As the eclectic idea crossed the Channel to grapple with manifest eclecticism, resistance to the philosophy grew in direct proportion to the rapidity with which British culture was becoming fundamentally eclectic. Not crippled by polarized ideologies as France had been, British philosophers and critics did not feel the powerful attraction to Cousin’s teachings that had once moved Stendhal to name Cousin the greatest philosopher of the age for his ability to overcome the destructive cycle of reaction and revolution. The culture of nineteenth-century Britain seemed to be under assault from the very forces of diversity and difference that Cousin harnessed to his catholic theory of eclecticism. The Victorians would become eclectic as the study of history promoted relativism and stimulated the adoption of multiple historical styles. They would become eclectic as a capitalist economy made the products of past and present, colonial and Continental cultures available to the middle classes through cheap reproduction. They would become eclectic as modern latitudinarianism overcame religious intolerance and encouraged acceptance of competing systems of belief. And they would become eclectic as widespread education propagated superficial knowledge and spread the veneer of civilization and taste over classes once distinguished by unequal access to culture. Self-conscious eclecticism was certainly at

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work in the organization of such characteristically Victorian institutions as the museum of art and natural history, the public lecture series, the collection of biographies, the literary anthology, the keepsake and treasury, and the international exhibition. Advancing with the tide of changes that were decentering and diffusing national identity, eclecticism, aimed as it was at the educated classes, looked as though it would overflow the last remaining stronghold of British culture—its press. If the literati succumbed to the sweet nothings of Cousin, then nothing remained but to give over responsibility for culture to the masses and to submit to the dictates of popular opinion.

Although Cousin’s writings were translated into English and widely reviewed in Britain, few philosophers would have been willing to avow publicly any allegiance to the French thinker, or to consider themselves part of an Eclectic school. This reluctance to embrace Cousin’s eclecticism cannot be explained only by its weaknesses (which were discussed on both sides of the Channel); indeed, Cousin offered both a cogent analysis of and a solution for handling the new cultural situation common to both countries. Yet eclecticism was not embraced in England, as it was in France, and Cousin was despised even though he was proposing and advocating the same kind of “glorious revolution” that had already been successful in Britain. His juste milieu was automatically mistrusted at least partly because he was French—because it seemed to represent all those tendencies of French thought against which the English defined their own national identity. As late as 1840 John Stuart Mill, in a review of Tocqueville, feels compelled to address the general unwillingness of British readers to engage with French philosophy (to which Tocqueville makes “a brilliant exception”): “At a time when the prevailing tone of French speculation is one of exaggerated reaction against the doctrines of the eighteenth century, French philosophy, with us, is still synonymous with Encyclopedism. The Englishmen may almost be numbered who are aware that France has produced any great names in prose literature since Voltaire and Rousseau” (214). Mill, who was early influenced by Cousin, laments the “insular” tendencies of British thought, which, in spite of French being “almost universally cultivated on this side of the Channel,” prevent his countrymen from being drawn into “The general movement of the European mind” (214). At the time of Mill’s review, the “prevailing tone” of French thought and the “general movement of the European mind” had been established by Cousin, who was also firmly in control of higher education in France, and Mill’s unwillingness to speak his name is indicative of the uneasiness about Cousin in Britain. Mill’s reference to Voltaire is significant, in light of his place in the negative Gallic stereotype that was still in force well into the
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Victorian period. As historian Gerald Newman has written, “The chief intellectual components of the Gallic stereotype, Britain’s distorted image of revolutionary France, were evidently the ideas of destruction, license, abstract political thought, atheism, and impious mockery” (389). In the nineteenth century the Gallic stereotype was applied to “analogous tendencies of unbelief, moral laxity, ridicule, generalizing philosophy, and cosmopolitanism” (397; author’s italics)—all of which might have been associated with Cousin and eclecticism. Developed during the revolutionary period, the Gallic stereotype was used from the start to “uproot international ideas,” and eclecticism embodied an ideal of internationalism that Britain could not easily accept. That British writers could not acknowledge the French contribution to understanding the cultural situation, however, does not mean they did not take up the same ideas or face the same problems. The Gallic stereotype was linked to elitist decadence and mass culture, a dualism that parallels Victorian responses to eclecticism, particularly in the emerging discourse about literary modernity.

The Eclectic Mind

The history of the idea of eclecticism has been repeatedly punctuated by the same accusation: in seeking to find the best in everything and everyone, the eclectic bankrupts meaning. In an early critique of modern eclecticism, Samuel Taylor Coleridge challenges the foundation of the “philosophy of the nineteenth century.” Writing his *Biographia Literaria* between 1815 and 1817, Coleridge might have got wind of Victor Cousin’s lectures of the same period in which the Frenchman first advanced the modern theory of eclecticism.¹ In the biographical miscellany, Coleridge is concerned to construct and justify his conservative opinions in the wake of an attack by Hazlitt on the poet’s early support of the French Revolution; thus he is careful to distance himself from any hazy or confused doctrines, of which eclecticism could easily become an example. Coleridge borrowed the essential material of his statement against eclecticism from Schelling:

> But the worst and widest impediment [to metaphysics] still remains. It is the predominance of a popular philosophy, at once the counterfeit and the mortal enemy of all true and manly metaphysical research. It is that corruption, introduced by certain immethodical aphorising Eclectics, who, dismissing not only all system, but all logical connection, pick and choose whatever is most plausible and showy; who select, whatever words can have some semblance of sense attached to them without the least expen-
diture of thought, in short whatever may enable men to talk of what they
do not understand, with a careful avoidance of every thing that might
awaken them to a moment’s suspicion of their ignorance. This alas! is an
irremediable disease, for it brings with it, not so much an indisposition to
any particular system, but an utter loss of taste and faculty for all system
and all philosophy. (167)

Like Schelling, Coleridge wants to explain why his contemporaries had
lost their taste for philosophy. Eclecticism was partly to blame, because it
substituted an “impotent sham philosophy” for analytical study and “apho-
ristic” wisdom for patient philosophical inquiry (Works 7.1:292). Coleridge
adds depth to Schelling’s briefer description with terms that would become
essential in later critiques of eclecticism. First, he indicates that eclecticism
is “popular”; even if he was unaware of Cousin as a rising star in phi-
losophy, he could have predicted the wide appeal that the eclectic principle
would have, how it would soothe minds tortured by the difficult choices
offered by ideologies. As Scottish philosopher William Angus Knight
would later concede, eclecticism’s chief proposition is an obvious one: there
is generally truth on both sides of any question. Coleridge must have seen
how the ordinary mind reaches for the indisputable truth, the easy resolu-
tion, and then shows it triumphantly before the bickering ideologues and
academics, asking, “what are you fools arguing about? Your battles are
pointless, your foes imaginary. Join us here in the practical world!”

Coleridge next identifies eclecticism as the “counterfeit” and “enemy
of all true and manly metaphysical research” (167). All of Cousin’s major
critics in Britain—Sir William Hamilton and George Henry Lewes in
particular—would expose what they believed to be his false assumptions
and exhortatory style that served to mask the emptiness of his proposi-
tions. They would complain, in much the same terms used by French critic
Hippolyte Taine, that he convinces his auditors with grand schemes and
epic generalizations that but mimic, or counterfeit, genuine philosophi-
cal inquiry. For Coleridge, the eclectic method is “unmanly” because it
bypasses rigorous analysis in favor of historical presentations and uses the
work done by others in a haphazard manner to forward its own agenda.
“Manly” research involves, it seems, stern self-discipline, perhaps even the
sacrifice of one’s health and happiness, to discover a fragmentary truth—a
truth that will have been earned, not stolen. The ambivalence in some
criticism toward Cousin and his eclectic principle would stem from the
recognition that he labored over his history of philosophy, over all those
editions and translations, but that he expended little thought (to para-
phrase Coleridge) in putting his system together. In fact, the eclectic seems
to justify his historical study by claiming for it a power to change lives that history as such does not normally possess. Hamilton would go so far as to say that Cousin did not understand what he was talking about. Coleridge believes that this was true of all Eclectics, but that their system allows them to proceed without “awaken[ing] them to a moment’s suspicion of their ignorance” (167). This “irremediable disease,” as Coleridge describes it, of a mistaken belief in one’s own powers of discernment encourages a person to rely on himself alone for judging true and false, good and evil, moral and immoral.

