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Introduction

"The greatest creations in world literature," remarked the late Amos Oz, "have generally been produced in the twilight, or in relation to a period of twilight."[1] Twilight stands here for the unraveling of a cultural world, as its customs, beliefs, and linguistic patterns are overtaken by new regimes of meaning and power. "Periods of flourishing success . . . when things are getting bigger and stronger are not propitious to storytellers," states Oz. It is when a civilization begins to fall apart, when established institutions and ideologies lose their purchase on the minds of their inheritors, that the literary imagination comes into its own:

> And so, in the twilight between a great sunset and the vague glimmering of a new dawn, someone like Dante stands poised between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Or Cervantes and Shakespeare on the threshold of the modern age. Or the great Russian literature of Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, written to the accompaniment of the death-knell of Orthodox, tsarist Russia. . . . Similarly Thomas Mann, and in a different way Kafka too, [writing] in the period of the decline of comfortable bourgeois Europe, heavy with years and old ways and manners and patterns of behavior and speech and mentalities, and in their differing ways knowing that this world was doomed.[2]

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1. Amos Oz, *Under This Blazing Sun*, trans. Nicholas de Lange (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 22.

2. Oz, *Under This Blazing Sun*, 23–24.

This rough-and-ready sketch is open to criticism on several fronts.[3] But Oz is surely right that "twilight"—the ending of a Golden Age or passing of an era—has been one of Western literature's earliest and most enduring preoccupations. How early? Another well-known survey—this one by Raymond Williams—wryly traces the trope from twentieth-century invocations (by F.R. Leavis and others) back to nineteenth-century elegies to the pre-industrial English countryside (in Thomas Hardy and George Eliot), eighteenth-century paeans to pre-enclosure rural virtues (Oliver Goldsmith), early Elizabethan responses to commercialism (Philip Massinger), Thomas More's *Utopia*, the Magna Carte, Virgil, and eventually all the way back to the Garden of Eden, the *terminus post quem* of the Western canon.[4]

The present study will not stretch quite that far, nor will it cover the range of literary modes evoked by Oz's and Williams's sweeping genealogies. For reasons that will soon become evident, it will restrict itself to a single type, which I call the novel of cultural extinction, and offer close readings in the works of three of its most accomplished twentieth-century practitioners: American Edith Wharton, Austro-Hungarian Joseph Roth, and Israeli Yaakov Shabtai. Contextualizing the book's argument, however, will require reaching back beyond the Great War to the beginning of the long nineteenth century, when the form acquires its trademark historicist view of culture and culturalist view of the self. For it is then, in the seminal works of Maria Edgeworth and Walter Scott, that the theme of *cultural* extinction, by which I mean the terminal disappearance of distinct, geographically locatable, and culturally identifiable ways of life, begins to assume its recognizable modern shape.

As this book will show, underlying the striking similarities in concern and method among Wharton, Roth, and Shabtai is a durable, fertile, and highly appropriable repository of tropes and representational strategies, which, after being first assembled and reworked into narrative prose fiction by Edgeworth, Scott, and their peers, radiated out of England's Anglo-Celtic periphery to become, by the middle of the twentieth century, a truly global genre. Indeed, the preoccupation with cultural vanishing not only

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3. A critical reader of Oz's essay might point out, for instance, that great works of literature have been known to appear in times of prosperous stability, not just of crisis. Besides, any critical statement that overlooks the vast differences in culture, circumstance, and outlook that distinguish a late-Medieval Florentine poet from a German-speaking Czech modernist must seem, at least by today's critical standards, deeply problematic.

4. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 9–12.

links the exemplary figures at the center of this study; it is the thread that ties James Fenimore Cooper to Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Ippolito Nievo to Thomas Hardy, Theodor Fontane to Willa Cather, S.Y. Agnon to Chinua Achebe, Ahmed Ali to Evelyn Waugh, and Tomasi di Lampedusa to Mario Vargas Llosa—a provisional list that would expand significantly were we to include the scores of mid- and late-nineteenth-century regionalist writers in Europe and America who sought to record in fiction their nations' vanishing pockets of traditional life.

