INTRODUCTION

Poets frequently, if not always, borrow from other poets; we need to be reminded to what extent they do, and must, borrow from themselves.

T. S. Eliot, “Poets’ Borrowings” (1928)

SHELLEY AND THE TYPIST

This study takes its bearings from one of W. B. Yeats’s most compelling insights into the precocious character of the imagination, the ways in which its nimble, intuitive discoveries always surprise and surpass the intellect and its slow, awkward deliberations. In his illuminating early essay “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry” (1903), Yeats borrows a scene from his Romantic master’s work to conjure a gothic vision of Shelley himself wandering through an abandoned, dimly lit temple to kneel in devotion at the altar of the Muses. He draws the scene not merely from one of Shelley’s poems, he explains, but from all of them; it is a composite of the symbols and scenes that dominated Shelley’s imagination throughout his career, returning time and again at crucial moments to help him to resolve the riddles of his own “half-understood visions” (EcI 87). Stepping into Shelley’s place, Yeats imagines what he would have heard in that supremely receptive, meditative posture amid the sacred ruins: “I think too that as he knelt before an altar where a thin flame burnt in a lamp made of green agate, a single vision would have come to him again and again . . . and that voices would have told him how there is for every man some one scene, some one adventure, some one picture that is the image of his secret life, for wisdom first speaks in images, and that this one image, if he would but brood over it his life long, would lead his soul, disentangled from unmeaning circumstance and the ebb and flow of the world, into that far household where the undying gods await all those whose souls have become simple as flame, whose bodies have become quiet as an agate lamp” (EcI 95).
The meandering syntax and chantlike rhythms of this passage nearly seduce us away from its sense, as if Yeats (who was deeply committed to the initiations and ceremonies of the occult at this time) were intent on protecting a secret, on burying his hermetic treasure so that only the literary initiate might uncover it. There are two important elements here that Yeats's ideal literary apprentice would not fail to discern. First, his paradigm of the artist obsessively returning to a single image or scene is less a symbolic, mystical account of Shelley's verse than a nearly literal description of Yeats's own creative tendencies, of the way that his own imagination circled and circled in widening gyres around a distinct group of salient and ambiguous tropes over the course of his career, his own motley band of "circus animals," as he calls them in his final volume (VP 629). But more important, what Yeats calls the artist's "brooding" seems not so much a conscious, deliberate pattern of return and revision—especially in his own case—as an imaginative compulsion, an inward dictum that refuses to be ignored, or the result of a hidden mechanism of the mind that compels it to revisit certain scenes much as the trauma victim relives a traumatic event over and again until its psychological turbulence reaches equilibrium. It is as if the flame in the agate lamp burned a powerful intoxicant, irresistibly luring its worshipper time and again through the same labyrinthine ruins of the temple to gaze at its mysteries. What Yeats describes here, in short, is the passion of the artistic imagination, the process by which the creating mind assumes the character of the moved—without or even against its conscious awareness—rather than that of the mover.

This paradigm of creative return and revision is not unique to modernism. But what distinguishes it in writers like Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Thomas Mann—the primary objects of attention here—is that the image or scenario to which the modern artist is compulsively drawn is often itself a depiction of compulsion and passivity, a moment when the imagination is overwhelmed by its own creative energies, or when the mind succumbs to its own powerful affective forces. What most consistently moves the modern imagination is not a stately pleasure-dome, a vision of the Muse or the Deity, but the mind itself being moved, the processes by which it is acted upon and the ways in which it responds.

To put this claim to the test right away, I want to begin by offering an instance from The Waste Land, precisely because it seems such an unpromising place for us to begin a book about passion in literary modernism, a study of the ways that several modern writers situate passion—in several senses—at the foundations of psychological and creative activity. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a poem more barren of the telltale trappings of ardor and emotional intensity typically associated with passion. It possesses none of the fiery revelations that blaze through D. H. Lawrence's novels; none of the liberating cries of William Carlos Williams's poetry; and none of the visionary flames that smolder behind the eyes of Virginia Woolf's most memorable protagonists. In fact, if this most quintessentially
modernist work of art may be said to approach a passion, it could only be Eliot’s zealous desire to erase the possibility of passion entirely, to transform its dazzling flames into infernal tortures, its outbursts of freedom and self-possession into nightmarish shrieks of imprisonment and voices crying out of empty cisterns. Or as one reviewer of his earlier work remarked, perhaps it is simply that “Mr. Eliot . . . has forgotten his emotions.”1 Eliot was, after all, the poet who famously insisted that poetry is an escape from emotion. And is not *The Waste Land* his grand escape, his personal instrument of “relief”?2 In its broken lines, even passion’s brief, still moments of contented fullness and vibrancy become merely the low-humming throbs of a human engine, or the aching, paralyzed murmurs of an intimacy gone awry.