Third, Coleridge introduces the theme of “corruption,” which for him signifies the destruction of system and “all logical connection.” Corruption would also come to be synonymous with decadence, one of the chief complaints against eclecticism in the arts, and with a presentiment of cultural decline. Critics of eclecticism do not always distinguish whether this fall would be the result of a venal or a cardinal sin—another valence of corruption for Coleridge—whether from pollution of the old systems by foreign influences, such as those from the rising classes of the anarchistic Continent, or from open rebellion and blasphemy. Certainly, eclecticism was intended to be a conciliatory philosophy, but once people began to “pick and choose,” and to decide for themselves which portions of a doctrine they found agreeable enough to retain, then the integrity of any particular system would be destroyed. Of course, this picking and choosing would be most problematic when it came to one’s religion. For example, could one still be a faithful member of the Church of England if he or she decided that the style of medieval Catholicism better expressed the essence of Christianity? Were all those Gothic stone churches expressive of a resurgent core belief, or did they simply reflect the trend toward superficiality in worship? More specifically, if one rejected, say, the doctrine of transubstantiation but believed all the rest of the teachings of the Church of Rome, could one still be Catholic? If people began to ignore the organic development and coherence of a system, and to select only “whatever is most plausible [or] showy,” or proper to the spirit of the age, then what is to prevent them from inventing their versions of each doctrine and each system, just as it suits them? (One could argue that this is ultimately what has happened with religion in the twenty-first century, where we see the endless splintering of religious sects, the mixing of pop culture with religion, or selective obedience on the part of members of mainstream religions.) For conservatives, eclecticism signifies a catastrophic disregard of traditional authorities. For liberals, eclecticism represents emancipation of the individual mind. For radicals, eclecticism portends the reign of mediocrity.
Coleridge’s encapsulation of the opposition to eclecticism draws upon both conservative and radical opinions. Seeing that such a principle tends toward disintegration, rather than the ideal unity in diversity imagined by Cousin, toward the appearance of truth rather than the true, and toward indecision rather than decisive action, a philosopher-artist such as Coleridge would necessarily place his trust in traditional authority for holding negative social impulses in check and in the individual imagination for generating creative ideas. However, it would be misleading to overlook the eclectic qualities of Coleridge’s own work. In an amusing echo of his denunciation of “immethodical” Eclectics, he refers to his own *Biographia* as “an immethodical miscellany” (qtd. in Leask xxviii)—part biography, part literary criticism, part metaphysics, part literary theory, part history of philosophy, part philology, part exhortation, and part apology. The multiplicity of purpose matches the diversity of method and style employed in discovering and communicating his opinions. In the chapter on metaphysics, he exhibits great admiration for certain of the doctrines of Leibniz, the very same upon which Cousin constructed his idea of eclecticism. Leibniz taught that true philosophy would consist in “explain[ing] and collect[ing] the fragments of truth scattered through systems apparently the most incongruous” and that the “deeper […] we penetrat[ed] into the ground of things, the more truth we discover in the doctrines of the greater number of the philosophical sects” (*Biographia* 148). Since truth is often “masked” and “mutilated,” the task of the philosopher must be to seek it everywhere, without regard to the strange places in which he might find it. In an eclectic tour de force that would have delighted Cousin, Coleridge (following Leibniz) catalogues the truths to be found in opposing sects:

The want of *substantial reality* in the object of the senses, according to the sceptics; the harmonies or numbers, the prototypes and ideas, to which the Pythagoreans and Platonists reduced all things; the ONE and ALL of Parmenides and Plotinus, without Spinozism; the necessary connection of things according to the Stoics, reconcilable with the spontaneity of the other schools; the vital-philosophy of the Cabalists and Hermetists, who assumed the universality of sensation; the substantial forms and entelechies of Aristotle and the schoolmen, together with the mechanical solution of all particular phenomena according to Democritus and the recent philosophers—all these we shall find united in one perspective central point, which shows regularity and a coincidence of all the parts in the very object, which from every other point of view must appear confused and distorted. (148–49)

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Cousin had, of course, followed Leibniz closely in his original formulation of eclecticism, even borrowing this aphorism (which Coleridge quotes in the original French): “J’ai trouvé que le plupart des sectes ont raison dans une bonne partie de ce quelles avancent, mais non pas tant en ce quelles nient” (149).

The really attractive part of eclecticism is its promise to be the key to all mythologies; nothing has to be excluded when one’s philosophy exemplifies the principles of inclusion and tolerance. Eclecticism assumes, as Coleridge does here, that it is possible to achieve “one perspective central point” from which all systems might be viewed as they really are. But how that ideal viewpoint is to be found is not clearly explained either by Leibniz or by Cousin. The dilemma of the individual’s self-reliance remains, which may explain why, only a few pages further on, Coleridge comes out against eclecticism.

The Multitude of Voices

Despite eclecticism’s obvious attractions, uneasiness about it persisted. Apparently fueled by two of the most dangerous tendencies of the age—superficial learning and latitudinarian attitudes—eclecticism wore by turns the aspect of the philistine bourgeois, the pantheistic bohemian, and the cosmopolitan dilettante. Eclecticism focused attention on the problem of judgment, specifically how people who were only partially educated, by chance or by inclination, would determine which of the “prophets” of the age spoke the truth, or at least parlayed a recognizable version of the contemporary situation.

In an 1829 essay for the Quarterly Review on the “State and Prospects of the Country,” Robert Southey worries about the “progress” in the literary marketplace that every year makes more books available for sale. The increase is an obstacle to literature and education because no individual could possibly read and judge them all. The first of the two factors making the age an unpropitious one for concentrated study can be characterized as historical; living at a late period in history, a scholar is naturally more burdened by the sheer number of texts demanding his or her attention in any field of study—not to mention the “new” knowledge of those disciplines invented in modern times, which are jostling for prominence with traditional studies:

The Greeks had no other literature than their own, enriched with what little they had gleaned from Egypt; the Romans had no other than that of Greece; and, till within the last fifty years, the learning of a well-read per-
son was confined to that of Greece and Rome, a few of the most celebrated Italian, French, and Spanish writers, and a limited selection from the works published in our own language. To these languages, German must now be added; and in each of them, a list of authors of celebrity might be drawn up, whose works it would require the lifetime of a laborious student to digest. In addition to this, the sciences of agriculture, natural history in all its branches, mechanics, chemistry, mineralogy, and geology, have either been created or exceedingly extended. To master all this is impossible. No perseverance can toil through such a mass, nor memory retain it. (118–19)

Sounding almost panicked at the prospect of being overwhelmed with the “mass” of knowledge, Southey has captured one of the characteristic ideas of his century, namely that human learning had reached such dimensions in modern times that new institutions and organizations will be needed to cope with it all, to order it, to reduce it to more human dimensions. Yet the impulse toward reductive models gives rise to the second great difficulty facing scholars, and all reasonably educated people, in the nineteenth century: can the “new systems, manuals, and abridgements [. . .] conveying knowledge more easily, simply, or compendiously than before” (119) be relied upon to transmit the same ideas and information as the original authors would have done? The encyclopedias, dictionaries, anthologies, digests, periodical reviews, eclectic journals—in short, all those publications that promised to purvey the important knowledge of the day in swift and painless fashion—bypassed the labor and sacrifice once thought to compose the essential quality of the scholarly life. Even if digested knowledge sufficed for the merely educated person, how could these shortcuts ever satisfy the genuine seeker after truth? But without some guide through the vast tracts of human knowledge, how could any one person hope to cover any portion of it in his or her lifetime? Southey worries that the average reader will “give up profound and systematic application in despair, and betake [himself] to works of a subordinate character” until that person “becomes a mere living dictionary.” The tendency of the age is to substitute “mere knowledge, for the power of saying and doing that which is fit, which, more than anything besides, contributes to stamp this the age of moderate men, and to render the existing state of society so unfavourable to every sort of extraordinary excellence” (119). In Southey’s view the power to say and do “that which is fit” seems to derive from encounters with ideas at first hand, since the already digested knowledge emerges with the strong coloring of an interpreter’s opinions, making it difficult, if not impossible, for the twice-removed reader to capture the original spirit of the text. In the Biographia Literaria, Coleridge is even more severe in his judgment on
the worth of periodicals and digested knowledge. Satirically thanking the “anonymous critics” who had made his name famous, he jokes that readers will not “distinctly remember[ ] whether [his name] was introduced for an eulogy or for censure”: “And this becomes more likely, if (as I believe) the habit of perusing periodical works may be properly added to Averrhoes’s catalogue of ANTI-MNEMONICS, or weakeners of the memory” (32–33). Far from improving the understanding of the average reader, the “habit of perusing periodical works” leads to a kind of degeneration of knowledge, where all the conflicting opinions offered in various journals lead one further into confusion.

John Stuart Mill did not share their Conservative politics, but he agreed with some of the poets’ diagnoses of the leading characteristics of the age. One of the great dangers of what Mill called the “age of transition” was the advent of false prophets who would try to supplant the ancient institutions and fill the void of absent authority. In an inventory of its shortcomings, a transitional age must record its lack of consensus; the old authorities are divided among themselves or against each other, resulting in a “mixed state without received doctrine” (“Spirit of the Age” 28). While the “diffusion of superficial knowledge” is the “grand achievement” of the age, it is not the cause of transition; it is the tendency of people to discuss and question ideas, rather than embrace them, that gives the age its transitional character (6–8). In his essay on “Civilization,” Mill specifies how the increase of reading and the growth of commercial publishing exacerbate this “intellectual anarchy.” Demonstrating that the individual has less influence in a civilized society in which more decisions are made by “the movements of masses” (90), Mill argues that all classes ought to be prepared for the responsibilities of rule. Following Southey, Mill observes that civilization promotes a “relaxation of individual energy,” with wealth as the sole inducement to concentrated activity (97–98), and a reliance on opinion, without any reliable guide to judge what is true and what is quackery or puffing (100–101). The fate of literature in a civilized society, then, is not surprising:

