summerson reminds his readers, Ruskin never called for the revival of Gothic, but rather for something much harder to define—a new style that would mean the same as Gothic, would have the same integrity, both moral and aesthetic. In Stones of Venice, his plates were “illustrations of principle, not . . . things to copy” (9). Summerson says that Ruskin was looking for modernism, but that he did not know what it was. Out of this freedom grew a “latitudinarianism” that was neither Gothic nor eclectic; I would rather describe the latitudinarians who looked to Ruskin as volitional eclectics who were self-consciously mining what Reynolds might have termed “history’s diverse beauties” in order put together a new style; and while at first it might have looked like “Frankenstein’s monster,” by the end of the century Victorian architecture revealed a kind of hybrid beauty entirely its own.

A Thing to Dream of, Not to Build

For most architectural historians the genealogy of the Gothic Revival in Great Britain is interwoven with Romantic literary culture, and popular literature is often blamed for the misdirection of national architecture during the nineteenth century. Charles Eastlake, one of the movement’s early historians, wrote in 1872 that there had been three major influences on the Gothic Revival—literary, religious, and antiquarian—and that Walter Scott had been responsible for “awaken[ing] popular interest in a style which had hitherto been associated with ascetic gloom and vulgar superstition” (113). Drawing attention to the “romantic side of archaeology,” Scott, according to Eastlake, kept alive architecture’s “one solitary and flickering flame, [ . . . ] the Lamp of Memory” (115). In 1928 Kenneth Clark’s history of the Gothic Revival sought to correct and restrain Eastlake’s original assessment of Scott’s importance.16 While giving a central place in his account to literary medievalism, Clark emphasizes that the Gothic Revival was well under way before Scott arrived on the scene, and grew out of the
whole Romantic Movement. But it was indeed the revival of interest in national, medieval literature that gave rise to the architectural revival: “Literary men with no particular architectural bent had started a demand for Gothic which was largely satisfied by amateurs” (80). As Megan Aldrich points out in *Gothic Revival*, Scott’s Gothic pushed the Revival in a more realistic direction (140). His medievalism was to Walpole’s what Pugin’s Gothic was to Strawberry Hill. The eighteenth-century revival had been, as Clark admits, a hybrid, bred from classical tastes and “Gothick” fantasy. As Eastlake emphasized, Scott’s literary architecture formed part of the rich texture of his novels (113). His realistic depiction of character and setting gave his readers a more substantial impression of medieval life, and made it, on some level, habitable. (Aldrich believes that the Eglinton Tournament would never have occurred without the example of *Ivanhoe.*

In *A Writer’s Britain*, Margaret Drabble credits Scott with doing for Scotland what Wordsworth had done for the Lakes: “he praised her beauties, created a new vision, and encouraged the tourist trade. He also restored the country’s history and dignity” (171). With the publication of *The Lady of the Lake* in 1810, the enthusiasm for Scottish travel reached epidemic proportions. As Drabble relates, “On all the roads leading to the Trossachs was suddenly heard the rushing of many chariots and horsemen. Inns were crowded to suffocation. Post-hire permanently rose. Every corner of that fine gorge was explored, and every foot of that beautiful loch was traversed by travellers carrying copies of the book in their hands, [. . .] repeating passages from it with unfeigned rapture” (172). In his novels Scott “covered the country from coast to coast,” and the tourists followed him everywhere he went. Even Queen Victoria pursued the pleasure of Scott and Scotland by touring the scenes of the poems and novels, and finally purchasing Balmoral as her country retreat. As Ian Ousby points out in *Literary Britain and Ireland*, Scott “wrote at a time when the taste for wild landscape and for picturesque evidence of the medieval past was in the ascendant, and he gave this taste a local form and shape” (346). Above all, Scott made Scottish history fashionable, and set his seal most firmly upon its medieval phase when he purchased Abbotsford (a farmhouse with classical portico) in 1812 and began to refashion it according to his vision of the Gothic, demolishing the original house by 1822.

Located near ancient Melrose Abbey, Abbotsford “satisfied Scott’s ambition of becoming a laird, the founder of a dynasty, and the life he led there smacked more of the country gentleman than the relentlessly busy novelist” (Ousby 348). Over the years Scott transformed the house into a Scottish baronial mansion and filled it with arms, armor, heraldic devices, and a diverse collection of mementos of the famous. In 1824 Scott wrote to
a friend, “You should come and see Abbotsford which as Augustus said of Rome (I love magnificent comparisons) I found of Brick and have left of marble. It is really a very handsome old manorial looking place both without and within, with a fine library, a Gothick hall of entrance and what not. But in truth it does not brook description any more than it is amenable to the ordinary rules of architecture—it is as Coleridge says ‘A thing to dream of not to tell’” (qtd. in Daiches 92). Scott’s entire career seems to underscore the intimacy between historical romance and the archaeological pursuit of history, to make history a “thing to dream of.” In his seminal essay “Three Kinds of Historicism,” Alan Colquhoun clarifies the “confusion” surrounding the term “historicism” in this period. It is “a theory that all sociocultural phenomena are historically determined and that all truths are relative”; it is “a concern for the institutions and traditions of the past”; it is “the use of historical forms” (3). As a theory of history, an attitude, and an artistic practice, the Gothic Revival embodies all three kinds of historicism. The Revival could not exist without the new theory of history that saw all time periods as distinct and the artifacts they left behind as belonging to them in an organic sense; it could not prosper without an attitude of reverence and humility toward the past, and a desire to preserve its remains; finally, it could not become a movement if artists did not try to make the past live again in the present.

Ruskin and his contemporaries quickly realized that gathering up the fragments of the past with an eye toward rebuilding led inevitably to eclecticism, both in the coexistence of different styles and in the mixing of styles from different periods and countries. The growth of these hybrid, eclectic “monsters” was, to paraphrase Bruno Latour, a consequence of the modern effort of classification (to which Ruskin himself contributed); in this case, the antiquarianism of the Gothic Revival and its popularization in literature, painting, and architecture were necessarily at odds, but they inevitably co-evolved. As Colquhoun puts it, “historical thought [. . .] clearly revert[s] to eclectic practice” (12) when it sets up one period as a paradigm, as nineteenth-century historicism did with Gothic. An indelible feature of modernity, historicism exists at war with itself, longing to bring the past to life, and then despising its own creations.