Why does the specter of cultural extinction loom so large in the history of realist fiction? How do we account for the fact that the literary genre famously credited by Benedict Anderson with imagining communities into existence seems to have dwelled, as insistently, on their dispossession and collapse? What distinguishes twentieth-century renditions of the cultural-extinction trope from its earlier invocations? And what, finally, might this enduring thematic preoccupation have to teach us about what philosopher Samuel Scheffler has described as the "elusive influence of time in our thinking about ourselves"?[5] These are the questions at the heart of *The Blossom Which We Are*. Its main objectives are, first, to make a case for cultural extinction as a theme that grounds a genre; and, second, to argue that this genre, far from incidental or marginal to the realist enterprise, offers a privileged site for exploring key aspects of the history and development of this literary mode. If the theme of cultural transience warrants our attention today, I claim, it is because, like the more closely studied marriage and Bildungs masterplots, it opens an invaluable window onto what Georg Lukács called the ideology of realism,[6] while also illuminating how the novel has negotiated the pressures and challenges of modernity. Insofar as many of these challenges are still ongoing, the novel of cultural extinction, I claim, also has a timely lesson to teach.

In maintaining that the novels I shall be examining impart a common lesson, I do not mean to suggest that they converge on a single moral viewpoint or that their authors espoused a similar set of political "positions" or "values." Indeed, comparing Wharton, Roth, and Shabtai on such a basis would yield only superficial similarities. Their biographies, the milieus in which they moved, and the sociopolitical contexts to which they

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5. Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife* (New York: Oxford, 2013), 16.

6. Georg Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism," in *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Terry Eagleton and Frew Milne (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996), 141–162.

responded were simply too different to repay such comparisons. What these twentieth-century realist writers did significantly share, I want to claim, is not a set of moral or political convictions exactly, but a common *attitude*, a similar way of relating to their respective values and beliefs.

I take my cue here from the way Louis Menand describes the intellectual temperament shared by the founding fathers of the American pragmatist tradition: Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, Charles M. Peirce, and John Dewey: "If we strain out the differences, personal and philosophical, they had with one another, we can say that what these four thinkers had in common was not a group of ideas, but a single idea—an idea about ideas."[7] That meta-idea, writes Menand, was that the concepts we use are not representations of the world "out there" but tools invented by human groups in order to deal with themselves and their environments.[8] This idea could take root in late-nineteenth-century America, he goes on to claim, because of the cultural climate that set in during the post–Civil War years. To come of age in the wake of that national catastrophe was to assume a new and decidedly more skeptical relation to accepted truths and received ideas, an attitude born of the recent experience of the fragility and ephemerality of social and political institutions.[9]

A similar awareness, I claim, ties together the figures at the center of my study. Their different social backgrounds and political commitments notwithstanding, Wharton, Roth, and Shabtai all believed they had experienced what Wharton described as the "sudden and total extinction" of the worlds of their youth: Old New York (in the case of Wharton), the Habsburg Empire (in Roth), and so-called Little Tel Aviv [*Tel Aviv ha'ktana*], the urban hub of the historical Zionist labor movement (Shabtai).[10] All three then narrated this experience from the presumptive standpoint of survivor-witnesses in major works: *The Age of Innocence* (1920), *The Radetzky March* (1932), and *Past Continuous* (1977). While the cultural formations whose demise these novels chronicle could scarcely have been more different, the manner in which they are depicted is the same. Culture, as represented in Wharton's, Roth's, and

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7. Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), x.

8. Menand, *Metaphysical Club*, xii.

9. This disposition, it should be noted, is equally conducive to pragmatist skepticism and xenophobia and self-isolationism, which was the other face of that era.

10. Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York & London: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1934), 7.

Shabtai's works, is *both* a world-structuring and identity-sustaining power *and* an ungrounded, vulnerable, and ultimately transient episode.

Richard Rorty, in one of his essays on Heidegger, captures the picture of culture projected by Wharton's, Roth's, and Shabtai's novels of cultural extinction. On Rorty's interpretation, one of Heidegger's aims, in his revisionary rewriting of the history of Western philosophy, was to get us to think of our culture neither "as the place where human beings finally got clear on what is really going on," nor as an expression of some deep spiritual substance or *Geist*, but rather "as just one cherry blossom alongside actual and possible others, one cluster of 'understandings of Being' alongside other clusters. But we also have to think of it as the blossom which *we* are. We can neither leap out of our blossom into the next one down the bough, nor rise above the tree and look down at a cloud of blossoms (in the way in which we imagine God looking down on a cloud of galaxies)."[11] Rorty's choice of the cherry blossom, long a symbol of transience, as the focus of his metaphor is, of course, no accident. For coming to terms with what he elsewhere calls "[our] lonely provincialism" (the idea that we are nothing but our cultural and historical moment) entails accepting that no part of our way of life, from its mundane practices to its most revered values and institutions, is immune to time and change.[12] Culture thus emerges from Rorty's sketch, as from the novels examined below, simultaneously as the constitutive stuff of the self—"the blossom which *we* are"—and as a human artifact, consigned like all human things to pass. To read Wharton's, Roth's, and Shabtai's representative works in this light, I want to suggest, is to see them as offering searching explorations of the precariousness of identity and the transience of value under conditions of modern acceleration and change. As such, these novels speak in powerful and provocative ways to concerns that are as pressing today as they were at the time they were written.