It is not solely on the private virtues, that this growing insignificance of the individual in the mass, is productive of mischief. It corrupts the very fountain of the improvement of public opinion itself; it corrupts public teaching; it weakens the influence of the more cultivated few over the many. Literature has suffered more than any other human production by the common disease. When there were few books, and when few read at all save those who had been accustomed to read the best authors, books were written with the well-grounded expectation that they would be read carefully, and
Driving the destruction of literary values is the desperation of an author to succeed, to be noticed at all among the million competitors willing to do anything to capture, ever so briefly, the public’s attention. With the sheer mass of publications stacked up against any writer, he can no longer rely even on history to rescue him from oblivion. Advertising now trumps merit, and the press of opinion tramples genuine ideas. Both Southey and Mill recognize that time is working against even the most diligent readers, and without a track through the wilderness of opinions no one can hope to collect, even in the most ample of “golden treasuries,” the best works of the age. Mill’s scheme for overcoming the “system of individual competition” (105) in literature depends on exploiting the tendency of the age toward combination. In order to arrest the decay of literature and the reign of ignorant opinion, Mill proposes “organized co-operation among the leading intellects of the age, whereby works of first-rate merit, of whatever class, and of whatever tendency in point of opinion, might come forth with the stamp on them, from the first, of the approval of those whose name would carry authority” (106). This patently eclectic project would depend first of all on the “regeneration of individual character among our lettered and opulent classes,” a cultural sea change requiring the complete reformation of the university system—a notion Mill might have derived from Cousin, with whom he corresponded and who was a noted author on educational reform. Since “great minds” were never formed by institutions whose purpose was the reproduction of their own narrow values, the universities would have to become nonsectarian, both in admission policies and in teaching: “all thinkers, much above the common order, who have grown up in the Church of England, or in any other Church, have been produced in latitudinarian epochs, or while the impulse of intellectual emancipation which gave existence to the Church had not quite spent itself” (108). With the rooting out of the “principle [ . . . ] of dogmatic religion, dogmatic morality, dogmatic philosophy” (109), it might at last be possible to produce graduates “qualified to seek truth ardently, vigorously, and disinterestedly” (107)—those individuals who would eventually be capable of judging ideas on their merits. Teachers, Mill writes, would not
be expected to conceal their opinions for the sake of becoming eclectic or undogmatic, but would hold those opinions more firmly for “know[ing] all creeds, and, in enforcing [their] own, stat[ing] the arguments for all conflicting opinions fairly” (110). He concludes: “In this spirit it is that all the great subjects are taught from the chairs of the German and French universities” (110). In this reference to Cousin’s eclecticism, Mill acknowledges his debt to the eclectic paradigm and advocates an educational program founded on eclectic principles. Seeing in eclecticism a principle of democracy—a democracy that was anyway advancing relentlessly over the nineteenth century—Mill recognizes that the only cure for the “common disease” of the age, its intellectual confusion or eclectic tendency, is in the application of a rigorous principle of eclecticism. The pretension to knowledge would be supplanted by authentic knowledge, and the pretension of hack writing to literary values would be replaced by literature’s hard-won truths.6

Of all the statements on the intellectual anarchy of the nineteenth century, and its need for eclecticism, Thomas De Quincey offers perhaps the most prescient analysis of the future of human learning. In a brief 1824 essay, De Quincey concedes that “this is the age of superficial knowledge” of which the greatest proof is the encyclopedia—but “prodigious extension implies a due proportion of weak intension; a sealike expansion of knowledge will cover large shallows as well as large depths” (“Superficial Knowledge” 449). Unlike Mill, however, De Quincey does not imagine a vanguard of intellectuals emerging to guide confused youth through the literary wilderness; instead, he perceives that the proliferation of knowledge in all fields is leading to the division of intellectual labor. He even recommends that this specialization continue, as profundity is to be preferred over comprehensiveness (for the sake of knowledge itself); but as is typical of his writing, De Quincey severely qualifies this recommendation by offering an extremely appealing model of individual development as its opposite: “Let all the objects of the understanding in civil life or in science be represented by the letters of the alphabet: in Grecian life each man would separately go through all the letters in a tolerable way; whereas at present each letter is served by a distinct body of men. Consequently, the Grecian individual is superior to the modern; but the Grecian whole is inferior: for the whole is made up of the individuals; and the Grecian individual repeats himself. Whereas in modern life the whole derives its superiority from the very circumstances which constitute the inferiority of the parts [. . .]” (452). The question, then, for the history of the idea of eclecticism is whether, as a principle and a tendency, it will operate more like the modern machine, where each person contributes his bit of skill to the
overall operation, or whether, as a principle and a tendency, it will operate more like an educated Greek, who considers all the issues raised by all fields of knowledge, and determines for himself the truth in each. Clearly, time has become a factor in a way that it never could have been for that ancient Greek, whose whole world revolved around Greece and who saw only a noontime shadow of history beneath his feet. The multiplicity of modern life—and the fantastically long expanse of history trailing behind us—has catastrophically limited our ability to comprehend any subject at all. Now scholars are taught to be specialists, as De Quincey predicted we would be, and the impulse toward comprehensiveness is wisely laid aside. The eclectic, even in the nineteenth century, risks the integrity of his or her knowledge for the sake of that expansive vision.

The Burden of the Past

In his 1836 sketch of the architectural profession, A. W. N. Pugin satirized the tendency of his colleagues to sell their skills to whoever could afford them, and at whatever cost to their own aesthetic and moral principles. Architecture suffered from the influx of capital and from the spread of superficial knowledge about styles that gave the average man or woman license to demand a building or renovation in whatever style he or she fancied. The writer suffered similar indignities, resulting from the boom in reading and publishing, so that De Quincey’s vision of the fate of the scholar in the nineteenth century might also have predicted the fate of the artist. With the disappearance of traditional authorities, public opinion, transmitted through the organ of the press, became increasingly important, and literature was absorbed into this new function. Because writers who wanted readers had, on some level, to satisfy the demands of their public, they would often produce great quantities of historical poems, fictions, and biographies, or sensational novels and tales; though, of course, one of the extraordinary aspects of Victorian culture was the willingness of people to listen to men such as Mill, Carlyle, Ruskin, and Arnold berate them for their mistaken attitudes and careless actions. Certainly, the intellectual anarchy and pervasive unbelief these men found so troubling were manifested in the literature of the day, and nowhere was the situation more dire than in poetry. Everyone agreed that poetry had evolved at the beginning of civilization; the humanist philosopher Giambattista Vico even proposed that poetry made civilization possible by naming the phenomena of nature and transforming them into law-giving deities. Poetry seemed to spring from the human impulse toward belief in a transcendent reality, and when
that belief was lost, so too was the poetic faculty. The proliferation of competing belief systems and the geometrical increase in reading materials tended to erode the faith on which traditional institutions depended for their continued dominance; the crowd overwhelmed individual voices and limited the influence they might have; and so the poem and the poet faded into inconsequence.

For at least a century preceding William Hazlitt’s trenchant explanation of why poetry can only decline, poets and critics had offered various explanations for its demise. In fact, Walter Jackson Bate sees the growth of criticism in the mid-eighteenth century as an attempt “to reground the entire thinking about poetry in the light of one overwhelming fact: the obviously superior originality, and the at least apparently greater immediacy and universality of subject and appeal, of the poetry of earlier periods” (48). Eighteenth-century critics were the first to explain the superiority of ancient poetry historically; that is, they saw that the ethos of the ancients, with its passionate directness, was more conducive to the growth of poetry than were the affectations of civilized societies. At the head of the Romantic movement, Wordsworth believed that poetry might be renewed by returning to its sources: nature, simplicity, and common life. As Bate points out, however, the Romantic poets were in the minority. Most critics “assume[d] that the door [was] closed” (49). Belief in the marvelous and the heroic had vanished with Christianity, science, and the “well-ordered State”; language had become specialized, and less metaphorical, with the growth of analytical writing; the arts in general had become detached from ordinary life; and the subdivision of genres had contributed to the narrowness of the artist’s practice (49–52). As the reading audience grew larger, so did its “mediocrity of taste” (53). Finally, eighteenth-century critics blamed their own stock-in-trade, criticism, for intensifying self-consciousness and timidity in poets; but the growth of criticism was “considered inevitable as a culture grows older, and part of the price paid for the spread of literacy” (54).

A new emphasis in discussions of poetry’s decline appeared in the nineteenth century, with the comparison of progress in the sciences to progress in the arts. Hazlitt, in his brief essay for the *Round Table* (1817), “Why the Arts Are Not Progressive,” rejects the analogy between science and art as altogether false and dismisses the remedies for art’s tardiness—namely “study of the antique, the formation of academies, and the distribution of prizes”—as likely to do more harm than good: “When that original impulse no longer exists, when the inspiration of genius is fled, all the attempts to recall it are no better than the tricks of galvanism to restore the dead to life” (158). The galvanic solutions that Hazlitt mentions were precisely
those being employed in painting and architecture, and were actually creating (some thought) a great deal more confusion than had existed before. Now instead of a single model worthy of imitation—the classical—artists of the nineteenth century confronted at least two—the classical and the medieval. The institutionalization of the fine arts (painting and poetry for Hazlitt) and the professionalization of artists generally produce rules and criticism, but not, he believes, great art. According to Hazlitt, only that which is “mechanical, reducible to rule, or capable of demonstration, is progressive, and admits of gradual improvement: what is not mechanical or definite, but depends on genius, taste, and feeling, very soon becomes stationary, or retrograde, and loses more than it gains by transfusion” (158).