In a scene so familiar that it hardly needs retelling, Tiresias is witness to the arrival of the infamous “young man carbuncular”—a feeble, arrogant clerk with pretensions to high society—to his afternoon rendezvous at the typist’s flat (*CPP* 44). In her boredom, the typist acquiesces to the young man’s graceless sexual advances. After their brief, anticlimactic tryst, the clerk fumbles his way down the darkened stairwell and (in the draft) pauses to urinate in the street; the typist reassembles the room, grateful for his hasty removal. When last we see her, she is setting a record on the gramophone to begin the music—or perhaps to continue the haunting music that has already begun in a different key—that accompanies us into the poem’s next section. As the sole witness to such a distinctly passionless affair intimates—“I Tiresias have foresuffered all”—there is much more to this scene than the apathy of its participants or the sneering irony that so many readers initially discerned in its retelling (*CPP* 44). Something about the typist passage has, in fact, sparked a disproportionate degree of critical debate, and in part it is this disproportion, the unlikely magnetism of the scene, that makes it so intriguing. For earlier scholars, it captured in miniature what they understood to be the poem’s central concern: Eliot’s sardonic critique of modernity, his invective against society’s emotional emptiness and moral depravity. For others, it performed the sexual ambivalence and misogyny with which Eliot’s earlier poems had carelessly toyed as well, from Saint Sebastian’s brutal sexual fantasies to Sweeney’s close encounters with ravenous female pursuers and traitorous adulterers.3 More recent scholars have gravitated toward the uncanny automatism of the typist’s final gesture, sensing in it a powerlessness beyond the mere unthinking routine of apathy, a helplessness that seems crucial to Eliot’s vision of human relationships and especially to a scene so “intimate with suffering.”4 As Tiresias hints, suffering is in fact central to this moment, and I argue that a more wide-reaching and paradoxical sort of suffering is central to Eliot’s thought about passion and poetics.

This scene so acutely traces in miniature the broader contours of *The Waste Land* because the typist’s suffering registers a concern that had haunted Eliot’s
imagination for long before, from the writhing, tormented protagonists of “The Love Song of St. Sebastian” (1914) and “The Death of Saint Narcissus” (1915) to the anesthetized patient that opens his later, more famous “Love Song.” Yeats would surely have recognized the emotions that accompany it; they are akin to those that he dramatizes in his own “Leda and the Swan” and in the late “Cuchulain Comforted.” The scene is one of those rich and complex moments to which the artist is drawn throughout his entire career, one which promises (according to Yeats) to lead the imagination from meaningless ebb and flow of creative self-dispersion toward the hard, gemlike simplicity of a unified vision. It captures, in a kind of shorthand, the experience of suffering without acting, of being possessed by a force that the conscious will cannot resist or overcome, and of enduring a “passion” (in the broadest sense of the word, something which “moves” us or causes us to suffer) that transforms the autonomous mind into something like an automatic object; the typist’s “automatic hand” sets the gramophone playing.

The emotional upheaval associated with this experience returns, even more thoroughly charged with the ambivalence of attraction and repulsion, in the final stanzas of The Waste Land, when the speaker imagines the “awful daring” of willfully surrendering oneself to this condition—both the excitement and the terror of suffering without resistance or escape (CPP 49). The passion of The Waste Land begins precisely here, I believe, in the emotional turmoil provoked by the awful, daring realizations of powerlessness and vulnerability—“awe-filled” because the mind typically resists losing control with all of its might, and “daring” because the loss of control, or the surrender of the ego’s vigilance, can promise imaginative discoveries beyond what the mind’s self-possession would have otherwise allowed. If the typist scene has attracted a degree of critical attention disproportionate to its seemingly minor place in the poem, I believe that this is because its implications reach far beyond The Waste Land, beyond any of Eliot’s poems, and into concerns central to the way that a particular strand of modernism defines itself and its most ambitious projects. In short, I believe that following it will lead us deep into the same ruined temple where Yeats’s Shelley kneels in silence, rapt in a vision of his own rapt imagination.

