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Genteel Designs, Modern Renovations: Poetics and the Poetic Community from Hearth to Dynamo

You must remember that we were not very much later than Ruskin, Pater, Swinburne, and Matthew Arnold; our atmosphere was that of poets and persons touched with religious enthusiasm or religious sadness. Beauty (which mustn't be mentioned now) was then a living presence, or an aching absence, day and night.¹

—George Santayana

Writing from Rome in 1928, at a time when the stock market, modernism, and Mickey Mouse assailed American culture, Santayana invoked the beauty-soaked poetic, philosophical, and aesthetic milieu of genteel idealism in which his generation came of age. For almost forty years—from the 1860s until the early 1900s—genteel writers, editors, and publishers dominated the nation's intellectual life. In the midst of the upheavals and perceived chaos of industrial life that followed the Civil War, they fashioned a web of cultural institutions and critical methods designed to elevate morality and promote standards. They turned to culture as an antidote to the materialism of capitalism and socialism alike, believing it would supply a foundation for unity in a society riven by conflict. As idealists, they placed special value on the centrality of the spiritual; eternal ideas constituted an epistemological framework and wielded religious force as they found embodiment in poetry.

Far from being alienated in ivory towers or society's margins, these liberal Victorians assumed authoritative public roles and

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promoted a vision of life beyond the mundane and material, advocating self-culture as a means to improve public life and to bolster American democracy. In this they went beyond the superficial. As E. L. Godkin noted in his “Chromo-Civilization,” one did not obtain culture through casual reading or a grand tour of European capitals; it required intensive engagement with words, continued effort, and rigorous thought. They drew inspiration, as did Progressive reformers, from a transatlantic exchange of ideas. The British poet and critic Matthew Arnold (1822–88) offered eloquent explanations for the powerful role played by culture in reforming individual lives, a service viewed as especially necessary in an industrializing nation. In his influential 1869 study *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold defended culture against accusations of frivolity and protested the veneration of machines and materialism. Far from being “moonshine,” as critics deemed it, culture served a practical role by providing models of perfection that would help the human race achieve greater wisdom and harmony. Beauty, in turn, exerted a positive ethical force. Grace, serenity, and symmetry had marked the great eras in history, which Arnold identified as the Italian Renaissance, Elizabethan England, and, above all, ancient Greece, when art, culture, and democracy (though his ideas were more oligarchic, with members of the elite sharing in governance) worked together. Men and women of culture served as “true apostles of equality” because they sought to disseminate the best ideas of their time, making “the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere” and bringing “sweetness and light” to all, regardless of class, although of course an elite defined the standards. As the perfect embodiment of beauty, poetry sustained, consoled, strengthened, and encouraged.

Similarly, at a time when England was reeling from the full brunt of industrial capitalism, John Ruskin, a Tory radical, championed the regenerative effects of nature, architecture, and art. God revealed Himself in nature, and perceiving His beauty entailed a moral exercise. Ruskin realized this one day when the sun peered through after a storm cloud lifted: “And then I learned—what till then I had not known—the real meaning of the word Beautiful,” he wrote. It was that which: “can turn the human soul from gazing upon itself…and annihilate—be it ever so small a degree, the thoughts and feelings which have to do with this present world,