Like many of the writers of the Romantic period, Hazlitt aligns poetry with nature, and thus excludes the possibility of progress except by drawing upon that source. Science advances by building on previous discoveries, while the arts, depending on individual genius, “leaped at once from infancy to manhood” and “have in general declined ever after” (159). The great artists were not only in direct communication with nature; they also were unhampered by criticism from any but those who genuinely inclined toward art. Only those with “natural genius” attempted either poetry or criticism, while other great minds were employed with wars, religion, and politics—there were none of those connoisseurs and “pretenders to taste” whom the modern artist confronts as a rule, as soon as his work reaches the world. Hazlitt reminds the cheerleaders of progress that “The diffusion of taste is not the same thing as the improvement of taste” (161), and while institutions certainly promote the former, there is little evidence that they can affect the latter: “The number of candidates for fame, and of pretenders to criticism, is thus increased beyond all proportion, while the quantity of genius and feeling remains the same; with this difference, that the man of genius is lost in the crowd of competitors, who would never have become such but from encouragement and example; and that the opinion of those few persons whom nature intended for judges, is drowned with the noisy suffrages of shallow smatterers in taste. The principle of universal suffrage, however applicable to matters of government, which concern the common feelings and common interests of society, is by no means applicable to matters of taste, which can only be decided upon by the most refined understandings” (161). Hazlitt assumes that only persons born with an understanding susceptible of “refinement” can develop as critics and artists, which seems to make art forever undemocratic in a society that will eventually become democratic in its government. Denying that the “public taste is capable of gradual improvement,” Hazlitt apparently denies the efficacy of democratic education, a surprising assertion from
one whose own writing aimed to improve his readers with straightforward discourse on the chief topics of the day.Unlike the Romantics in France, who believed that anyone could be educated into understanding, though not into genius, Hazlitt wants to erect a barrier against incursions into fine art by the insensible and uncultivated, whose opinions on works of genius ought to be deflected, leaving them intact for the judgment of those whom nature has qualified for the task. If the proper judges are left to their work, then those works worthy of attention will reach public notice, while those with merely flashy presentation and little substance or art will end up in the dustbin of history.

Thomas Love Peacock’s wicked little treatise on The Four Ages of Poetry (1820) proposes a historical trajectory similar to the one offered by Hazlitt—poetry peaks in the second period of civilization, the Golden Age, soon after the mechanical aspects of the art have caught up with the brilliant expressions and vivid ideas of the Iron Age—but is much less forgiving of those latest entrants into the annals of literary history, the Lake Poets. Contemporary poets are living in what Peacock considers the second Brass Age, the modern period having four ages of its own, all dimmer reflections of the ancient ages of poetry. Blaming the obsession with picturesque beauty for driving budding poets back into nature, Peacock argues that these modern poets “convert[ed] the land they lived in into a sort of fairy-land, which they peopled with mysticisms and chimaeras” and inspired with their nonsense a whole host of “desperate imitators, who have brought the age of brass prematurely to its dotage” (15). Peacock views the embracing of history by poets with as much skepticism as their ecstatic return to nature, and contrasts their collective delusion with other fields of knowledge:

While the historian and the philosopher are advancing in, and accelerating, the progress of knowledge, the poet is wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance, and raking up the ashes of dead savages to find gewgaws and rattles for grown babies of the age. Mr. Scott digs up the poachers and cattle-stealers of the ancient border. Lord Byron cruises for thieves and pirates on the shores of the Morea and among the Greek islands. Mr. Southey wades through ponderous volumes of travels and old chronicles, from which he carefully selects all that is false, useless, and absurd, as being essentially poetical; [. . .]. Mr. Wordsworth picks up village legends from old women and sextons, and Mr. Coleridge, to the valuable information acquired from similar sources, superadds the dreams of crazy theologians and the mysticisms of German metaphysics, and favours the world with visions in verse, in which the quadruple elements of sexton, old woman,
Jeremy Taylor, and Emmanuel Kant, are harmonized into a delicious poetical compound. (16)

The critique here is unmistakably aimed at the eclecticism of the Romantic poets, who, in drawing inspiration from numerous sources, fail to promote—in Peacock’s opinion—any coherent ideas of their own. Far from representing progress in poetry, which would be a recovery of the originality of the ancient poets, the Romantics have proven that any return to the Golden Age of poetry is absolutely impossible. The Romantic is indiscriminately “eclectic” and therefore not a true eclectic at all. In effect, Peacock argues that the poets fail to follow the example of a scientifically oriented eclecticism: “The brighter the light diffused around [the modern poet] by the progress of reason, the thicker is the darkness of antiquated barbarism, in which he buries himself like a mole, to throw up the barren hillocks of his Cimmerian labours. The philosophic mental tranquillity which looks round with an equal eye on all external things, collects a store of ideas, discriminates their relative value, assigns to all their proper place, and from the materials of useful knowledge thus collected, appreciated, and arranged, forms new combinations that impress the stamp of their power and utility on the real business of life, is diametrically the reverse of that frame of mind which poetry inspires, or from which poetry can emanate” (17). Peacock makes it perfectly clear that the ill-considered, indiscriminate, and eclectic combinations of the Romantics will not “impress the stamp of their power and utility on the real business of life.” Though the two processes of collection Peacock describes might at first seem to advance toward equally rewarding ends, the poet’s self-burial in “the darkness of antiquated barbarism” does not have the same potential for progress that the philosophical eclectic’s has—and here is the crux of the problem in interpreting Peacock’s attitude toward eclecticism. He recognizes that there are two kinds of eclecticism, but cannot imagine that they would have anything in common, or would constitute similar ways of operating in response to a historical crisis of decline. For him, the mental attitude of the eclectic philosopher must be diametrically opposed to that of the frantic and mystical poet of the modern Brass Age—but not to the mental attitude that brought about the second Golden Age, around the time of the “revival of learning.” At that time, the collection of the scattered materials of the medieval troubadours and rediscovered Greek and Roman literature “resulted in a heterogeneous compound of all ages and nations in one picture; an infinite licence, which gave to the poet the free range of the whole field of imagination and memory” (12). The richness of Renaissance eclecticism derived from an ability to combine diverse
influences effectively and correctly; the bizarreness of Romantic eclecticism results from combinations that are jarring and offensive. Peacock’s ambivalence toward eclecticism is typical of nineteenth-century literary critics, whose horror at the misbegotten monsters of their own day gives way before the intricate eclectic beauties of the past. Hazlitt had called Milton the greatest imitator and greatest borrower to have lived, and, as Peacock intimated, his perfection resulted from his ability to combine the energy and power of the Golden Age with the “studied and elaborate magnificence” (13) of the Silver.

Thomas Babington Macaulay thought to set the capstone on the tomb of poetry when he wrote in 1825 that the most wonderful proof of Milton’s genius was the age in which the poet of Paradise Lost had lived. Like Macaulay himself, Milton lived in an age when poetry was becoming impossible—an enlightened age of scientific progress when analytical ability overtook poetic wisdom. Under these conditions, Milton’s education might have crippled him, as it gave him full knowledge of ancient models whose originality “def[ied] imitation” (“Milton” 3) and made him “regret [. . .] the ruder age of simple words and vivid impressions” (4). While Macaulay is concerned to demonstrate Milton’s Zeitgeist-defying genius, he also explains, without regret, the diminishing power of poetry in the nineteenth century: the steady advance of knowledge in one field—science—compensates for the loss of strength in another—poetry, or the arts in general. The key for Macaulay is in recognizing the opposing means by which art and science achieve perfection. Poetry thrives in the infancy of the race and springs from the wonder and mystery people feel when confronted with the natural world; science works to dispel mystery and thus improves gradually over the centuries: “Even when a system has been formed, there is still something to add, to alter, or to reject. Every generation enjoys the use of a vast hoard bequeathed to it by antiquity, and transmits that hoard, augmented by fresh acquisitions, to future ages” (4). In Macaulay’s view, imagination and knowledge are poised on great cosmic scales, and as the weight of accumulated knowledge grows heavier with each passing year, it steadily depletes the force and sharpness of imagination.

Few artists and poets rejoice at the accumulation of a “vast hoard” of works of genius. What to the scientist represents the foundation on which he will raise a still more durable structure to the artist signifies the towering obstacle of accomplished revelation. All that remains to the poet burdened with his inheritance is the ornamentation and ceaseless refinement of the “palace of art.” As Macaulay recognizes, science gains by refinement of its theories, while poetry almost always loses: “In an enlightened age there will
be much intelligence, much science, much philosophy, abundance of just classification and subtle analysis, abundance of wit and eloquence, abundance of verses, and even of good ones; but little poetry. Men will judge and compare; but they will not create” (6). In negative judgments of eclecticism in painting and architecture, the accusation of excessive scholarship was always the centerpiece. To paraphrase Macaulay, artists who “judge and compare [. . .] will not create,” and the tendency of civilized art to be refined, scholarly, and unoriginal would seem to support the (usually) Romantic opponents of eclecticism. The search for originality either paralyzed artists or provoked an eclectic compromise. Some artists attempted to strip away their civilized sensibilities in order to recover something of the purity of ancient expression. Straining against a treacherous language that betrays thought as it emerges, the poet has a still harder task ahead of him:

He who, in an enlightened and literary society, aspires to be a great poet, must first become a little child. He must take to pieces the whole web of his mind. He must unlearn much of that knowledge which has perhaps constituted hitherto his chief title to superiority. His very talents will be a hindrance to him. His difficulties will be proportioned to his proficiency in the pursuits which are fashionable among his contemporaries; and that proficiency will in general be proportioned to the vigour and activity of his mind. And it is well, if, after all his sacrifices and exertions, his works do not resemble a lisping man or a modern ruin. We have seen in our own time great talents, intense labour, and long meditation, employed in this struggle against the spirit of the age, and employed, we will not say absolutely in vain, but with dubious success and feeble applause. (7)

In the image of the modern poem as “a lisping man or a modern ruin,” Macaulay has captured the effect of the poet’s speaking a borrowed language. In attempting to translate his modish ideas into a language of the heart, the poet’s tongue grows large and clumsy in his mouth, as if to hold back insincere words. But the modern poet is also a modern ruin, a structure built to mimic natural processes and accumulated beauty. His language reflects the knowledge of his age and can be antique only by fraudulent means.