Yet reproduction or imitation of the desired object had been a salient feature of medievalism since the eighteenth century. The antiquarian Horace Walpole had his Gothic Revival house, Strawberry Hill, and his Gothic romance, The Castle of Otranto; his contemporary William Beckford built his Gothic dream house, Fonthill Abbey, and wrote his neomedieval-orientalist fantasy, Vathek; and Walter Scott began his career by collecting traditional ballads (and writing some better-than-fair imitations), carried
on by writing a slew of historical novels including *Ivanhoe*; and, when he had amassed (almost) enough funds, began transforming Abbotsford into a medieval castle.

Most visitors to Walter Scott’s mansion at Abbotsford considered it the perfect outward expression of the famous author’s mind. John Ruskin’s 1838 letter to John Claudius Loudon records a very different experience. At this time, Ruskin was writing a series of articles for Loudon’s *Architectural Magazine* on “The Poetry of Architecture.” This early work already hinted at Ruskin’s later preoccupations with nature and authenticity, and art as the expression of Zeitgeist. But this first project was also explicitly touristic in nature, composed of leisurely pieces meant to delight and inform armchair travelers. The ambitious young man—he was only 19 at this time—had plans for a further series on “The Homes of the Mighty,” in which Scott’s mansion would appear as the first number. Traveling to Abbotsford with this project in mind, Ruskin found that Scott’s dream house would not make a suitable subject for one of his essays; he was therefore not an uncritical tourist but a desiring subject possessed with a longing that Abbotsford could not satisfy. He might have assumed, too, that his visit to the author’s house would give him access to the space of the Waverley novels consumed in his youth. In his search for this authentic experience he was disappointed; but, as Michael Brooks has written, this was the first important step for Ruskin in recognizing that his beloved Gothic architecture would never be successfully translated into a modern setting (13). Instead of finding the embodiment of the literary past, Ruskin found a modern, eclectic monument. His bitterness is audible in the letter to Loudon: “Had Abbotsford one point about it deserving of praise, or even admitting of toleration—or had it shown the slightest evidence of the superintendence of that mind whose plaything, whose sucking coral, it had been—the case would have been different; but it does not—and what purpose could it possibly serve to endeavour or pretend to cast a stain upon a part of Scott’s reputation, insignificant enough, it is true, but which might perhaps give pain to some of those whose affections are gathered in his memory, and which, while it would have been daring to have hurled it at the light of his living name, it would be only base to cast upon the marble of his sepulchre?” (*Works* I:16). In this letter Ruskin both denies the connection between the house and the man (he does not see the “slightest evidence of that mind whose plaything it had been”) and affirms it when he concludes that attacking Abbotsford would be like “pointing out the deformity of his limb or triumphing over the one weakness which was the cause of his ruin and his death” (I:16). Blaming Abbotsford for bringing Scott to the point of bankruptcy in 1826 and for hastening his death, Ruskin
regards the house as he would any destructive vice. An air of compulsiveness hangs about the place where no sign of discrimination, of “superintendence,” is visible. The garden is classical, an Italian fountain attaches to a baronial gateway, the house commences with “a horrible-looking dungeon keep”; worst of all, the grand front “is a splendid combination of the English baronial, the old Elizabethan, and the Melrose Gothic—a jumble of jagged and flaky towers, ending in chimneys, and full of black slits with plaster mouldings, copied from Melrose, stuck all over it” (I:17). This place of defense, as Ruskin calls it, indicating his displeasure at seeing both military and ecclesiastical architecture appropriated for a dwelling place, is “fitted up as if it were as large as the Louvre” (I:17). Ruskin is struck by the copy of an arch from the cloisters at Melrose: “This arch, designed for raising the mind to the highest degree of religious emotion, charged with the loveliest carving you can imagine, and in its natural position combining most exquisitely with the heavenward proportions of surrounding curves, has been copied by Scott in plaster, and made a fireplace” (I:17). For Ruskin this misuse of the sacred arch of the Gothic cathedral in the domestic hearth proves “that Scott, notwithstanding all his nonsense about moonlight at Melrose, had not the slightest feeling of the real beauty and application of Gothic architecture” (I:17).

By the time he is writing of Scott as “the great representative of the mind of the age in literature” in Modern Painters III (1856), Ruskin clearly has had time to ponder the relationship between Scott’s literary genius and his genius for living in the nineteenth century. In his chapter “Of Modern Landscape,” Ruskin works hard to justify his elevation of Scott to the pantheon of Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare. His argument depends on establishing Scott’s modernity, which he does by delineating the characteristics of modern landscape painting, and then tracking them in Scott’s work. His comparative study of Greek, medieval, and modern landscape art leads Ruskin to conclude that the moderns are expected to take pleasure in “things which momentarily change or fade; and to expect utmost satisfaction and instruction from what it is impossible to arrest, and difficult to comprehend” (V:317). Ruskin finds evidence of this “triumph in mutability” in the modern obsession with clouds, a preoccupation that suggests, metaphorically, the loss of belief in God. He writes, “[M]uch of the instinct, which, partially developed in painting, may be now seen throughout every mode of exertion of mind,—the easily encouraged doubt, easily excited curiosity, habitual agitation, and delight in the changing and the marvellous, as opposed to the old quiet serenity of social custom and religious faith,—is again deeply defined in those few words, the ‘dethroning of Jupiter,’ the ‘coronation of the whirlwind’” (V:318). The worship of
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wind and clouds—of chance—betrays ignorance, perhaps willful, perhaps endemic, of stable facts. As he does throughout his entire corpus, Ruskin draws upon the explanatory power of Greek mythology and culture. Referring to the *Clouds* of Aristophanes as the only serious study of the subject in the ancient world, Ruskin borrows the poet’s conclusions: “[clouds] are ‘great goddesses to idle men’”; “who so believes in their divinity must first disbelieve in Jupiter, and place supreme power in the hands of an unknown god ‘Whirlwind’”; this god makes his disciples “to speak ingeniously concerning smoke” (V:318). The modern age is marked, as no other has ever been, by the pervasiveness of unbelief. The love of fog, clouds, smoke, and somber colors in modern landscape painting suggests to Ruskin a darkness of heart caused by the loss of faith. On the whole Ruskin believes that the modern age is properly called the Dark Age, compared to the bright Middle Ages, because “On the whole, these are much sadder ages than the early ones; not sadder in a noble and deep way, but in a dim wearied way—the way of ennui and jaded intellect, and uncomfortableness of soul and body” (V:321). The positive valence of modern uncertainty is the love of liberty and wildness; it is levity, even profanity, before nature; it is the romantic love of beauty, which the moderns find in history or nature, but never in themselves.