PASSION AND PATIENTS

This book explores how four modern writers engage with passion, how they learn to dramatize its upheavals and illuminations, and how this engagement changes the way that they think about creativity and literary composition. Each chapter offers a self-contained narrative, which can be consulted on its own, though here and in the conclusion I discuss how those narratives overlap and intertwine and where they challenge the prevailing scholarly consensus. I begin by resuscitating a classical meaning of the word “passion,” the contemporary usage of which—as a vehement or powerful emotion—is a relatively late development. Historically the
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word derives from the Latin *passio*, meaning “to suffer” or “to be moved,” an etymology from which we also derive “patient,” which is the object of a passion, as well as “patience,” which actually refers to the state of suffering. When I say that I will exercise patience, I am saying, in effect, that I will allow myself to be acted upon. As I discuss below in more detail, the classical definition of “passion” relies upon the distinction between the entity that acts and the entity that is acted upon, between what Aristotle calls the mover and the moved. In this sense, then, passion refers to suffering in general—anything that moves us, either with or without our intention—as well as to the particular instantiations of suffering, whether these be physical pain, emotional turmoil, the psychological movements compelled by what we call the unconscious, or those mysterious creative forces that we refer to as “inspiration.” It is with passion in this broader, philosophical sense that the following pages will be concerned. I argue that many of the well-known hallmarks of literary modernism—its experimental forms, its radical poetic theories, and its innovative ideas about emotion and personality—arise in part from an urgent desire among modern writers to meaningfully encounter powerlessness, to both know and feel what it means to be *the moved* instead of *the mover*.

My claims run counter to a number of surprisingly intransigent assumptions about this school or strand of modernism, including those that underlie Peter Nicholls’s claims in his relatively recent *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (1995), a desperately needed and yet deeply flawed polemic in favor of expanding the conventional modernist canon. With an eye toward what he calls canonical modernism’s “defensive” ironies and the “ubiquitous trope of mastery,” Nicholls contrasts several marginalized or neglected strands of modernism with the masculinist aesthetics and ideology of Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and the “Men of 1914,” among whose later ranks he includes Eliot and Yeats. For him, this domineering modernism relentlessly privileges “intellect over emotion” and aggressively enforces “strong and authoritative versions of the self.” Poets like Eliot and Yeats undertake “the task of stabilizing the self, closing it to the turbulent movements of desire,” Nicholls argues: “One of the first moves of this Modernism had been to reconstitute the self as closed, autonomous, and antagonistic.” Poets such as H.D. and Gertrude Stein, he concludes, aimed instead to destroy the autonomy “which is so much prized by the ‘Men of 1914,’” and in doing so successfully “open the self to what is outside it.” I agree with Nicholls’s assessment of H.D., but I believe that he is profoundly wrong about Eliot and others, that they are the wrong straw men for this line of argument. To be fair, Nicholls is only building upon the similar claims in the first volume of Gilbert and Gubar’s *No Man’s Land* (1988), another polemic that made its much-needed corrections to the canon at the expense of canonical modern writers, whose complexity they were similarly forced to elide. “The Eliotian theory,” Gilbert and Gubar argue, “that poetry involves ‘an escape from emotion’ and ‘an escape from personality’ constructs an implicitly masculine
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aesthetic of hard, abstract learned verse that is opposed to the aesthetic of soft, effusive, personal verse supposedly written by women and Romantics.” There is a kind of critical metonymy at work in statements like this one, a familiar tendency to focus upon one aspect of modernist aesthetic theory and allow it to eclipse the complexity and ambivalence of the whole, which often provides ample evidence to the contrary as well. In fact, the very essay under consideration, Eliot’s over-determined “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), also describes the poet in terms of passivity and emotional sensitivity; its rhetoric, in other words—as well as the rhetoric of Eliot’s nearly contemporaneous lecture for the Arts League of Service, “Modern Tendencies in Poetry” (delivered in 1919 but not published until 1920)—is deeply divided between what Gilbert and Gubar would characterize as masculine and feminine aesthetics. I believe that scholars of modernism like Nicholls continue to misunderstand the modernist preoccupation with tropes of control and mastery because they are too quick, ultimately, to succumb to the temptation of this critical metonymy, to rely upon reductive and incomplete readings of canonical authors whose profound misgivings about the possibility of self-sovereignty and self-transparency would otherwise threaten to render the conventional critical shorthand no longer useful. This failure is symptomatic of a wide range of critical attitudes about canonical or mainstream modernism that I address, both implicitly and explicitly, in the following chapters.