Macaulay perpetuated a legend of Milton that became a commonplace in the nineteenth century; his greatness “in an age so unfavourable to poetry” must “in some degree be attributed to his want of sight” (“Dryden” 20). Living blind and isolated from the mainstream of taste, Milton avoided its pollution. By contrast, Dryden swam in it, drank down
its influences, and fed its strength with his own limited genius. Macaulay's review of Dryden's poetical works complements the essay on Milton; though these two poets were proximate in time and space, their artistic lives could not have been more different. For Macaulay, Dryden was the "greatest of [ . . . ] the critical poets" (21), while Milton was the last of the great imaginative poets. All of Dryden’s disadvantages can be traced to the age in which he lived—“On no man did the age exercise so much influence” (21)—and all of his abilities are commensurate with an advanced stage of civilization. From the earlier essay, Macaulay retains this guiding principle, “that the creative faculty, and the critical faculty, cannot exist together in their highest perfection” (3–4), and builds from this premise a case against Dryden, which is also peculiarly a defense of the best of the second-rank poets.

Making the familiar argument that “critical discernment is not sufficient to make men poets” (5), Macaulay brings forward the issue that had been nagging at the literary pessimists for more than a century: “It is by giving faith to the creations of the imagination that a man becomes a poet [and] by treating those creations as deceptions, and by resolving them, as nearly as possible, into their elements, that he becomes a critic” (5). The earliest poets are best because they were all, in Bate’s term, just “postprimitive.” As Peacock argues in The Four Ages of Poetry, it was this second, golden age of humankind that produced the greatest works of art, when the knowledge of the mechanical part of the art was mastered, when the imagination was still young, and when belief was still possible. More than a theory for Macaulay, this was the law of human nature: “Our judgment ripens, our imagination decays” (8). Such a historical pattern might imply that there was very little hope for the future of art, since art seemed to depend on a state of naivété impossible to sustain with the advancement of knowledge. Art could thrive only in the briefest of human moments, and what came after was a kind of living fossil. The fundamental problem was unbelief, not specifically a lack of faith in religion, but an inability to suspend disbelief, to suppress the critical faculty: “We should act in the same manner [as the ancients] if the grief and horror produced in us by the works of the imagination amounted to real torture. But in us these emotions are comparatively languid. They rarely affect our appetite or our sleep. They leave us sufficiently at ease to trace them to their causes, and to estimate the powers which produce them. Our attention is speedily diverted from the images which call forth our tears to the art by which those images have been selected and combined. We applaud the genius of the writer. We applaud our own sagacity and sensibility, and we are comforted” (9). Neither modern audiences nor modern poets actually believe
in the emotions—let alone the marvelous actions—represented in art. The pleasure for the spectator, Macaulay contends, now comes from his or her awareness of the machinery, technique, and composition involved in creation. Paradoxically, this improvement in technical knowledge comes at the expense of imaginative content: “The progress of language, which was at first favourable, becomes fatal to it, and, instead of compensating for the decay of the imagination, accelerates that decay, and renders it more obvious” (11). Increasingly abstract language is comparable to money, another circulating medium, a formal resemblance that might highlight the decreasing actual value of language (12); but we already know that for Macaulay, advances in science compensated for the loss of imagination and belief. Despite these apparent shortcomings, Dryden occupies an important place in literary history, and Macaulay’s contempt for Dryden’s lesser abilities as a poet turns into a celebration of his capacity for criticism.

Another compensation for the loss of poetry is evident in the gains of criticism, which improves as science improves; but as Macaulay tells the story, Dryden struggled to reach even this height above the decadence of mainstream taste. Dryden commenced his career at a time when English literature had just suffered the withering influence of the Protectorate, and was about to sink further under the weight of a “foreign yoke”: “It was to please Charles that rhyme was first introduced into our plays. Thus, a rising blow, which would at any time have been mortal, was dealt to the English Drama, then just recovering from its languishing condition. Two detestable manners, the indigenous and the imported, were now in a state of alternate conflict and amalgamation. The bombastic meanness of the new style was blended with the ingenious absurdity of the old; and the mixture produced something which the world had never before seen, and which, we hope, it will never see again” (19). Before 1678 (the year Macaulay marks as the turning point in Dryden’s long career), Dryden falls under the spell of the court and develops an eclectic style, which combines the “bombastic meanness” and “ingenious absurdity” of new and old, foreign and native. Macaulay criticizes three chief failures of Dryden’s early manner: unrealistic, unbelievable characters; bombastic, ornate speeches; and excessive, undiscriminating flattery—all of which either cause or result from Dryden’s eclecticism. As an example of the inferior Dryden, Macaulay chooses Annum Mirabilis, a work, he says, that has “no claim to be called poetry” since “It is produced, not by creation, but by construction” (22). Brandishing his Homeric standard, Macaulay speedily dispatches Dryden’s poem, remarking on how his description of a sea battle with the Dutch is rendered “not by an act of the imagination, at once calling up the scene before the interior eye, but by painful meditation,—by turning the subject
round and round,—by tracing out facts into remote consequences” (22). Macaulay suggests here that Dryden simply has not got the imagination to bring the sea fight to life for his readers; instead, like a critic, he turns a once-living historical fact into lifeless abstraction. By way of example, Macaulay supplies this “favourable instance”:

Amidst whole heaps of spices lights a ball;  
And now their odours armed against them fly.  
Some preciously by shattered porcelain fall,  
And some by aromatic splinters die. (qtd. 22)

Objecting to the way “preciously” and “aromatic” “divert our whole attention to themselves,” Macaulay complains that the image of the battle “dissolves” before the excessive color of the words used to describe it. Compounding the fault of overly ornate language is the tendency to bombast, to violent language all out of proportion to the “abject tameness of the thought” (27). Dryden once wrote that audiences demanded these “rants,” but Macaulay disallows such a defense as “unworthy of a man of genius” (27). Of course, one could please without ranting, and this further instance of disjunction between language and thought leads to the troubling question of whether audiences even perceived how inappropriate Dryden’s language was. His characters, Macaulay argues, never seemed real, not because he wrote speeches for Moors and Americans, but because they, too, are abstractions, without variation and complexity: “As is the love of his heroes, such are all their other emotions. All their qualities, their courage, their generosity, their pride, are on the same colossal scale” (26). Mimicking ancient tragedy, Dryden fails to capture its emotion; he creates characters who tower over his modern audiences by their words and deeds, but who have no more apparent emotion than trees have. He admired the wildness of Shakespeare, Dante, and Homer, and thought to reach their perfection by “daring sublimity”: “he attempted, by affected fits of poetical fury, to bring on a real paroxysm; and [. . . ] he got nothing but his distortions for his pains” (27–28).

As Bate recounts in The Burden of the Past, Dryden late in life recognized how futile were these attempts to match the long strides of his ancestors:

Strong were our Syres; and as they Fought they Writ,  
Conqu’ring with force of Arms, and dint of Wit;  
Their’s was the Gyant Race, before the Flood;  
And thus, when Charles Return’d, our Empire stood.
... 
Our Age was cultivated thus at length; 
But what we gain’d in skill we lost in strength. 
Our Builders were, with want of Genius, curst; 
The Second Temple was not like the First. 
(“To Mr. Congreve” 1694, qtd. in Bate 1)

Struck forcibly by the futility of trying to equal the genius of their ancestors, the best of Dryden’s generation turned their powers to criticism. Macaulay attributes this shift to Dryden’s superior taste, which “gradually awakened his creative faculties” (31). It was also his propensity for excessive flattery and undiscriminating admiration that propelled him toward the founding of a critical school. While Macaulay does not draw attention to the role of Dryden’s catholicity in pushing him toward criticism, this trait is important in light of Dryden’s early eclecticism. Macaulay looks with revulsion upon the excessive flattery that he perceives in Dryden’s poetry, but is willing to overlook its presence even in the later period for the sake of his brilliant critical works. In this somewhat puzzled recognition of Dryden’s particular genius, Macaulay lights, I think, on the source of his power as a critic:

His literary creed was catholic, even to latitudinarianism; not from any want of acuteness, but from a disposition to be easily satisfied. He was quick to discern the smallest glimpse of merit; he was indulgent even to gross improprieties, when accompanied by any redeeming talent. When he said a severe thing, it was to serve a temporary purpose,—to support an argument, or to tease a rival. Never was so able a critic so free from fastidiousness. He loved the old poets, especially Shakespeare. He admired the ingenuity which Donne and Cowley had so wildly abused. He did justice, amidst the general silence, to the memory of Milton. He praised the skies the school-boy lines of Addison. Always looking on the fair side of every object, he admired extravagance, on account of the invention which he supposed it to indicate; he excused affectation in favour of wit; he tolerated even tameness, for the sake of the correctness which was its concomitant. (32)

By Macaulay’s account Dryden was willing to search high and low for the best expressions that his and previous ages had to offer. More specifically, I think it was this early practice of trying to combine “diverse beauties” that led him to found a “critical school” in the spirit of that early Carracci academy that emphasized selection and combination. Macaulay himself
characterized critical poetry as the “poetry of courtesy, [. . .] to which the memory, the judgment, and the wit, contribute far more than the imagination” (12). This “different species” of poetry thrived, in eclectic fashion, on mining and combining all that was usable from earlier works; and if sometimes Dryden’s compositions failed to evoke the emotion of those antecedents, then he contributed to his age a style of expression, and the consciousness of the diversity of past ages of poetry. By employing something of the old manner and something of the new, Dryden demonstrated how the literature of the past could be used eclectically in the present.