If, as Menand suggests, the experience of the Civil War and its aftershocks impressed upon Holmes, James, Peirce, and Dewey that values and ideas must constantly adapt to the changing cultural environment if they are to survive,[13] the belief that they had witnessed the extinction of their native

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11. Richard Rorty, "Heidegger, Contingency, and Pragmatism," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 27–49, 37.

12. Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21–34, 30.

13. Menand, *Metaphysical Club*, xi.

worlds left Wharton, Roth, and Shabtai with the conviction that adaptability has its limits: that some sociohistorical transitions open chasms too wide to bridge. And so, while they shared the early pragmatists' view of values and beliefs as mutable social constructs, they were far less sanguine about the individual's capacity for readjustment. On the view their novels advance, while human life can and does appear in a bewildering array of cultural expressions, individual human beings do not evince such suppleness. The two beliefs are not incompatible. To say with Margaret Mead that human nature "is almost unbelievably malleable" is not to extend the same flexibility to the already-formed personality.[14] Wharton, Roth, and Shabtai thought that we are less elastic than we would perhaps like to think. The self that their fictions project is a creature tethered to the matrix of practices and beliefs that produced and sustains it. Once the clay of personality has hardened, their novels suggest, it can be tweaked but not refashioned.

This view is likely to meet with considerable resistance today. The culture of capitalism, in the course of its long reign, has elevated flexibility and adaptability to the status of cardinal virtues, while casting the failure or reluctance to adjust as signs of blimpish conservatism or debility. "We have encouraged an identity," observes Charles Taylor, "of which the core is the ability to 'reinvent' ourselves," so as to become "free, self-reliant, creative, imaginative, resourceful . . . the highest stage of human development."[15] This moral vocabulary, adds Slavoj Žižek, is now routinely deployed to legitimize the gradual erosion of job security under global neoliberalism: "I am no longer just a cog in the complex enterprise but an entrepreneur-of-the-self, who freely manages my employment, free to choose new options, to explore different aspects of my creative potential, to choose my priorities."[16] If Taylor and Žižek look askance at this rhetoric of reinvention and self-reliance, it is not because they think that freedom, creativity, or resourcefulness are bad things. The point of their critiques, rather, is that the hyperbolic and often cynical neoliberal veneration of self-invention and personal adaptability has conspired to occlude other and equally pressing needs and desires. These include the individual's intimate reliance on a relatively stable cultural

14. Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (New York: Morrow, 1963), 280.

15. Charles Taylor, "A Different Kind of Courage," *New York Review of Books*, April 26, 2007, 6.

16. Slavoj Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness: Chronicles of a Year of Acting Dangerously* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2017), 30.

environment for familiarity and moral orientation (not least when he or she is in open revolt against it) as well as the limits imposed on the desire for self-transformation by the need to maintain a sense of continuity and coherence with one's prior self. Different people will of course negotiate the competing desires for self-invention and self-maintenance differently. But it is doubtful that anyone can be so malleable so as to meet the requirements of the contemporary protean ideal while retaining a functioning personality.

Nor is the overestimation of malleability and adaptability characteristic solely of free-market ideology. Contemporary intellectual discourse in the human and social sciences has produced its own variant of the protean ideal.[17] The poststructuralist polemics against closure; Judith Butler's and Walter Benn Michaels's attacks on identity; the critiques leveled by progressive anthropologists such as Renato Rosaldo, Arjun Appadurai, and Lila Abu-Lughod against the allegedly homogenizing and anti-individualist implications of the anthropological concept of culture—these and similar arguments are motivated (at least in part), I want to suggest, by the often-unstated desire for the kind of unencumbered existence and free-floating selfhood that comport with the ideal of absolute autonomy. As Susan Hegeman sums up her critical reading of Walter Benn Michaels: "Ultimately, Michaels may well be a kind of existentialist, whose ideal is a space of radical freedom from externally imposed identity."[18] And if *that* is what human life can and should be, then the thing to do is to liberate the authentic self by ruthlessly deconstructing, denaturalizing, or otherwise undermining the allegedly repressive conceptual and political constructs that hem it in. And again, the problem here is neither with the ideal of self-invention or free choice as such, let alone with the anti-metaphysical stance common to the aforementioned critics.