The modernist writers whom I address here, to the contrary, deeply valued the destabilizations of passion and the intensities of affect and were frequently suspicious of the illusions of a “stabilized,” autonomous self. Modernism is, for the majority of scholars, renowned for its theoretical and imaginative assaults on unified subjectivity and consciousness, but the purpose and valence of these assaults as well as the roles of passivity and affective experience in dramatizing them have been, I believe, simplified and elided by our tendency to conflate them with the linguistic critiques of subjectivity proper to postmodernism. In this vein, my assumptions are largely in accord with the findings of scholars like Charles Altieri, Richard Sheppard, Tim Dean, and others who discern a post-Enlightenment critique of “exaggerated human self-valuation” (yet not a wholesale critique of Enlightenment rationality) at the foundation of modernist aesthetics. Especially for Yeats and Eliot, a “closed” self is not merely an obstacle to artistic creativity but a psychological impossibility, a fantasy undercut at every step by the turbulent passions to which the self succumbs and upon which it depends for its vitality.

I have made Eliot the central figure of this study not only because his renderings of passion strike me as richly complex and compelling but also because his work is a magnet for the kinds of critical misconceptions about modernism that I seek to correct. Yeats is my counterpoint because he seems diametrically opposed to Eliot on the topics of emotion, passivity, and suffering, and yet he too sought to situate passion at the foundations of intellectual and creative activity while
simultaneously refusing to dismiss the value of active, rational thought. Their two drastically different ways of envisioning a productive response to passion—Eliot attempts to bring the conscious mind into a consonant meditative state, Yeats attempts to heighten its activity to a fever pitch—represent the boundary conditions of mental activity and thus circumscribe the space of artistic experiment and affective modulation that their modern contemporaries also inhabit. I include Mann and Woolf not because they are alone among modern novelists who share these concerns but because their means of addressing them—the repeated dramatization of certain dominant or touchstone tropes—so closely correspond to Yeats’s and Eliot’s methods that the resemblance seems to indicate a widespread imaginative mode rather than an isolated stylistic strategy. The four writers whom I have chosen to address in this book, I realize, are canonical, and especially in light of recent scholarship on formerly marginalized figures and movements, I do not assume their modernism to be the only modernism. My goal is to say something meaningful and compelling about each of them, often with the help of evidence from the archives and from neglected texts. If another corner of modernism’s enormous room becomes a bit more familiar to us in the process, then I will have accomplished much.

PASSION AND INSPIRATION

Rethinking these four well-known writers in terms of passion will demand that I revisit the distinctively modernist *topoi* that have become attached to their names, like the dissolution of the self, the doctrine of impersonality, and the autonomy of art. Each of these contested and overdetermined *topos* began, however, not in pure mind but amid the rags and bones of the artist’s workshop. And if questions about subjectivity, impersonality, and autonomy all derive from the process of creative composition, then I believe that I can best address them and others by focusing more directly upon modernist ideas about inspiration and creativity. In the pages that follow, the process of creative composition—and the innovative theories about creativity that each writer explores—will become the conceptual backdrop against which other modernist commonplaces and conventions will appear in new and perhaps unexpected forms.

Several contemporary scholars have explored the recent rehabilitation of inspiration as a conceptual category, remarking its surprising centrality to the philosophies of language and subjectivity in twentieth-century poetry and in poststructuralist theory in France and America. But for most scholars of literary modernism, it remains the vestige of Platonic metaphysics. Contemporary scholarship often considers inspiration an ideological device aimed at establishing authority and control. If we talk about inspiration at all, we do so with either irony or suspicion. The contemporary mistrust of metaphysics, however, need not be an obstacle if our primary concern is to address the experience of artistic
creation solely from within the immanent, phenomenological circumference of the artist's awareness. If we restrict the conversation to the domain of the “moved,” the “patient” or recipient of the divine *afflatus*, then the concept of inspiration gestures not toward transcendence (the ostensible agent or origin of the utterance) but solely toward a certain incompleteness or insufficiency proper to the creative mind. It presents the artist with a vision of his or her own mind that is partial, half-darkened, and deeply ambivalent in its foreignness. In the finished work of art, the mind is confronted with a task that it did not accomplish alone, a work whose origin and ultimate meaning it cannot decipher, and the evidence of a seemingly intentional agent that is, however, not identical with the conscious agent that we identify as the self. The artist writes; the text is written. And although these two actions occur simultaneously, they are not identical.