Turning his attention to the literature of his own age, in 1830 Macaulay railed against the poetic stylings of Robert Montgomery, the very type of the “modern ruin.” Popular in his day, and forgotten (as Macaulay predicted he would be) in ours, Montgomery’s work is puffed up by “the unsupported assertions of those who assume a right to criticize” (374); the reading public fearing to look foolish buys up in large numbers the works of the latest “master-spirit of the age” (376). Seeking to enhance his reputation by stealing ideas and images from greater talents, Montgomery even failed “to turn his booty to good account” (377). Macaulay dissects Montgomery’s plagiarized verses in order to expose the careless ignorance behind the praise heaped upon him. Two examples of Macaulay’s catalogue will suffice to demonstrate the vulgar eclecticism at work here. Addressing the sea, Byron wrote, “Time writes no wrinkle on thine azure brow,” while the thief Montgomery rendered the image ridiculously thus: “And thou, vast Ocean, on whose awful face / Time’s iron feet can print no ruin-trace” (378). From Walter Scott, Montgomery lifted this lovely comparison, “The dew that on the violet lies, / Mocks the dark lustre of thine eyes,” and made it his own: “And the bright dew-bead on the bramble lies, / Like liquid rapture upon beauty’s eyes” (378). Montgomery’s reckless thievery underscores the importance of responsible, informed criticism; one must learn how to select from the ever-increasing mass of literary production that which deserves praise and emulation. Macaulay pauses over Montgomery because “literature must be purified from this taint” (387) of plagiarism and eclecticism: “And this is fine poetry! This is what ranks its writer with the master-spirits of the age! This is what has been described, over and over again, in terms which would require some qualification if used respecting Paradise Lost! It is too much that this patchwork, made by stitching together old odds and ends [. . .] is to be picked off the dunghill on which it ought to rot, and to be held up to admiration as an inestimable specimen of art” (385). Macaulay opposes the “patchwork” brand of eclecticism that would raise a modern ruin and revel in the circulation of fraudulent treasures. But as real treasures accumulate, how is art to progress, if
not by the operations of eclecticism? Macaulay the critic offers no solution for the aspiring poet—probably because he did not see any. Typical of his age, Macaulay was willing to grant science the benefit of critical selection and comparison, but poetry and the other arts would have to proceed by dint of pure invention and imagination. Montgomery was indeed a terrible poet; I believe, however, that his fault lay not in imitating Scott and Byron, but rather in doing so incompetently.

Self-Consciousness as Disease

That Thomas Carlyle worried over the passing of poetry is apparent in his 1829 essay “Signs of the Times.” In it he famously diagnoses the malady of the nineteenth century as an imbalance between “dynamic” and “mechanic” forces. An overemphasis on mechanistic explanations and endeavors has precipitated the decline of religion, poetry, and morality: “There is a science which treats of, and practically addresses, the primary, unmodified forces and energies of man, the mysterious springs of Love, and Fear, and Wonder, of Enthusiasm, Poetry, Religion, all which have a truly vital and infinite character; as well as a science which practically addresses the finite, modified developments of these, when they take the shape of immediate ‘m motives,’ as hope of reward, or as fear of punishment” (72). Like Macaulay, Carlyle allows for a shifting balance of these forces over time; but he is not willing to admit that gains in mechanistic knowledge compensate for the loss of other kinds of wisdom. Nor is he deceived into thinking, by the proliferation of institutions and societies supporting the arts, that the arts are in fact healthy: “In defect of Raphaels, and Angelos, and Mozarts, we have Royal Academies of Painting, Sculpture, Music; whereby the languishing spirit of Art may be strengthened, as by the more generous diet of a Public Kitchen” (66). Rather, it is increasingly clear to Carlyle and many others that the formal organization of national culture generally signals a decline in cultural production. Just as Henry Fuseli contends that the academies are symptoms of art in distress, Carlyle refuses to see the proliferation of institutions as anything more positive than the mechanization of art. After all, were science and art “indebted principally to the founders of Schools and Universities?” (73). In his view schools existed as machines for the preservation and transmission of knowledge; and no great work of art or poetry could be created by a machine: “Again, were Homer and Shakespeare members of any beneficed guild, or made Poets by means of it? Were Painting and Sculpture created by forethought, brought into the world by institutions for that end? No; Science and Art
have, from first to last, been the free gift of Nature; an unsolicited, unexpected gift; often even a fatal one. These things rose up, as it were, by spontaneous growth, in the free soil and sunshine of Nature. They were not planted or grafted, nor even greatly multiplied or improved by the culture or manuring of institutions. Generally speaking, they have derived only partial help from these; often enough have suffered damage [. . .]. They originated in the Dynamical nature of man, not in his Mechanical nature” (73). Carlyle believed, with most of his thoughtful contemporaries, that works of original genius could have been produced only in a simpler age still in touch with the invisible, spiritual aspects of nature. As the histories of art and science took on more precise outlines in the early nineteenth century, it was evident that human creativity depended on the mysterious operations of unnamable forces; but Carlyle was willing to name these powers dynamical and to link them to religion, worship, morality, and wonder. Without an attitude of humility toward nature and its infinite diversity, human beings reduced themselves to digestive, reproductive machines, unable to create. Most distressing from Carlyle’s point of view, religion—the proper foundation of humility—was itself taking on a mechanical character, as people began to place their faith in the machines of practical science: “Religion in most countries, more or less in every country, is no longer what it was, and should be,—a thousand-voiced psalm from the heart of Man to his invisible Father, the fountain of all Goodness, Beauty, Truth, and revealed in every revelation of these; but for the most part, a wise prudential feeling grounded on mere calculation; a matter, as all others now are, of Expediency and Utility; whereby some smaller quantum of earthly enjoyment may be exchanged for a far larger quantum of celestial enjoyment. Thus Religion too is Profit, a working for wages; not Reverence, but vulgar Hope or Fear” (79). Carlyle found the “true Church of England” in the “preaching” of the daily newspapers, which inflict “moral censure” and impart “moral encouragement, consolation, edification” (80). As religion shares with the press its aim and its audience, it takes on its nature, which is to make profit by telling people what they want to hear, or to move the populace to action in some cause, whether it be right or wrong; unity of purpose cannot endure, virtue is a matter of “Public Opinion,” and the moral compass spins in its case. Being then of a “fundamental character” Unbelief spreads to the offspring of religion—literature. No longer a “thousand-voiced psalm” or “vesper hymn to the Spirit of Beauty,” poetry is “a fierce clashing of cymbals, and shouting of multitudes” (80). Many of these discordant voices possess talent, but in such a noisy age who will hear them? The disturbing answer is that only the loudest—the best-advertised, so to speak—will penetrate the
tumult. Under these conditions, poetry will need not inspiration, but flash and style—which explains why bad poets sell: they need only the demeanor of the poet to convince a gullible public of their poetic nature; they require but the sturm und drang of the Romantic to raise a storm cloud of approbation around their heads.

Despite having similar views on the state of contemporary poetry, Carlyle and Macaulay bring divergent perceptions of progress in art and science to bear on their explanations of poetry’s decline. Macaulay judged advances in science to be the result of centuries of study, while rare artistic geniuses (most of whom lived long ago) conjured up occasional miracles. By contrast, Carlyle located the ground spring of inspiration for both art and science in the individual. His own age was sick because the arts and sciences continued to produce without any reference to a higher motive force than the “force of circumstances.” The works of individual genius were reduced to little more than mechanistic theories or recipes of three parts environment stirred into one part heredity. The painter Henry Fuseli saw in eclecticism and its recipes the mechanization of art; Carlyle compared the creation of a modern poem to another mechanical process, bricklaying: “We enjoy, we see nothing by direct vision; but only by reflection, and in anatomical dismemberment. [. . .] We have our little theory on all human and divine things. Poetry, the working of genius itself, which in all times, with one or another meaning, has been called Inspiration, and held to be mysterious and inscrutable, is no longer without its scientific exposition. The building of the lofty rhyme is like any other masonry or bricklaying: we have theories of its rise, height, decline, and fall,—which latter, it would seem, is now near, among all people” (79). Carlyle and Fuseli observed that the collection and theorization of art in institutional settings tended to produce lackluster reflections of original works of genius—or worse, the dismembered horrors of a Robert Montgomery. And yet, toward the end of “Signs of the Times” Carlyle acknowledges that the “admiration of old nobleness, which now so often shows itself as a faint dilettantism, will one day become a generous emulation, and man may again be all that he has been, and more than he has been” (83–84). From the Carracci to Winckelmann, and from Dryden to Macaulay, the idea that careful study and emulation could “save” art had been a powerful one; but with the proliferation of criticism, scholarship, reviews, and, above all, poetry, reaching the attention of a partially educated public, who would judge the soundness of the “third temple”?