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17. These two apparently antagonistic discourses—of capitalism and of high theory—may be, as Marxist critics have long argued, two faces of a single ideology. As Terry Eagleton puts it, the high premium that both place on "plurality, plasticity, dismantling, destabilizing, the power of endless self-invention . . . smacks of a distinctively Western culture and an advanced capitalist world." But then, as Franz Boas has pointed out, similar effects often spring from dissimilar causes. The fact that that the protean ideal looms large in both discourses does not prove that they are similarly motivated, that they are collapsible into a single agenda, or that poststructuralism has unwittingly served as capitalism's dupe and handmaiden. See Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), xi.

18. Susan Hegeman, *The Cultural Return* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 31.

It is, first, with the tendency of this critical discourse to overemphasize the individual's capacity for radical change, while underestimating the persistent need for collective identity, self-coherence, and continuity; and second, with the manner in which, in spite of its proclaimed antiessentialism, it tends to lapse into arguing for the existence of a radically free, pre-cultural "real self," which it then becomes the theorist's mission to liberate.

Against this background, the insistence common to Wharton, Roth, and Shabtai that the range of individual adaptability is limited (not only for the harried masses who lack the leisure and opportunity necessary for self-fashioning, but also for the relatively privileged and educated protagonists of their novels) seems to court charges of conservatism. These charges, it should be said, would not be unfounded. Though often unsparing in their critiques of their native societies, Wharton, Roth, and Shabtai all looked on with profound dismay at the social and political regimes that had displaced them. Yet pointing to the reactionary aspect of their writings is easy work. The more challenging question that their novels raise is to what extent, when it comes to the core practices and institutions that give shape and meaning to our lives, can we avoid being conservative. When put in these terms, the issue of conservatism invites an examination of the dynamics of value and valuing that extends beyond what we conventionally refer to as "political positions." These issues will be addressed concretely in the readings that follow. For now, suffice it to suggest that our celebration of fluidity, variability, and indeterminacy may be due for some tempering—not because the past enjoys some special privilege over the future, but because the protean ideal, while important and even vital in certain contexts, may well be obstructive in others. A bit of "intractability," as Terry Eagleton quips, "is sometimes just what we need."[19]

The latter remark is drawn from *Sweet Violence* (2002), Eagleton's polemical study of tragedy, a literary form, he argues, that offers some much-needed correctives to some of the least helpful tendencies of the intellectual Left. Like Eagleton's book, *The Blossom Which We Are*, too, is concerned with highlighting "what is perishable, constricted, fragile and slow-moving about us."[20] The emphasis on human vulnerability, which Eagleton sees as the moral core of tragedy, I want to show, is also a feature of the novel of cultural extinction. More specifically, what the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles,

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19. Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, xv.

20. Eagleton, Sweet *Violence*, xvi.

and Euripides were for the ancients, prose narratives of cultural passing have been for us moderns: namely, a way to acknowledge, via vicarious identification, the finitude and vulnerability of our own private and collective lives. "The pitier," as Martha Nussbaum claims in connection with the range of responses that Greek tragedy drew from its audiences, "trembles for his or her own possibilities."[21]

Novels of cultural extinction in general and *The Age of Innocence*, *The Radetzky March*, and *Past Continuous* in particular have frequently been read as escapes into fabled pasts or as expressions of elite ennui in the face of sociopolitical change. And while I do not want to deny that nostalgia and political despair figure centrally in these works, I do want to contest the idea that such readings exhaust the interpretive uses to which these particular novels (and their kind) can be put. We would do better, I believe, to read Wharton's, Roth's, and Shabtai's cultural elegies—or, for that matter, Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), Achebe's *Things fall Apart* (1958), and Lampedusa's *The Leopard* (1958)—not (only) as nostalgic escapes from a troubled political present to a vanished past, but also as modern meditations on the transience and vulnerability of cultural values and institutions. For reading these novels in this way may help us (to quote Rorty again) "recapture a sense of contingency, of the fragility and riskiness of any human project."[22]

Fostering such a sense is, I believe, a particularly urgent task today. We live in precarious times, in which the future of longstanding social and political institutions suddenly seems to have been thrown into question. The deepening crisis of liberal democracy and resurgence of ethnic populism, the rising inequality between the global North and South, the looming threat of environmental catastrophe and, most recently, the severely destabilizing worldwide outbreak of the COVID-19 virus—these threats combine to generate a widespread sense of unease that cuts across conventional party lines and divisions. For while each of these crises poses distinct challenges and threats, to which different people react in different ways, they all confront us jointly with the unsettling probability that the world that we will leave behind us will be radically different, not only from the one we inherited but also from the one we currently inhabit. We are situated, in this respect, in a position not unlike that of the post–Civil War intellectuals

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21. Martha Nussbaum, "Tragedy and Self-sufficiency: Plato and Aristotle on Fear and Pity," in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. Amélie Rorty (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 261–290, 267.