For Ruskin, Scott exhibits, more than any other modern writer, this strange mixture of the “elements of progress and decline” (V:327). There are other poets greater than he, whose genius belongs more to the next age, but Scott’s genius is peculiarly of the moment. First, Ruskin claims, “Nothing is more notable or sorrowful in Scott’s mind than its incapacity of steady belief in anything” (V:336). For proof Ruskin takes Scott’s ambivalence toward the supernatural and toward Catholicism (an attitude typical of Gothic novelists such as Ann Radcliffe). He is Presbyterian, Ruskin says, because that is the most sensible thing to be when one wishes to live in Edinburgh, even though he finds Roman Catholicism “more picturesque.”17 Second, Scott has the weakness of “looking back, in a romantic and passionate idleness, to the past ages, not understanding them all the while, nor really desiring to understand them” (V:336). This is the most serious charge Ruskin levels against his childhood hero. For many Victorians Scott was the first poet whose use of history had been in the service of realism, and not merely as a colorful backdrop. He had also been the first in literature (as Georg Lukács has argued in *The Historical Novel*) to link social customs to historical development. Ruskin, however, does not see Scott’s treatment of historical material as anything but interested. His best characters and scenes are “sketched from nature,” but, Ruskin contends, “his romance and antiquarianism, his knighthood and monkery, are all
false, and he knows them to be false; does not care to make them earnest; enjoys them for their strangeness, but laughs at his own antiquarianism, all through his third novel,—with exquisite modesty indeed, but with total misunderstanding of the function of an Antiquary. He does not see how anything is to be got out of the past but confusion [ . . . ” (V:337). Ruskin is obviously bothered by what he considers Scott’s carelessness toward his historical material (specifically his lack of understanding of architecture), and he goes on to reiterate his experience of Abbotsford, to make the point that Scott is representative of his age in his ignorance about art. Having only a “confused love of Gothic architecture,” Scott cannot “tell the worst from the best, and built for himself perhaps the most incongruous and ugly pile that gentlemanly modernism ever designed” (V:338). For Ruskin, Abbotsford embodies Scott’s modernity in its “mingling of reverence with irreverence” (V:338). By misusing the arch from Melrose Abbey, Scott shows an attitude to history that Ruskin has begun to reject: that we can own history, consume it indiscriminately. Scott the “pure modern” (as Ruskin calls him) “admires, in an equally ignorant way, totally opposite styles” (V:338). Scott is eclectic, in the common usage, irreverent even as he is sorrowful, desiring intimacy with a more colorful past that is gone forever. Ruskin instinctively felt, and tried hard to justify his opinion, that Scott’s novels—and even his home at Abbotsford—were “adequate” expressions of the age in which they were produced, largely because of their eclectic historicism.18

The fact that Scott’s eclecticism made him essentially, supremely modern did not, however, lead Ruskin to accept eclectic historicism as the way forward in architecture. It was inorganic, and often ignorant; it falsified the architectural record; it threatened to extinguish the lamp of memory. But it was only many years after his visit to Abbotsford that Ruskin became truly convinced that Gothic architecture was a thing to dream of, and not to build—when he decided that his writing on architecture, in assisting the revival of Gothic, had done more to degrade, than to exalt, the original. He had made people of varying abilities and insight long for what he described, to long, as he and Scott had done, for the chance to inhabit a medieval world. Eclecticism was essentially romantic, yes; but it was also always acting—playing a part rather than being in time. This made Scott’s choice of Gothic an ethical one. It also exposed a tension in the period about the proper uses of the past that would not be resolved until the end of the century.

It is significant that another of Ruskin’s idols, Turner, for whom he wrote Modern Painters, became the most famous illustrator of Scott. In 1838, the year of Ruskin’s visit, Turner produced a watercolor of Abbotsford. The Gothic Revival mansion is hazily, though distinctly, drawn
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against a hill in the right of the picture, its towers mimicking the forms of trees and rocks. The scene is one of integration, even reconciliation: humans in harmony with animals in the foreground, architecture in harmony with external nature. Turner’s aesthetic modernity is proven by his sympathy with Scott, in a way that might have pleased even that finicky tourist, Ruskin.

The “Problem of Failure”
Eclectic Revivals in Architecture

At the same time that John Ruskin was expressing, privately, his dismay at Scott’s eclecticism, A. W. N. Pugin, perhaps the most notorious propagandist of the Gothic Revival, who had already converted to Roman Catholicism in order to align his religious and aesthetic values, was making the choice of style, very publicly, a moral issue. In Contrasts (1836) he took on the entire classical inheritance and the Protestant Reformation that, in his view, came along with it. What neoclassicists deemed the elevation of taste should have been condemned for what it was, the expression of modern unbelief: “Almost all the researches of modern antiquaries, schools of painting, national museums and collections, have only tended to corrupt taste and poison the intellect, by setting forth classic art as the summit of excellence, and substituting mere natural and sensual productions in place of the mystical and divine” (16). As Pugin recognized, moreover, the mere collecting of things did not confer understanding or belief. A society seeking to recover its faith in God by building Gothic churches was doomed to fail, because only faith could create such enduring monuments. Religious ideas and ceremonies had always had the profoundest influence on the development of style, because style was the outward expression of inner faith. Therefore, Christianity had found its perfect expression in pointed architecture. If “the architecture of the nineteenth century [was] that extraordinary conglomeration of classic and modern styles peculiar to the day” (v), then it could not express a belief in anything higher than having the liberty or the means to choose. Patrons request what they like or what they believe will convey their status to others, and that is what architects build.