Were this anxious sense of mental foreignness merely part of the preparatory work of the artist, the deliberate receptivity that the mind cultivates before composition begins, the modern view of inspiration would remain squarely within Romantic parameters, like those that Shelley sets when he suggests that inspiration is already on the decline when composition begins. The act of writing would be yet another way of reasserting the ascendancy of the conscious will, a way to recuperate whatever mastery the artist might temporarily abandon beforehand. Writing would be, in short, a tranquil recollection that neutralizes the dangers and risks of emotional upheaval. But the writers whom I address all hold that passivity can be—and in some cases must be—simultaneous with artistic creation, that the creative act fuses action and passion together in an impossible simultaneity. Each refuses to submit to the conventional dichotomy whereby passion and action—in this case, inspiration and composition—remain opposing, mutually exclusive states. Once wecede the possibility that the mind can sometimes be moved without our conscious awareness—that is, once we fully register the more disturbing possibilities implicit in this artistic “possession”—we must also admit the possibility that the mind is always moved, that no conscious agent is free from a motivating energy unknown to it. In short, because passion need not abide by and often obscures the faculties that allow us to recognize it, we can never be certain of its absence.

In terms strikingly reminiscent of literary and philosophical discussions of inspiration since Plato—and that distinctly recall Freud’s early descriptions of the unconscious, a parallel that will become important later—contemporary philosopher Michel Meyer contends that passion is “in fact the other in us, without whom we would not exist, but with whom it is difficult and dangerous to be.” To adopt a turn of phrase from Eliot, the apparently impenetrable walls of the artist’s psyche have been breached. Somewhere in the basement, a door has been left ajar, and no amount of fumbling through the dark will suffice to find it and secure its latch. Although they receive little critical attention, the affective implications of this open
door—the sense of anxiety and passivity that it tends to provoke—cannot be overstated. In a way, modernism discovers its theories of both poetics and passion in the very act of confronting this door and grappling with the disturbing realization that it will not be—nor perhaps was it ever—safely closed.

The emotional and psychological ramifications of this version of inspiration are what most interest me here, the ways that modern writers’ theories of creative “possession”—which arise explicitly from their experiences of being spoken through, or unconsciously moved—lead them toward the same confrontation with vulnerability and powerlessness that they discover in their other spheres of interest, from Yeats’s experiments with trance mediumship and Mann’s infatuation with infectious diseases to Woolf’s and Eliot’s fascination with surrender and impersonality. In this way, the theory of inspiration becomes a metonym for psychological processes more generally; rather than a rare, aberrant occurrence from which the mind returns to its normative state of control and activity, it becomes the standard against which all mental acts are measured.

METHOD: THE PASSION SCENE

I am interested in how modern writers think about passion and passivity, but I am equally interested in how passivity informs and underwrites the process of composition for those same writers. Eliot says, for instance, that writing demands a tremendous degree of surrender and passivity, and yet for years scholars have considered him a master of deliberate craftsmanship, intense self-consciousness, and aesthetic control. In “Adam’s Curse,” Yeats admits that a single line of verse often takes hours of concentrated attention to compose, and yet elsewhere he proposes that the poet is no more than a vessel or passive medium for the daemonic spirit of inspiration. If we want to avoid simply dismissing these claims as self-contradictory, as poetic ideals never realized in the poetry itself, we must find a way to account for their strange simultaneity. In other words, my method must address both theory and praxis, how each writer imagines passivity and how passivity affects the way that he or she writes. But what sort of analysis will offer evidence of the writer’s compositional process? How can one hope to determine if the writer practices what he or she preaches?

The examination of a single text and the implications of its verbal strategies might reveal the writer’s thoughts about passivity at a single point in time, or how those thoughts inform the text’s figurative operations. But it will not tell us whether a particular scene or trope exerted an unusual pressure on the writer’s imagination; whether he or she felt compelled to revisit it repeatedly, as if to dress a reopened wound or consult an oracle; whether it was, in short, one of those intensely magnetized scenes toward which, as Yeats believes, the compass needle of the poet’s imagination invariably snaps. Admittedly no method can promise certainty about the degree of passivity that a writer did or did not experience during
composition. But I might offer some fruitful speculations if I begin by tracing, diachronically, how certain tropes and scenes recur throughout the writer’s career, how they seem significant enough to be invoked (consciously or unconsciously) in a wide variety of contexts and genres. At the very least, directing our attention toward such insistent repetitions and recurrences will provide the basis, in each individual chapter, for a micronarrative of creative self-revision and imaginative continuity. These narratives do not shy away from biography or intentionality, which I consider to be valid and illuminating—if always contingent—tools of interpretation. As Yeats argues, a poet’s biography and intentions must always inform but can never exhaust the text’s possibilities of meaning.