22. Rorty, "Heidegger," 34.

that Menand describes, or indeed of the novelists discussed later. For like them, we will probably live to see much of what we today take for granted become obsolete or simply nonexistent, including our own social, political, and professional identities. Can anyone reading this book speak confidently about the long-term prospects of the cultural world we call the humanities? In this fraught context, the novels at the center of this study have, I maintain, a lot to say to us. For each, in its way, explores the breakable, fragile, and transient nature of the socially constructed and culturally maintained frameworks that we inhabit. And even if they hold out no solutions to this quintessentially modern predicament, they may help us acknowledge and perhaps come to terms with it.

To accept that our familiar and everyday reality is a precarious, consensually produced narrative—a fragile fiction—is difficult to do, not least because our ability to pursue personal projects and assign value to our lives in the present depends on an implicit trust in the (relative) solidity and endurance of the values and institutions that make up our "world." Having long prided ourselves, as cultural critics, on our power to demystify and denaturalize conventional patterns of thought and action, we tend to forget that a certain degree of reification is not only an inevitable part of social life, but is also vital for keeping the enterprise going. Reification, understood as "the apprehension of the products of human activity *as if* they were something other than human products" is what enables us to "forget" the exceedingly tenuous nature of the social world in which we move, and thus to engage with it in an assured and deliberate way.[23] Without such active forgetting and the illusion of security and durability that it encourages, it is doubtful we would be able to get much done, either individually or collectively. Still, "the decisive question," as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann write in their classic study, is whether when we are not caught up in our pragmatic engagements we succeed in retaining the awareness "that, however objectivated, the social world was made by men—and, therefore, can be remade by them."[24] Keeping this awareness alive is hard even under the best of circumstances. But when the familiar order of things is threatened by radical disruption—as, for instance, in the case of the ongoing environmental emergency—the tendency is often to

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23. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1991), 106.

24. Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 106.

disavow it altogether. As Roy Scranton puts this point in his *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015), "It is hard work for us to remember that this way of life, this present moment, this order of things is not stable and permanent. Across the world today, our actions testify to our belief that we can go on like we are forever."[25] Powerful economic interests have of course been diligently at work to encourage the general complacency and lassitude with which the world's industrialized nations have hitherto responded to what everyone more or less agrees is a clear and immediate danger to the continued existence of our species. But these economical and political factors cooperate with deep-set cultural and psychological impulses of the kind that Scranton discusses. The more precarious the established order becomes, the more inclined we are to disown its historicity and malleability.

If the novel of cultural extinction matters today it is because it acknowledges *both* the necessarily conventional dimensions of social life *and* their endemic frailty and impermanence. From Walter Scott's *Waverley* to Yaakov Shabtai's *Past Continuous*, each of the novels examined below aspires to the world-making totality of vision and density of detail characteristic of the realist genre, while also giving the lie to the reassuring belief that the represented cultural world—any cultural world—can go on forever. "Giving the lie" is perhaps the wrong phrase here, because fiction never really "proves" or "demonstrates" the truth-value of propositions; rather, it mobilizes its rhetorical resources to coax its readers into a certain view of themselves and their worlds. That view, in the case of the novel of cultural extinction, is one that works out from the ambiguous recognition of the structuring power of cultural institutions, on the one hand, and their fragile and episodic nature, on the other. As such, this narrative form can help us to think in fuller and more meaningful ways about what it means to live as finite cultural beings who thrive and perish within perishable worlds of our own making. If Scranton is right that effective response to our current predicament requires taking a long hard look at our private and collective vulnerability, if "our future . . . [depends] on our ability to confront it not with panic, outrage, or denial, but with patience, reflection, and love,"[26] then, I submit, we have something to learn from the novel's most concentrated attempt to find meaning in the face of inevitable loss.

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25. Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2015), 16.

26. Scranton, *Learning to Die*, 27.

Culturalism, Historicism, Realism

These then are the topical concerns that I bring to this study. However, in framing them in the particular way I've done, I have been taking a broad range of assumptions for granted. For instance, I have assumed that history flows in a linear rather than cyclical manner, such that loss, once incurred, is irreversible; I have assumed that our individual lives transpire within the socially concrete yet metaphysically ungrounded structures we call "cultures"; and I have assumed that these complex meshes of language and practice not only shape our subjectivities but also constitute them, so that our individual selves are wholly continuous with the webs of beliefs and practices into which we are socialized. Some of these postulates (for instance, that history moves forward like an arrow) are today broadly assumed; others, like the anti-Cartesian idea that we are cultural-linguistic creatures all the way down, are still fiercely contested. In combination, however, they comprise an immediately recognizable and prevalent (though by no means exclusive) modern self-image, and one whose historical emergence, consolidation, and dissemination dovetails with that of the realist novel.