Pugin strikes against this laissez-faire tendency of modern architecture in his “Illustration of the Practise of Architecture in the 19th Century on New Improved and Cheap Principles.” Arranged as a collection of advertisements, it satirizes various aspects of the profession, including the spread of amateurism that allowed patrons to dictate to designers: “Shortly will
be published Architecture Made Easy, or Every Man His Own Architect by which Gentlemen Amateurs May Easily Acquire Every Information Respecting Design and Practice.” He ridicules public lectures on architecture that promote outlandish styles such as “Mechanicks Institute, A Lecture on Antideluvian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman and Gothic Architecture by Mr. Wash Plasterer” or that gloat over the mechanization of design as in “Mechanicks Institute, A Lecture on a New Designing Machine Capable of Making 1000 Changes with the Same Set of Ornaments by A Composition Maker.” These mock-lectures highlight for Pugin what had become a central problem in the profession: since neither the architects nor their patrons had any allegiance to a particular style—proof that they did not possess the religious faith Pugin believed ought to underwrite any national style of architecture—British architecture could never be more than a mishmash of borrowed styles bearing the imprints of vanished believers. Architects bragged that they could design “Buildings of Every Description [. . .] Gothic or Grecian on Moderate Terms” and such architectural freaks as

- A Moorish Fish Market with a Literary Room Over an Egyptian Marine Villa
- A Castelated Turnpike Gate
- A Gin Temple in the Baronial Style
- A Dissenting Chapel in the Plain Style to Serve Occasionally for a Lecture or Reading Room
- A Monument to Be Placed in Westminster Abbey—a Colossal Figure in the Hindoo Style Would Be Preferred and No Regard Need be Paid to Locality
- A Saxon Cigar Divan. (Contrasts)

The principal targets of *Contrasts* are well known—the Renaissance and the Reformation—but Pugin’s diagnosis of what was ailing modern architecture extends to the democratization of taste. While most of his work attacks the decadent, sensual, and classical taste of the upper classes, he recognizes another threat from below—the indiscriminate mixing of styles by the newly wealthy and partially educated. The architectural freaks in Pugin’s list were meant to outrage and even disgust his readers, but the attack on eclecticism was less likely to persuade than were his illustrations of medieval and modern cities and institutions (the “contrasts”). By exposing the weakness of a nation in which belief no longer dictates the choice of style, he also forged a connection between style and belief that would trump for many the pleasure of having a choice.
While Pugin’s *Contrasts* is properly a work of the Battle of the Styles (Greek versus Gothic), to which the satirical attack on professional eclecticism is secondary, his most important successor, Ruskin, eventually moved beyond the morality of the styles to an examination of what it means to have a choice—the only article of faith that Pugin could discover in nineteenth-century architecture. Asked by the citizens of the northern industrial city of Bradford to assist them in choosing a style for their new Exchange, Ruskin begins his 1864 lecture “Traffic” by informing his audience that he cannot speak about their new Exchange because he does not care about it. Worse yet, he cannot care about it because they do not. They may be about to spend £30,000 for an imposing new building, but they mean nothing at all by it: “[You] think you may as well have the right thing for your money. You know there are a great many odd styles of architecture about; you don’t want to do anything ridiculous; you hear of me, among others, as a respectable man-milliner; and you send for me, that I may tell you the leading fashion; and what is, in our shops, for the moment, the newest and sweetest thing in pinnacles” (*Works* XVIII:434). Like the eclectic patrons scorned by Pugin, these industrialists can afford to purchase whatever style they choose, and they are acutely aware that they do, in fact, have a choice. Ruskin’s savage tone and outright dismissal of any good intention behind inviting him to speak proceed from his unshakeable Romantic conviction that “architecture is the expression of national life and character” (XVIII:434). Merely asking the question “which style?” betrays the disease in a nation in which already several styles vie for ascendance. “I notice that among all the new buildings which cover your once wild hills, churches and schools are mixed in due, that is to say, in large proportion, with your mills and mansions; and I notice also that the churches and schools are almost always Gothic, and the mansions and mills are never Gothic. May I ask the meaning of this? for, remember, it is peculiarly a modern phenomenon. When Gothic was invented, houses were Gothic as well as churches; and when the Italian style superseded the Gothic, churches were Italian as well as houses. [. . . ] But now you live under one school of architecture, and worship under another” (XVIII:440). For Ruskin this association of style and function, far from indicating a reverence for the space of worship, rather indicates that they “have separated [their] religion from [their] life” (XVIII:440). By making Gothic the exclusive style of churches, but rarely choosing to employ it in other contexts, the citizens of Bradford appear to make religion a surface matter only, not something shot all through the fabric of life. The separation further implies that the Sunday Gothic-church-goers do not believe that their houses, factories, and hills are sacred, too: “in calling your churches only ‘holy,’ you call your hearths and
homes ‘profane’” (XVIII:442). Underlying this typology of style, Ruskin recognized a convenient compartmentalization of values; on Sundays, we believe and act according to these Christian values, and during the week, we believe and act according to these economic values.

Unfortunately for Ruskin, those who heard his lecture thought he meant they ought to choose Gothic, in order to affirm their faith, missing the vitally important distinction “do you mean to build as honest Christians or as honest infidels?” (XVIII:443). The eclectic architecture of the nineteenth century by its very nature could never proclaim a “common purpose”; having a choice only institutionalized doubt. To demonstrate effectively the universality of his claim that all great architecture results from great religion, Ruskin identifies the three great religions that have underwritten the three great European styles: the Greek worship of the God of wisdom and power, the medieval worship of the God of judgment and consolation, and the Renaissance worship of the God of pride and beauty (XVIII:445). All of these having passed, he argues, the English have now supplied a fourth deity of their own: the “Goddess of Getting-on” or “Britannia of the Market” (XVIII:448). They have a nominal religion, Christianity, and an actual religion, capitalism, with its goddess of the marketplace, to whom all “great architectural works are, of course, built” (XVIII:448): “It is long since you built a great cathedral; and how you would laugh at me if I proposed building a cathedral on the top of these hills of yours, to make it an Acropolis! But your railroad mounds, vaster than the walls of Babylon; your railroad stations, vaster than the temple of Ephesus, and innumerable; your chimneys, how much more mighty and costly than cathedral spires! your harbour-piers; your warehouses; your exchanges!—all these were built to your great Goddess of ‘Getting-on’; and she has formed, and will continue to form, your architecture, as long as you worship her; and it is quite vain to ask me how to tell you how to build to her; you know far better than I” (XVIII:448). Apart from the revival styles with their confused attempts to declare allegiance to the values of the past, Victorian architecture expressed for the most part its faith in profit and progress, and the practical values of getting ahead in life by any means necessary. The revived styles of the Greek, medieval, and Renaissance gods could be subsumed, as Pugin recognized, under the values of commercial culture and would indeed be employed as the signs and tokens of success, piety, fidelity, patriotism, liberty, democracy; but for Pugin and Ruskin, the very coexistence of these competing deities meant that none of the revived styles could truly express the age, because the values each expressed would always be in conflict—and no clever representation of belief could supply its lack. Eclecticism was thus entirely at
odds with the values of the Gothic Revival, as represented by its moralists, because it sought to resolve conflict and to preserve the best parts of the past for the future, rather than acknowledging that they constituted contradictory views of life.