This ambivalence toward criticism actually forms the basis for Carlyle’s next major essay on the spirit of the age, “Characteristics,” in which he questions whether all of this “self-contemplation” can really be healthy.
Two major premises inform the essay, both of which have important bearing on nineteenth-century attitudes to eclecticism: “The beginning of Inquiry is Disease” (40) and “the end of Understanding is not to prove, and find reasons, but to know and believe” (43). In formulating his theory that all speculation is a kind of sickness, Carlyle assumes that “the first condition of complete health is, that each organ perform its function unconsciously, unheeded; let but any organ announce its separate existence, were it even boastfully, and for pleasure, not for pain, then already has one of those unfortunate ‘false centres of sensibility’ established itself, already is derangement there” (39). Since the unexamined body is the only healthy body, the only healthy society must be a precritical one. Carlyle dwells nostalgically on ancient “republics” and monarchies where every “organ”—or person—“perform[ed] its function unconsciously” and where society was what we can call whole, in both senses of the word. The individual man was in himself a whole, or complete union; and could combine with his fellows as the living member of a greater whole. For all men, through their life, were animated by one great Idea; thus all efforts pointed one way, every where there was wholeness. Opinion and Action had not yet become disunited; but the former could still produce the latter, or attempt to produce it, as the stamp does its impression while the wax is not hardened. Thought, and the Voice of thought, were also a unison; thus, instead of Speculation we had Poetry; Literature, in its rude utterance, was as yet a heroic Song, perhaps, too, a devotional Anthem. Religion was everywhere; Philosophy lay hid under it, peacefully included in it. Herein, as in the life-centre of all, lay the true health and oneness. Only at a later era must Religion split itself into Philosophies; and thereby the vital union of Thought being lost, disunion and mutual collision in all provinces of Speech and Action more and more prevail. For if the Poet, or Priest, or by whatever title the inspired thinker may be named, is the sign of vigour and wellbeing; so likewise is the Logician, or uninspired thinker, the sign of disease, probably of decrepitude and decay. (50)

Like many of his contemporaries, Carlyle imagined a prelapsarian state in which men and women existed in harmony with each other and with their environment. Differences in opinion arising from speculation fractured these thoughtlessly ideal societies; people no longer shared a single idea, worked toward a common purpose, or worshipped in one church. Diverse populations lack the unity of Carlyle’s “antique Republic”; antagonistic religions undermine the solidarity of the “feudal monarchy”; and museums, libraries, and universities exacerbate the mood of self-contemplation.
Philosophies divorced from religion in particular draw Carlyle’s attack, because they first encourage skepticism toward traditional value systems and then give birth to the most damaging of modern ailments, unbelief. In his sketch of the precritical society, Carlyle shows religion in harmony with philosophy, not yet “split into Philosophies,” and literature in service to religion, a “heroic Song” or “devotional Anthem,” not yet disintegrated by speculation. The “inspired thinker” creates unconsciously, while the “uninspired thinker” manufactures consciously (51). Taking up once again his preferred diagnosis of modern life, Carlyle equates the “Division, Dismemberment, and partial healing of the wrong” (40) in society with mechanization, and machinery with speculation. Instead of art, we have theories of art; instead of poetry, we have reviews of poetry—these secondary creations are but the machinery of logic, “sign[s] of decrepitude and decay.”

Carlyle’s second major premise in the essay is, of course, almost inseparable from the first: that the goal of understanding is not to know, but to believe. Modern poets cannot match the sublimity of their ancestors, because they no longer believe in their creations. Instead of awaiting some species of divine inspiration, they collect, assemble, and imitate the “treasures” of the past; essentially they gather up old poems for raw material and manufacture new ones, no matter that they cannot feel or know what ancient poets knew and felt about the words and ideas they used so effectively. Listening hard for the sounds of genius, modern poets forget, Carlyle says, that “genius is ever a secret to itself”: “The Shakespeare takes no airs for writing Hamlet and the Tempest, understands not that it is anything surprising: Milton, again, is more conscious of his faculty, which accordingly is an inferior one. On the other hand, what cackling and strutting must we not often hear and see, when, in some shape of academical proclision, maiden speech, review article, this or the other well-fledged goose has produced its goose-egg, of quite measurable value, were it the pink of its whole kind; and wonders why all mortals do not wonder!” (42). Consciousness produces art of inferior quality—for Carlyle, no other outcome is possible. But does it follow that academics, reviewers, and second-rate poets should cease producing work? If one cannot be Shakespeare, should one give up the art? Has literature reached the end of its history? Certainly not. In many of his writings, Carlyle demonstrates his commitment to a cyclical model of history that predicts the eventual spiritual renewal of society, a rebirth that will mean the dawning of a new era of poetry, in its broadest sense. Surrendering to the irony of his position as reviewer, he acknowledges that “the diseased self-conscious state of Literature [is] disclosed in this one fact, which lies so near us here, the prevalence of
Reviewing!” (57). But he asks more pointedly whether self-consciousness is more than a symptom, whether “it is also the attempt towards cure” (54). As with his hope that the “admiration of old nobleness” might lead to “generous emulation,” Carlyle here trusts that in doing this “sick thing” and “listen[ing] to itself,” Literature might return to a healthier state. Despite Carlyle’s opposition to eclecticism and specifically to its modern representative, Victor Cousin (66), his most optimistic pronouncement on the future of literature takes a very eclectic-historicist view of the present situation, anticipating that the best part of the past will always be with us:

The true Past departs not, nothing that was worthy in the Past departs; no Truth or Goodness realized by man ever dies, or can die; but is all still here, and, recognised or not, lives and works through endless changes. If all things, to speak in the German dialect, are discerned by us, and exist for us, in an element of Time, and therefore of Mortality and Mutability; yet Time itself reposes on Eternity: the truly Great and Transcendental has its basis and substance in Eternity; stands revealed to us as Eternity in a vesture of Time. Thus in all Poetry, Worship, Art, Society, as one form passes into another, nothing is lost: it is but the superficial, as it were the body only, that grows obsolete and dies; under the mortal body lies a soul that is immortal; that anew incarnates itself in fairer revelation; and the Present is the living sum-total of the whole Past. (65)

For Carlyle in his role as historian, the key to revitalizing the present was collecting the biographies of great men whose words and actions would inspire people the way religion once did; since “the Present is the living sum-total of the whole Past,” the present actually benefits from “increased resources”—from the “new wealth which the old coffers will no longer contain” (65). The forms of past art survive, even when the inspiration and belief is lost, and so the question for Carlyle becomes, as it did for most critics and historians of the arts, what will be the new foundation of our belief? Will we have an accidental, indiscriminate mixture of past forms and ideas driven by marketplace forces? Or will we achieve a considered, critical selection of past art that will assist us in developing the style by which the age will truly express itself?

With a few exceptions, most reviewers and literary critics judged the poetry of the mid-nineteenth century severely and retained the pessimistic tone of their eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century precursors. Far from benefiting from the “increased resources” of history and world culture, Victorian poets seemed to travel in the old ruts, to be imitative in a way that was antithetical to the growth of a new style of poetry. Charles
Kingsley’s 1851 article in *Fraser’s*, irritably titled “The Prevailing Epidemic,” is typical of the response to contemporary poetry and its incoherent eclecticism. Kingsley commences his review of “nine new books of poetry, whereof only two, if as many, are of such merit as to make it conceivable to us why they should have been published” by iterating a great Carlylean truth: “If a man has a single new fact, or thought, or metre, to add to the accumulated treasure-heaps of mankind, let him bring it, and we will welcome him as a benefactor, however small his gift [. . .] but if all he can do is to say over again things which have already been said a great deal better, let him be silent” (492). Not only does Kingsley betray concern over the enormous crowd of publications vying for his attention at *Fraser’s*; he also worries over the lack of “sound and sterling critic[s]” who will stem the torrent of amateur and ill-considered literary offerings. Although he will not promise to read through all the works he will review, he yet maintains that “a book may be worth reviewing, though not worth publishing,—even as a great many actions are fit to be punished, which are by no means fit to be done” (493). Acting on this principle, he attempts “to take the most and the least faulty [works] before us, and by exposing, through them, some of the common poetic mistakes and superstitions of the day, try, if possible, to warn others from the road which leads to Limbo Patrum, the region of failures and abortions” (509). Kingsley lists as the most egregious fault of aspiring poets the total lack of art or manner in the poetry—a consequence, he feels, of the widespread belief that sincerity of feeling is sufficient to merit any assemblage of words whatever: “Now, is this a book to be read through? especially when the author informs you in the preface that it has no plot, and has actually been made as you make chairs and tables, bits at a time, jotted down in a note-book, ‘altogether unpremeditated either in design or otherwise’” (494). According to Kingsley, such scribblers are not called to poetry; they do not feel any stirring joyfulness in the play of language, nor do they have any grand ideas to bequeath to humanity.