In this book, then, I try to link the rise of the latter self-image (here called *culturalism*) with the emergence of a certain temporal imaginary (often called *historicism*), and to locate both in the literary tradition we call *realism*. Mine is hardly the first study to draw such connections. Thanks to the enormous sway of realism's greatest mid-twentieth-century champions, Georg Lukács and Erich Auerbach, we have long been accustomed to associate the appearance of the nineteenth-century realist novel with the post-1789 discovery of history in the fully historicist sense. More recently, a number of powerful studies have established the role of realist fiction in the emergence of the modern, holistic and relativistic, concept of culture.[27] Though I will gratefully draw on these studies in what follows, my aim is not to repeat them, but to chart an as-yet under-theorized part of the

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27. See Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Ian Duncan, *In Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); James Buzard, *Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-Century British Novels* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Susan Hegeman, *The Cultural Return* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Michael Elliott, *The Culture Concept* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Brad Evans, *Before Cultures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Nancy Bentley, *The Ethnography of Manners: Hawthorne, James, Wharton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

critical terrain they explore. Specifically, I want to show that realist fiction (a category whose use in this book will be defined momentarily) encodes a view of the human situation, in which cultural vulnerability, fragility, and finitude are built-in features. My claim, in other words, is that insofar as literary realism historicizes and culturalizes social reality (as Katie Trumpener, James Buzard, Michael Elliott, Brad Evans, and Nancy Bentley have variously argued), it also ephemeralizes it. Indeed, it is a telling and, in my view, still insufficiently appreciated fact, that the texts most often credited with launching literary realism proper—Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* and Scott's *Waverley*—are both also novels of cultural extinction, written in the express purpose of chronicling the final disappearance of geographically localized and ethnographically realized lifeworlds. Part of the aim of this book is to demonstrate what happens to our understanding of literary realism when it is keyed to its nineteenth-century founders' preoccupation with the friability of social customs and institutions.

To jumpstart an argument about the connections between culturalism, historicism, and realism requires providing some preliminary definitions. These terms have simply been used for too long, by too many people, and in too many contexts to be of any critical use before one takes the risk of more narrowly demarcating them. And it is a risk, for any definition of such contested concepts involves exposing oneself to charges of one-sidedness or oversimplification. The following then is a series of working definitions, which I will use to get the argument going, on the understanding that a fuller and more nuanced account will have to emerge in the course of the subsequent discussions.

Culturalism, as I shall be using this term, refers to a structure of thought and feeling that begins to take shape toward the end of the eighteenth century in reaction to Enlightenment thought and policy. My choice of culturalism to refer to this discourse is meant to distinguish it from its later disciplinary expressions (in twentieth-century anthropology, pragmatist philosophy, hermeneutics, new historicism, cultural studies, and so on), but also in order to imply its diffused and attitudinal, as opposed to strictly doctrinal, quality. In its most basic sense, culturalism is founded on the idea that the individual self—whatever else it might be—is "so entangled with where [it] is, who [it] is, and what [it] believes that it is inseparable from them."[28] This idea appears for the first time in the years leading up to the

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28. Clifford Geertz, "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 35.

French Revolution, and it was its gradual acceptance in the decades that followed that gave rise sometime on or about 1900 to the modern, holistic and relativistic, concept of culture and its dedicated disciplinary matrices.

When culturalism first appeared on the scene, the reigning assumption among the leading intellectual lights of Europe was that the springs of human feeling, action, and thought remain constant across languages, places, and times. Over and above their various disagreements, Spinoza, Voltaire, John Locke, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Samuel Johnson all believed that in spite of the ostensible differences among and within social groups, all human beings are at bottom cast from a single, unchanging mold. None of these intellectuals, it should be said, doubted that different societies organize human life differently, or that human beings are profoundly modified by the contingencies of their time and place. But they shared the conviction that local particularities are a superficial veneer draped over a more fundamental human essence or core that is knowable, general, and unchanging. For some (Spinoza and Kant), that essential humanity was rational in nature; for others (Hume and perhaps Johnson), it was passional. But thinkers on both sides of this internal divide agreed that the most vital part of the individual—the part that makes her human—is also the part that remains untouched by the contingent specificities of her social environment. In order to become more fully human, this dominant view maintained, one must overcome, transcend, or otherwise purify oneself of these contingencies, so as to draw closer to the universal and immutable core of one's being. This self-image, as Arthur O. Lovejoy remarked in his celebrated intellectual history, "was the central and dominating fact in the intellectual history of Europe from the late sixteenth to the late eighteenth century."[29] Culturalism was its rejection.