In their effort to reestablish a single style for the national expression that was architecture, aesthetic purists such as Pugin failed to understand that the majority of people would always remake any historical style in their own image, as Sir Walter Scott did, never allowing it to express one idea only. Like Pugin, the Gothic Revivalist George Gilbert Scott blamed the Civil War for breaking up national traditions and hastening the uniform adoption of classical styles; but his recommendation that Gothic—as “the style whose traditions have the strongest possible claims upon our affections”—replace classicism ignored the fact that architects would be replacing one imported style with another (6–7). Choosing Gothic over Greek was still choosing. And by the end of the century, everyone agreed that Gothic was a dead style, which survived only in eclecticism: Gothic had become “one ingredient in an ever-evolving eclecticism” (Crook 160). Disillusioned Goth J. P. Seddon complained, “Eclecticism! Eclecticism! What horrors have been perpetrated in thy euphonious name” (qtd. in Crook 179). J. D. Sedding’s diagnosis was more precise: “What we call Victorian architecture is nothing in fact but a retrospective art, an art of plagiarism and odds and ends . . . historic art made histrionic” (qtd. in Crook 180). It was the same charge of inauthenticity that Ruskin had leveled at Walter Scott, which pointed to a lingering crisis of identity. The organic relationship between style and nation once taken for granted had been lost, and that was what rankled most. As Sedding put it, Victorian architecture was “composed of what naturalists call ‘illegitimate crosses’” (qtd. in Crook 180). Even when it was intentionally designed, eclectic architecture continued to be regarded as monstrous and unnatural, or as histrionic and frivolous.

Balancing the unease about eclecticism, naïve or volitional, was the emergence of a new (debased) “native” architecture sprouting like mushrooms out of every speculator’s suburb. It was ugly, practical, and cheap: the architecture of commercial competition. The only real architecture we have, William Morris acknowledged in “The Revival of Architecture” (1888), is laboriously eclectic. Thoughtful architects realized that an exotic Gothic style would not thrive in the nineteenth century: the economic system was incompatible, and would not allow workers to express their individuality; and most builders would opt for cheaper, mass-produced materials. So the revivalists would try a Gothic of slightly later date, always thinking to get closer to the “spirit of the age” the later they
Chapter 1: History’s Diverse Beauties

chose to dig for style. It was not a crazy idea, but it should have pointed out the essential problem with Revival styles: they did indeed belong to their ages, and the saddest thing about the nineteenth century—but also its compensatory gift, Morris thought—was its awareness of history. Like Hardy’s Laodiceans, they all knew too much; they could not invent, but could only adapt—the debate on architectural style had made this clear. Ruskin’s essay on “The Nature of Gothic” marked the beginning of the end of the Revival for Morris, by making the contrast between the nineteenth century and the fourteenth century so great that it was obviously impossible to bridge the gap. In sharp contrast to eclectics such as Morris, James Fergusson, in the History of the Modern Styles of Architecture (1891), despaired of their ever matching the forms and tendencies of their art to the greatness of their engineering. Whether in the revivalist or the modernist camp, most critics shared the conviction that nineteenth-century architecture went horribly wrong when it revived historical styles; this revulsion only deepened as ever-cheaper and less-authentic imitations spread across the landscape.

The aesthetic revisionism that had commenced with the Gothic Revival of the eighteenth century was brought to fruition in 1834 when the British government called for a competition to rebuild the destroyed Houses of Parliament and asked only for Gothic or Elizabethan designs. Their reasons were compelling: the new buildings would be on the site of the ancient Palace of Westminster, and could incorporate what remained of it; they would also be close to Westminster Abbey, one of the great medieval monuments; and, finally, Gothic was thought to be a truly English style and thus would best represent the nation to the world (Clark 108–21). With this grand gesture, the competition signaled the end of the dominance of varieties of classicism across the spectrum of English culture. Though the disciples of Gothic would attempt a takeover of style as complete as Neoclassicism had once enjoyed, never again would any style of architecture, painting, or the decorative arts achieve such ubiquity.

Several factors contributed to the end of the tyranny of a single style. While the confrontation of Gothic and Greek styles had energized supporters on both sides, moderates found a productive, if controversial, middle road. By selecting elements from various historical styles, from the beautiful and the sublime, the ideal and the natural, architects satisfied an apparently contradictory desire for individual freedom within the social order. “Picturesque,” the peculiar growth of the Revolutionary period, exemplifies this eclectic aim to reconcile cultural extremes. In its most popular forms the picturesque aesthetic exhibited the best qualities of the new moderate liberal outlook, what was termed in French politics the
juste milieu or middle course. For many intellectuals of the day, the eclectic juste milieu was less a philosophical system than a sensibility and an aesthetic. In his study of the French painter Thomas Couture, Albert Boime emphasizes that the artist under the influence of eclecticism wished not to overthrow classicism but to infuse it with passion and imagination by looking everywhere for inspiration and meaning (16): “Nothing is given but everything is assembled (and open potentially to reassembly). The eclectic borrows variously and pieces together representative elements in another place. All ideas in this system have value not by virtue of any single writer or thinker, but by virtue of their ready-made distinctiveness and capacity to be reconciled as an ensemble” (22). In this view the styles of the past and of other countries were equally available for incorporation into living works of art, an art that would express a new relationship to history, to country, to colony—an art tolerant, open, and already meaningful.

Coming only two years after the Great Reform Bill, the rebuilding of Westminster in accordance with popular taste marked the opening up of the rarefied realms of personal style and the fine arts to the middle classes. As the knowledge of historical and foreign styles increased through public museums, exhibitions, pamphlets, and periodicals, the newly empowered classes gained access to the intricacies of the languages of style—to a vocabulary that could be deployed in self-representation. The picturesque developed into a complicated, eclectic, aesthetic mode whose elements were easily adapted to differing economic conditions.