Compounding the thoughtlessness that allows amateur productions to reach the public is the noticeably sloppy language of which they are composed. In his dissection of W. R. Cassels’s poem “Pygmalion,” Kingsley draws attention to the particular weaknesses of the modern poet. First, Cassels errs by his imprecise word choices, which Kingsley demonstrates by citing passages that hint at a careless and wasteful mimicry of romantic images. The offending poet stumbles with the phrase “verderous pleasure” (Kingsley queries, “What sort of pleasure is that?”), with “That heaven sets lambent on its imaged self” (Kingsley begs to know, “What in heaven, or its imaged self either, does that mean?”), and “Upon each limb / Grace
laid its sweet commandment lovingly” (Kingsley wonders, “Why lovingly? Did grace love the statue? If so, what is grace?”) (495). Second, Cassels falls prey to a habit that Kingsley regards as the most offensive of the modern poet, namely frequent reference to the wistful longings, unique powers of observation, and all-around incomparable genius of the Poet. In “Pygmalion” he envisions streams “Calling forth flowers from the slumbering earth, / Like ‘thoughts from the dream of a Poet,’” (495); in another poem Cassels tells the story of a poet disappointed in the world who comes back to his first love in the country (496). While Kingsley does not detest this latter poem as much as Cassels’s others, he wishes it had any other person as its hero. The hackneyed image of the poet that the Victorians inherited from the Romantics cannot be blamed entirely on the wave of feeling that washed out traditional poetic values earlier in the century. The Romantic poets seemed to offer a kind of generalized notion of the poetic nature, whereby any reasonably thoughtful individual might lay claim to heightened perception and feelings. One of the works Kingsley reviews accordingly contains no fewer than four poems about poets—“The Poet’s Bride,” “Poesie,” “The Poet,” and “Sonnet—The Outer and Inner Life of a Poet” (498)—a density that prompts the critic to complain that poetry is suffering from an epidemic of “poets”: “Why will he run into the modern cant of young authors on this point too? Instead of writing poetry now-a-days, people write spoilt prose about poets, and think that will do as well. Poetry about Poets!—a folio commentary on a bank-note! If they know so perfectly what poets ought to be, why don’t they go and be it, and let the poor world, not over-stocked with ‘world-singers’ just now, see what it is like? Just as the unfortunate Germans are, or were, overrun with scribblers of ‘Kunst-novellen,’ who could not draw a cow if they were asked, so we are with poet-scribblers who can’t write poetry” (498). In all of these examples, Kingsley sees a gap between theory and practice, saying and doing—there are novels about artists written by people who know nothing about art, poems about poets written by people who know nothing about poetry. The pervasiveness of poetry about poets (and the corresponding evacuation of genuine thought or feeling) is symptomatic of the drift in modern poetry toward a vague and eclectic spiritualism.

In the nineteenth century, Kingsley complains, it suffices to look like a thing in order to be it—modern poets substitute the re-presentation (or the theory) for the act. Since the audience for poetry no longer understands the impulse behind it or the words that compose the great poems of the past, the modern poet’s superficiality might escape detection. As long as he collects enough of the catchphrases, loads his poem with the usual images, and assumes the appropriately wistful attitude, most casual observers will
reckon him a poet: “It is a sad style, this, which too many young men have got into now-a-days, in prose and verse: one part Carlylese, one part Tennysonian, one part Bulwerean, one part third-hand Fichtean, and seven parts Anna-Matilda Slipstrop, stolen apparently from her well-known ballad in the Rejected Addresses; everybody’s peculiarities, and nobody’s beauties; great, big, huge stock-words, every one of them a hoary sinner about town these ten years, substituted for a thought in every line, except where the young poets forget themselves a moment, and their dyed wigs get awry, and the native baldness peeps out” (497). In revealing the recipe mixture for most modern poems, Kingsley foregrounds one item in the list: pretentiousness. The use of “stock-words” in place of authentic thought can be blamed in part on the spread of superficial knowledge, which encourages individuals to lay claim to a more expansive territory of knowledge than is really wise, given their limited resources for holding onto it. Kingsley detects a misunderstanding of the most basic philosophical precepts in David Holt’s Lay of Hero-Worship when the poet writes “Out of the Real the Ideal springeth,” and he counters—no matter whether the poet meant to be cleverly paradoxical—“Nonsense! [. . . ] The ideal is the real, and the only real, according to all philosophies which acknowledge an ideal, and not a mere nominal abstract” (497). Since the poet has “filched” these terms (and many others that Kingsley lists) from philosophy, “they must be used rightly, and not wrongly” (497). But Holt exhibits a far more dire brand of pretentiousness for Kingsley when he claims that he can construct a “basement upon which to build a bright / Edifice of Divine imaginings” (497). Here Kingsley recognizes the hated spiritualism of the age with its “Every-man-his-own-God-maker-cant” (498) and blasts Holt for invoking the Divine as a means to glorify the poet and his imaginings, “just as you would intense or gorgeous, or ‘utterless,’ or any other word from the stock-cant vocabulary” (497). Kingsley caps his argument against the pseudoreligious feeling of so much contemporary poetry with a diatribe against the thoughtless eclecticism of the age: “Seriously, the prevalence of this sort of—what shall we call it?—Pseudo-Spiritualistico-Eclecticico-Hypoplatonico-Pantheistico-Pamborborotaractic Sentimentalism, infecting the greater part of our bad poetry, and too much of our good, is an ugly sign of the ‘unreality,’ as the modern phrase is—the lying, as our forefathers used to call it, in their coarse way—which is abroad in the world;—nasty foul out-croppings of Mr. Carlyle’s universal ‘Liars’-rock substratum,’ in the very sanctuary of God, as poetry once was and will be again, but never to those who persist in this fashion of writing” (498). Kingsley asks these poets to give up writing poetry, to come into contact with one “fact,” and to quit pretending to illumination that they do not possess (499). Such
pretending contributes to the spread of a dangerous state of unreality, particularly in the upper classes, who seem most disposed to write nonsense, and who are most likely to be estranged from any “simple, universal word, or thought, or feeling, of human nature” (499).

The spread of superficial knowledge, false religious feeling, philosophical confusion, rampant literary borrowing, and intellectual laziness are familiar symptoms of eclecticism. Kingsley adds one more feature to the idea of eclecticism at mid-century: its effeminacy. Coleridge and Lewes might have laid the foundation for Kingsley’s diagnosis, but this muscular Christian made unmanliness a central feature of the (literary) spirit of the age. In fact, Kingsley links almost all of the negative characteristics of modern poetry to its unmanliness. He first employs sexual language in his critique of Cassels’s poem “Pygmalion.” Glossing the final lines, in which Pygmalion finally enjoys the warm contact of his Galatea (“He clasped the maid unto his beating heart, / As father might the daughter of his love”), Kingsley complains, “Oh, most lame and impotent conclusion!” (496). While playing up the humor of a climax driven by paternal love, Kingsley also speaks to the lack of poetic consummation. Instead of feeling the fire of sexual passion, Cassels supplies only “dim wonderment,” a conclusion Kingsley dismisses as “vapid, gaudy, wordy, misty bombast and slipslop, without definite images, sound manful thought, or even correct use of language” (496). Cassels is unable to satisfy the poetic promise raised by his borrowings from more “virile” sources such as Carlyle, Tennyson, and Bulwer Lytton, being, Kingsley mocks, “seven parts Anna-Matilda Slipslop” (497). Not surprisingly, Kingsley holds out the “poetess” as the ultimate failure for the young men whom he primarily addresses in this essay. The “quasi-metaphysical verbiage” of so many modern poets bypasses the “severely philosophic method” of the always masculine scholar (501). The “Autotheistic” position (the false religious feeling and poet-worship Kingsley detests) betrays a deep-seated cowardice, barely separated as it is “from sheer, blank, honest, manful Atheism—honest and manful because it wears no rouge, and has courage to look steadily at the reflection of its own skeleton face” (498). Kingsley implies throughout “The Prevailing Epidemic” that the “sanctuary of God” in which true poetry dwells can be retaken only by honest, “manful” language, which has been lost, he believes, in the imprecise, perplexed vocabulary of modern life.

Just as Macaulay reviewed the work of a bad poet in order to remind critics of their obligation to serve the public, Kingsley rehearsed the faults of modern poetry in order to arrest the decline of the art. He hoped that poetry would come to reflect the age in a significant way or even to transcend it by a mastery of traditional form—a mastery that could come only
with a return to the beliefs that shaped tradition. But how were these foundational beliefs to be recovered and restored? In the second part of this book, I consider five writers (including Kingsley) who struggled to create in an age of eclecticism. Most writers discovered the necessity of compromise. The conditions of literary modernity demanded it. Just as Ruskin tried to find principles for modern architecture that would be like Gothic, but different, writers had to understand both the structure and the spirit of past literature. Old forms might be infused with new meanings, or combined to create new styles, and new modes of expression might equal the force of the antique; but this could not happen ex nihilo. In the ordinary sense, every writer born in the nineteenth century was eclectic. But if these writers wanted to use that vast inheritance, they had to learn how to be eclectic.