Setting themselves expressly against Enlightenment uniformitarianism, the early exponents of the culturalist view—Giambattista Vico, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Edmund Burke, later followed by the Romantic poets and the German Idealists—argued that local and individual differences mattered more than similarities; that diversity was to be cultivated rather than overcome; that abstract reasoning was a dangerous lure rather than a panacea; and that there is no single model of human perfection, either moral or aesthetic, that all human groups should strive to attain. On a deeper level, however, what set Vico against Descartes, Herder against Kant, Burke against the French

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29. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 293.

philosophes, and Wordsworth and Coleridge against the neoclassical poets, was the question of which self-image the West should adopt. If the Enlightenment thinkers insisted that the most genuinely real part of the individual is also the most antithetical to its immediate sociohistorical environment, the early culturalists maintained that the self was wholly *coextensive* with and *expressive* of its culture. If the eighteenth-century uniformitarians believed that the true self was to be sought above or beyond its inherited customs and beliefs, the culturalists held, as Clifford Geertz would later assert, "that men unmodified by the customs of particular places do not in fact exist, have never existed, and most important, could not in the very nature of the case exist."[30] To repeat, what made this late eighteenth-century reorientation so revolutionary was not the truism, as apparent to Plato and Herodotus as it was to Locke and Kant, that human identities arise from and reflect the social arrangements of their time and place. Rather it was the early culturalists' bold *transvaluation* of these contingencies. To say, with Burke and Herder, that human beings are constituted by the habits of thought, practice, and speech of their respective communities was to invest these local and transitory circumstances with unprecedented significance, while also changing the definition of what it means to be a person. From mere impediments that had to be cleared away so that the essential self—however conceived—could come into view, factors like language, manners, folk traditions, and inherited morals suddenly became the very fabric from which a human subject is woven. To strip a person of her cultural "trappings," on this view, was not to reveal some underlying universal template or core, but to deny that person of her humanity.

The importance of this movement of ideas for the subsequent development of the modern concept of culture is too well known to require extensive comment here.[31] I will be briefly reconstructing parts of this story in the next chapter, but only in order to spotlight one implication of the shift in self-image that late eighteenth-century culturalism had set into motion. On the view I will develop, culturalism did more than give rise to a novel form of self-recognition; it also introduced new anxieties and

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30. Geertz, "Impact," 35.

31. Isaiah Berlin's *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (1976) remains the authoritative intellectual history of the period. For an account of Herder's significance as the "source of cultural pluralism and anthropological relativism" (20), see George Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987). For Burke's influence on the emergence of the modern culture concept, see Williams, *The Country and the City*.

vulnerabilities into the human repertoire (or at least brought them into much sharper relief than ever before). For the more reconciled individuals became to viewing themselves as cultural creatures, wholly entangled in the contingent network of social relations and institutions that make up their sociohistorical habitat, the more they perceived their personal fates as inextricably linked with how this particular habitat fares. Should that precarious constellation of practices and beliefs be violently disrupted or destroyed, they stand to lose the only meaning-making context in which their individual identities make sense. In other words, insofar as being able to locate oneself within a culturally demarcated space has become "a hallmark of what it means to be a subject in modernity," as Hegeman writes, then so has living with the heightened awareness of the brittle and time-bound nature of one's social identity.[32] Much of the labor in the subsequent chapters will be to flesh out the historical and conceptual link between the rise of the culturalist view and the emergence of this peculiarly human and distinctly modern vulnerability.

If culturalism (as I shall be using this term) refers to a self-image organized around an awareness of our constitutive entanglement in the web of practices and institutions that we inherit, historicism will refer to the equally modern consciousness of the temporality and mutability of these arrangements. Like culturalism, historicism is a product of the turn of the nineteenth century. Lukács's *The Historical Novel* (1937) remains an indispensable account of the birth of historicism out of the spirit of the French Revolution. On his famous argument, the unprecedented nature of the events of 1789–1815 compelled Europeans and other observers to comprehend for the first time "their own existence as something historically conditioned [and to] see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them."[33] The way history itself was configured also changed in the wake of the Revolution. The decades following 1789 witnessed the decisive retreat of the cyclical and providential conceptions of time, which had defined the historical consciousness of the medieval and early-modern mind, and the advent of a linear and secular view of history as a sequence of unrepeatable events, scored by periodic ruptures and transformations that affected whole societies (as opposed to just their

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32. Hegeman, *The Cultural Return*, 25.

33. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1963), 24.

ruling classes) in profound and irreversible ways.[34] As Peter Fritzsche sums up this point in his more recent *Stranded in the Present* (2004), "[It] was during the revolutionary epoch that the new appeared to contemporaries as an unmistakable if unknowable force, which upended, uplifted, and destroyed. Inconstancy was the new constant."[35] History, in the wake of 1789, became not only more visible, but also more forbidding.

Thus, if culturalism had inserted fundamental—sometimes irreconcilable—differences between contemporary forms of life, historicism introduced a consciousness of separation between present and past. If culturalism emphasized commonalities based in language, tradition, and custom, historicism generated affinities among strangers who inhabit the same historical generation (giving rise to what Fritzsche calls that "modern species 'contemporaries'").[36] The changing meaning of the term "revolution" serves as a useful index of this shift in perception. Before 1789 the word was typically used to refer to the cyclical patterns of nature, as in the revolution of the stars. From the French Revolution onward, however, it came to signify drastic, often violent, change—the most extreme version of which being, of course, extinction. And indeed, starting in the early decades of the nineteenth century it is possible to discern a growing interest in disappearing races, cultures, and species: from the Romantics' fascination with relics, ruins, and last-of-the-race figures (think of Wordsworth's "Michael" or "The Old Cumberland Beggar")[37] to the emerging scientific preoccupation with the fossil record, culminating in Georges Cuvier's conclusive demonstration of the reality and prevalence of species extinction.[38] The idea of local and relative extinction

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34. For a well-known but still provocative study of the late-eighteenth-century transition from cyclical and providential views of history to a linear one, see Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper, 1954), in particular 49–137.

35. Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 30.

36. Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present*, 53.

37. For a ranging and engrossing account of the modern myth of the belated survival, see Fiona Stafford, *The Last of the Race* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

38. When Cuvier came on the scene in the early 1800s, the accepted view among the proponents of extinction (most notably Comte de Buffon) was still that only a single species in earth's history had actually suffered this ignominious fate: the so-called "American *incognitum*" (mastodon), discovered in Big Bone Lick, near the Ohio River, in 1739.

events, of the kind that spells the terminal ending of a single race, spe-
cies, or community while leaving the rest of creation untouched—an idea
that had been unthinkable from within a worldview organized around the
metaphor of the Great Chain of Being—becomes in the early nineteenth
century both a scientific fact and a recurring literary trope. From within
the emerging historical awareness urged on by these developments, writes
Zygmunt Bauman, the world began to appear "ever more human [in]
form . . . [revealing] the temporality of all worldly arrangements, [for]
temporality is a feature of human, not divine, existence."[39] Put simply, by
humanizing the world, historicism also infected its components—institutions,
practices, moralities—with the canker of mortality.

What the emergent historicist awareness had in common with its coeval
counterpart, the culturalist self-image, was their secularist thrust. By this I do
not mean that either culturalism or historicism *refuted* (or had really anything
to say about) God's existence. Nor do I hold that either was (or is) incom-
patible with religious belief. Instead, the secular dimension of the historicist
and culturalist orientations consisted of the manner in which they reshaped
the nineteenth-century's horizon of expectation. Historicism redirected peo-
ple's attention from the possibility of postmortem rewards and punishments
to the immanent and mundane realm of experience, newly conceived as the
principal arena in which human destinies are concretely determined.[40] Cul-
turalism's secular aspect, meanwhile, consisted in its suggestion that the self
is not an entity apart from the contingent world of inherited customs and
transient conventions but is continuous with it, thus effectively substituting
the otherworldliness common to Descartes's and St. Augustine's conceptions
of the self with an earthly, rooted alternative.[41] Similarly, just as historicism
insisted on the self-sufficiency of history, such that "[its] apprehension," as
Reinhart Koselleck writes, "no longer required recourse to God or nature,"[42]
so did culturalism insist on the self-supporting and autotelic nature of cul-
tural formations. Already in Burke, and even more so in Herder, there is the
idea that while a form of life exists *in relation* to its counterparts, it is not

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39. Zygmunt Bauman, *Culture as Praxis* (London: Sage, 1999), xi.

40. See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith
Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 255–276 and in passim.

41. For a suggestive exploration of rootedness as a modern metaphor, see Christy Wampole's
Rootedness: The Ramifications of a Metaphor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

42. Kosellek, *Futures Past*, 196.