No architect was more successful than John Claudius Loudon in disseminating the picturesque at all levels of British society. Throughout his life, Loudon was preoccupied by the two fundamental questions of his profession: use and beauty. Initially a disciple of Uvedale Price (author of Essay on the Picturesque, one of the most important treatises on the subject), he adapted the principles of landscape painting as guides for designing and laying out real landscape. But he had also “imbibed the principles of utility” from Bentham, and he liberalized Price’s teachings by taking into account the needs of those cottagers whose dwellings had been appropriated (and neglected) as elements of picturesque scenery (Simo 6). According to his biographer, Melanie Louise Simo, Loudon believed that true taste in the British rural style should be founded on the best of indigenous cottages, castles, and villas; but his Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture, which went through numerous editions during the century after its initial publication in 1833, presented designs that showed him to be impartial on the question of style. The fitness of the style—its characteristic elements designed for particular uses—was more important than its being Gothic or Greek.
The first section of the *Encyclopedia* offers designs of “Cottage Dwellings in Various Styles.” Alongside the numerous Gothic and Italianate or classical designs, Loudon gives space to German Swiss, Elizabethan or Old English, Indian Gothic, and Chinese. Many of the designs are hybrid creations, but Loudon accepts even these awkward contributions into the *Encyclopedia*, as long as the architect has made the house fit for living in. For example, in his Remarks to Design XIX Loudon wonders, “What then, is the style attempted? Those who have viewed the buildings of all the countries of Europe with an architectural eye, or those who have studied the cottage buildings in the pictures of the Italian landscape painters, will best be able to determine this question” (82). Allowing for the understanding of picturesque principles that some readers will bring to the design, Loudon concedes that “no characteristic of any style or manner ought to be servilely imitated, when that imitation would prove inconsistent with utility,” but the spirit of the original ought to be retained even as the architect adapts the structure to its new location (82–83). Loudon seems unable to explain how the strange, domed cottage might be deemed a legitimate occupant of English soil, but it is his particular genius to allow any style at all that is beautiful and functional into his pantheon of models without trying to rationalize its inclusion on moral grounds, as the acolytes of Gothic or Greek were wont to do. Loudon’s eclecticism encourages liberal practice in a profession just emerging from its long dependency on aristocratic patronage. He sums up this way one of the most important factors in his own approach to design: “The time has gone by for one class of society to endeavour to mark another with any badge whatever; and therefore we could wish all architects, when designing cottages, to abandon their received ideas” (1183). In 1805, he goes on, a prominent architect wrote that the moldings and ornaments of the “regular” styles of architecture should never be applied to cottages, but now, in 1840, we see progress in the moldings and ornaments carefully placed in the smaller dwellings. Thinking and reading beings, clearly, all have the right to style.

Unlike Loudon, who saw eclecticism as the by-product of a rational architecture, George Wightwick built an altogether different foundation for his eclecticism—it would be “Beautiful,” “Poetical,” and “Romantic.” In this endeavor he tried to emulate Walter Scott: his “romance”—which he named *The Palace of Architecture* (1840)—would be to architecture what Scott’s novels were to history (vii). As Wightwick recognized, much of the pleasure of reading Scott was attributable to his powerful evocation of the architecture and landscapes of the past. Scott’s readers could occupy the historical spaces opened up by his novels, both imaginatively through reading and physically by traveling to the famous places he described. By
making the most scientific and mathematical of the arts into a romance and bringing to life the entire history of architecture as a single eclectic palace, Wightwick encouraged his readers to inhabit imaginatively whatever pavilion or room they fancied after being guided through by the “Prince Architect.” Just as the Great Exhibition of 1851 would collect the decorative arts of the world under a single roof, so Wightwick collected the world’s architecture into a single book, having faith that such a “congress” would conspire to create a brighter future for the art: “You will see, within this domain, an epitome of the Architectural world. Mine is, as it were, a palace of congress, wherein you will be successively addressed by humble (but, it is hoped, characteristic) representatives of the great families of Design in ancient and Mahomedan India, China, Egypt, Greece, ancient and modern Italy, Turkey, Moorish Spain, and Christian Europe” (3). On their journey, Wightwick’s readers would learn to recognize the importance of architecture as a vehicle of association—its pictorial romance and material poetry (4). As a precursor to his ambitious program, the Prince Architect claims Hadrian’s villa at Tivoli, where the emperor, after traveling for six years around his empire, “resolved on imitating all the monuments, the magnificence or splendour of which had excited his imagination” (5). Preoccupied with architecture as testimony to the character of nations, as (to paraphrase Pugin) the history of the world, Wightwick bravely acknowledges, “The numerous architectural abortions to be found in many a modern city, however detestable in themselves, are, nevertheless, testimonies to the existence of that spirit, and of those means, which, under the guidance of knowledge, would produce monuments worthy of pretension, instead of gew-gaws, manifesting pretension only” (10). Part of Wightwick’s eclectic purpose is to learn from this sometimes bewildering accumulation of styles the true path for the future of architecture: “in every new work, we seek to express, not only the limited excellence of what now is, but the anticipated virtue of a day not yet arrived” (11). By selecting and comparing what he imagines to be the most characteristic structures of various nations, Wightwick hopes to uncover what links spirit, means, and beauty; and ultimately, in the testing of new combinations, perspectives, and groupings, to find at last a suitable dwelling place for his country and his age.

Like Wightwick, A. J. Beresford Hope, who would eventually become president of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), as well as a leader in the revival of the Church of England, based his aspirations for the future of architecture as a fine art on the adoption of an eclectic program. In his 1858 lecture “The Common Sense of Art,” Beresford Hope makes the essential unity of all architecture—all the styles of different lands—his first principle, but he also recognizes local significance and development
and so chooses the Gothic as the pattern of future architecture. This choosing of a particular style, he knows, makes him eclectic: “the only style of common sense architecture for the future of England, must be Gothic architecture, cultivated in the spirit of progression founded upon eclecticism” (10). The progressive architect must search everywhere for material and for inspiration; all of England’s Gothic, all the Gothic in Europe will not be sufficient for the task: “To be truly eclectic, we must be universally eclectic—we must eclect from everything that has been collected; and we must assimilate and fuse everything that we eclect, for without such fusion the process remains after all only one of distributive collection” (13). Like the eclectic philosophers in France, Beresford Hope had faith in the common sense that would guide his choices. Common sense would tell him to stop “eclecting” when he could no longer assimilate the style. If the architecture of the past—mixed and hybrid as it was—was the natural and spontaneous response of human beings to their environment, then the architecture of the future would be responding to an environment that included the architecture of other ages and other nations, as well as new materials and new technologies for building. Believing that only primitive societies developed “total styles,” he embraced a theory of evolution for the arts that incorporated the vital feelings of association on which successful architecture depended. The Crystal Palace was a great building because its ornamentation was continuous with English “Perpendicular” Gothic; it inspired patriotic feelings because it embodied English history and carried it forward in time. The rational latitudinarianism that informed Beresford Hope’s judgment made “Progressive Eclecticism” a mid-Victorian catchphrase (Crook 161).

Proceeding on assumptions similar to those adopted by Sir Joshua Reynolds in the training of young artists, the eclectic revivalists adopted an “art for art’s sake” position, against Pugin and Ruskin, who insistently linked eclecticism with degraded morality. In France the theorist, restorer, and Gothic revivalist Eugène Viollet-le-Duc reached a similar conclusion that the architect’s education must proceed from the careful analysis of the masterpieces of the past to an original synthesis of those achievements, allowing for the conditions of, and using the materials dictated by, his own age (Summerson, “Viollet-le-Duc” 141). This analytical process often began with the simplest structures and progressed to the most ornamentally complex. The primitive hut had been a favorite instructive image since the eighteenth century in which architects had hoped to discover absolute structural necessity, a pure and unadorned response to the laws of nature (Viollet-le-Duc 23). Viollet-le-Duc imagines that the first shelter was a tree, and that when storms became strong enough to disturb its
protective canopy, people heaped more material over the spreading branches. For Ruskin, as for Viollet-le-Duc, this spontaneous, rational development of the primitive dwelling underscores the connection between national landscape and architectural forms, and, as Ruskin would have it, “the prevailing turn of mind by which the nation who first employed it is distinguished” (Works I:5). Such a conclusion ordinarily leads to the rejection of eclecticism. For example, in The Poetry of Architecture Ruskin argues for the specificity of architectural language; it cannot be translated across cultures or exported indiscriminately without a calamitous loss of meaning. Indeed, his desire to prohibit the exportation or mechanical revival of any style would make the primitive hut or the picturesque cottage impossible for all nonpeasants. Writing of the search for a style of the nineteenth century, Viollet-le-Duc also tries to link style to language; just as language is something all human beings possess, we all have style, or inspiration (215); but Viollet-le-Duc acknowledges the loss in translation even while imagining the recovery of meaning. Though we have progressed far beyond the rudiments of language, “those simple and true ideas that lead artists to invest their conceptions with style,” we need only recall the want our art was created to satisfy in order to have true style again. Pushed to their extremes, both Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc signal the coming end of historical (eclectic) styles; but Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc reach, via similar theoretical and historical models, the same conclusion: the new style will be the child of eclectic historicism.

Ruskin devotes half of The Poetry of Architecture series, which he wrote, significantly, after his visit to Abbotsford, to the study of the cottages of various nations, but not in order to recommend them as homes for the middle classes. Like most of Ruskin’s output, Poetry is meant to be instructive, not prescriptive. And as is usually the case, his intention is enthusiastically misunderstood. Ruskin acknowledges only three cases in which a cottage might be designed by an architect: when a nobleman or man of fortune erects dwellings for his domestics on his own property, when a landlord exercises influence over the houses of tenants for the sake of improvement, and finally “when ornamental summer-houses, or mimmicries of wigwams, are to be erected as ornamental adjuncts to a prospect which the owner has done all he can to spoil, that it may be worthy of the honour of having him to look at it” (Works I:66–67). While he is willing to advise interested parties in the first two cases, he considers the third circumstance to be barbarous and not worthy of his consideration. This prohibition against a cottage ornée as a kind of substitute for the primitive hut (“wigwam”) is particularly severe, since Ruskin’s ideal cottage closely resembles the designed version, and completely disregards the reality of most laborers’ cottages: “A few square feet of garden and a latched wicket,
persuading the weary and dusty pedestrian, with excessive eloquence, to lean upon it for an instant and request a drink of water or milk, complete a picture, which, if it be far enough from London to be unspoiled by town sophistications, is a very perfect thing in its way. The ideas it awakens are agreeable, and the architecture is all that we want in such a situation. It is pretty and appropriate; and if it boasted of any other perfection, it would be at the expense of its propriety” (I:12). The “proper” features of English picturesque cottages were thought to be smallness, rusticity, and simplicity; the shape and color of the dwelling had to be harmonious with the landscape from which the materials for building were extracted; and the internal necessities were to determine its irregular, external boundaries. Ruskin calls forth a host of images associated with rural pleasures, and betrays a continued infatuation with “the presumed innocence and simplicity of a ‘primitive’ life, passed in harmony with nature” (Archer 68).

Why then does Ruskin disallow this more perfect form of dwelling for members of his own class? Because the cottage ornée has been torn from its social fabric. Ruskin recognizes that the period of the primitive hut has passed him by, and although he purchases a whitewashed cottage on the shores of a beautiful English lake, he improves and enlarges the original structure until it is an appropriate and typical dwelling for a member of his own class. It seems that Ruskin found his way to authentic dwelling by incorporating—eclecting—past forms into the contemporary. The ambivalent transition between the cottage and villa sections of his first book is revealing:

And now, farewell to the cottage, and with it, to the humility of natural scenery. We are sorry to leave it; not that we have any idea of living in a cottage, as a comfortable thing; not that we prefer mud to marble, or deal to mahogany; but that, with it, we leave much of what is most beautiful of earth, the low and bee-inhabited scenery, which is full of quiet and prideless emotion, of such calmness as we can imagine prevailing over our earth when it was new in heaven. We are going into higher walks of architecture, where we shall find a less close connexion established between the building and the soil on which it stands, or the air with which it is surrounded, but a closer connexion with the character of its inhabitant. We shall have less to do with natural feeling, and more with human passion; we are coming out of stillness into turbulence, out of seclusion into the multitude, out of the wilderness into the world. (I:73)

The peculiar relation of the cottage to the primitive hut, enshrined by architects as the first dwelling, is strongly evident in Ruskin’s delineation of the territory of the two houses. The evocation of a building that no
architect has ever seen, and which the peasants themselves do not use for their own cottages, locates the artificial cottage not in the wilderness but in the suburbs. Built into the form of the cottage is a longing for the (small) space of childhood, what architects regarded as the childhood of the whole race. In the small dwelling one is more vulnerable and, at the same time, more aware of one’s security. Taking pleasure in the experience of vulnerability, the inhabitants of the cottage ornée shed their heavy clothes, their formal speech, and renew physical contact. Gaston Bachelard recognizes the original house as an unchanging space that is always familiar; the ornamented cottage, although inauthentic, can be understood as an attempt to rebuild the primitive hut. Situated on the boundary between the primitive hut and familiar domestic space, the cottage ornée opens onto memory, onto memories of houses. The villa opens onto other memories—of travel, literature, and painting. The villa not only contains collections of experiences and artifacts, like those Ruskin saw in Abbot’sford, but is also itself an eclectic form, the imitation of the memory of a house built somewhere else. Evaluated against the characterization of the primitive hut as a pure, unadorned response to nature, the copy cottage can only fail. But the villa is always already dissociated from its national origin. The key difference for Ruskin is in the inhabitant of each:

Man, the peasant, is a being of more marked national character than man, educated and refined. For nationality is founded, in a great degree, on prejudices and feelings inculcated and aroused in youth, which grow inerete in the mind as long as its views are confined to the place of its birth; its ideas moulded by the customs of its country, and its conversation limited to a circle composed of individuals of habits and feelings like its own; but which are gradually softened down, and eradicated when the mind is led into general views of things, when it is guided by reflection instead of habit, and has begun to lay aside opinions contracted under the influence of association and prepossession, substituting in their room philosophical deductions from the calm contemplation of the various tempers, and thoughts, and customs, of mankind. (I:74–75)

For Ruskin this displacement of national feelings in favor of general ideas opens the way to eclecticism in art: “the more polished the mind of its designer, the less national will be the building” and the less unified will be the building and its scenery (I:75). The implications of Ruskin’s analysis are significant for the larger questions raised in this chapter: the growth of the middle classes came about as a result of massive displacement from the land. Living in cities where no native style prevailed, and confronted with
unfamiliar aesthetic systems, ordinary citizens created a profoundly ordinary, symbolic-ornamental, and eclectic architecture. These newly available languages of art encouraged novel expressions, what Eagleton might call aesthetic bonding, an imaginative exchange of identities.

While the seemingly ideal synthesis of styles represented by the picturesque did not satisfy the guardians of high culture, it has been consistently employed in domestic architecture for two centuries. For commentators such as Ruskin, the picturesque could never create a true juste milieu because it corrupted the essential character of each style from which it borrowed. The liberalization of style would lead to the bastardization—the mongrelization—of artistic style generally; the lack of any one style to represent the character of the age was proof of its corruption, its surrender to the pressures of supply and demand in the market of culture. Rather than adhering to a single style (as one might to a single religion), architects would design buildings in any style their patrons demanded, however inappropriate or ridiculous.

It is tempting to conclude by saying that the common-sense eclecticism envisioned by Loudon and Beresford Hope won the day—that architects such as Norman Shaw, C. F. A. Voysey, and Edwin Lutyens represented the future. But the eclectic synthesis they achieved proved temporary with the advent of modernism, when the stars of purity and authenticity were again in ascendance. It may be, however, that modernism itself was the interregnum—an anomalous moment in which we pretended not to have a choice.

As proof, it is worth pointing out that two of the most influential architectural writers of the early twentieth century were apostates when it came to the Victorians. Both Kenneth Clark and John Betjeman began their careers by despising Victorian architecture, and ended by respecting—if not loving—it. Clark wrote his “classic” (Crook’s word in the 1995 preface) The Gothic Revival just after his graduation from Oxford. When his publisher suggested reprinting the 1928 edition, Clark responded nervously: “I expected to find the history inaccurate, the entertainment out of date, the criticism relatively sound. But it is the criticism which has worn least well” (1). In the letter, reprinted in later editions, Clark explains how he had set out to validate the architectural doctrines that were current in the 1920s but had ended up being “persuaded by what [he] set out to deride” (2). He worried that later generations could not possibly understand the hatred of Victorian architecture that had once existed—it was universally ridiculed. Even in the 1920s Clark knew that he was doing something radical in mounting even a half-hearted defense—it was “interesting” though never “agreeable”—of the aesthetic and moral positions of the Victorian built
environment. The best to be hoped from a reprinting, he concluded in 1949, would be to show the “very great change which my attitude towards all the arts has undergone in the last twenty years, and which began with my reading of Ruskin’s *The Nature of Gothic*” (4). Though Ruskin had been a devastating critic of his own age, Clark recognized that Ruskin had guided the best architects toward a reconsideration of the moral meaning of architecture, and to the production of a few works of enduring genius. Even Summerson would ask in 1968 whether “failure” was a fair label when the Victorians had labored so hard, and with such seriousness, to improve the art of architecture.

For steering the larger populace toward an appreciation of Victorian architecture, Clark assigns the most credit to John Betjeman. In his 1970 introduction to *Ghastly Good Taste* (originally published in 1933), “An Aesthete’s Apologia,” Betjeman tells of the incipient fascination with Victorian art and literature that blossomed in his youth but was restricted in one important sense: “Their architecture I thought then was not to be taken seriously, as it was purely imitative and rather vulgar” (xxi). Indeed, the book concludes (in both editions) with this death knell: “Except for the fine streak in domestic architecture [. . . ] building ceased to be of anything but commercial importance in England after 1860” (105). Betjeman had blamed the lamentable fall of a great art on “self-conscious stylist”—in other words, architecture declined because it lost its organic connection to the society that produced it. It fell because it was eclectic. And yet, in the revised edition, in a footnote, the apostate Betjeman acknowledges that Norman Shaw, whose work he had once derided as “sham classicalism,” “was our greatest architect since Wren, if not greater” (104). The only other part of *Ghastly Good Taste* to be altered for 1970 was the huge fold-out “Street of Taste,” which was originally dominated by the nineteenth century, stretched between two principal modes, “Educated Class State-Conscious” and “Middle-Class Self-Conscious.” The architectural mode of the twentieth century up to 1933 was still worse—“Big Business and Chaos.” Modernism, for Betjeman, had been “A misinterpretation of simplicity” and not the salvation of the art. Things became bleaker still in 1961 (in the extended version of the “Street”), when one of the icons of Victorian self-consciousness, Euston Station, was demolished. This section Betjeman titled “In Memoriam.” The Victorian Society that Betjeman helped to found in 1958 lost the battle for Euston, but it went on to win public opinion and countless other battles, notably for the eclectic, aesthetic suburb of Bedford Park. After Euston, the “problem of failure” would be no longer in the Victorians, but in ourselves.