Primarily for the purposes of shorthand—but also in order to distinguish them from the symbol and the image—I refer to these recurrent tropes and scenarios in the chapters that follow as “passion scenes,” and I choose that term for two reasons: First, they typically portray passive suffering, vulnerability, and powerlessness; passion in its several senses is their subject matter. Second, they seem to exert an unusual psychological force upon the creative mind that conjures them, an autonomous energy that may very well trump conscious intention and deliberation; passion is somehow part of their method. In short, I have taken the passage from Yeats with which this book began as both a thematic prompt and a methodological blueprint.

I begin by identifying a trope or scenario that occurs regularly over some segment of the writer’s career, one which tends to appear at key moments of intellectual or emotional discovery and which extends laterally through multiple genres of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, even letters and autobiography. With the salient structural features of this scene in mind, I then attempt to think through the imaginative situation at the text’s origin, the questions and quandaries that the author was facing each time that the scene offered itself as mode of aesthetic exploration or resolution. In this vein, I find it useful to recall that medieval thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas wrote of the imagination as a “storehouse” of forms or shapes (thesaurus formarum), a vast mental warehouse in which the mind accumulates images, impressions, and composite arrangements of sensory experience. My assumption is that the items stockpiled in a writer’s imaginative storehouse tend to form idiosyncratic groupings associated with certain intellectual and emotional problems, so that when the mind confronts one of these problems, it cannot help but draw upon (consciously or unconsciously) the particular stores of images attached to it. Over time, these groupings shift, alter, and intermingle; new, more useful chains of association assemble, while others lose their urgency and usefulness. So with each reappearance of a particular passion scene, I ask: What intellectual and affective problems are now at stake? What new creative demands does it attempt to meet? And how does its current manifestation alter the dramatic landscape of the work in which it appears?
Eliot’s etherized patient lying upon a table or his startled narrator glancing over his shoulder; Yeats’s white horses descending from their painted surface; Mann’s microscopic agents of infection invading an unsuspecting victim; and Woolf’s portrayals of the naked eyeball threatened by the razor-sharp objects of perception—these are all vivid, intense tropes toward which each writer repeatedly gravitates in the attempt to address a constantly changing yet remarkably constant set of questions. My aim is not to assemble these scenes in the hopes of discovering an all-encompassing psychological, symbolic, or mythological system into which they all might fit. The urgent pressure exerted by the scenes, in fact, derives from the impossibility of such a system, from the frustrating ways in which they simultaneously seem to offer and refuse resolution and fulfillment. Nor do I want to claim for them a reconciling unity consistent with Frank Kermode’s “Romantic Image” or with what another scholar calls the “erotics of the image,” both of which imply a self-perpetuating symbolic system aimed at containing and resolving polarities.

Though I insist on using the term “passion scene” primarily as a critical expedient and not as a new aesthetic or theoretical category, it is important to distinguish between it and the similar conventions of the symbol or the image. In standard modernist discourse, the crucial element of the symbol or the image is its apparent atemporality, the way in which it ostensibly unifies the verbal elements of the poem and the disparate elements of experience by tapping into an origin- ary, ahistorical phantasmagoria. On the contrary, the passion scene relies entirely upon a set of changing, conflicted valences and is contingent upon the context and circumstance of its latest appearance. Its critical usefulness, in fact, derives from the way that its unpredictable shifts and modulations register the artist’s shifting and modulating concerns. If the symbol hovers or glides over change and tension, one might say that the passion scene falters and lurches with each altered, renewed appearance. In each chapter, I trace the constantly changing valences of such a scene over the course of a single artist’s career, and I attempt to show how the tensions that arise also indicate important tensions in his or her thinking about passion and creativity. If the discrete verbal units of an individual poem offer us a stylized chart of mental conflict and change, then the many works that comprise a single artistic corpus—alongside the published and unpublished archival records that complicate and illuminate them—promise to sketch for us the wildly uneven contours of a lifelong emotional and intellectual engagement, complete with all of its false starts, circularities, and paradoxes.

The method that I am suggesting will offer, in short, a series of narratives of creative struggle and development, each of which traces what Yeats memorably called the poet’s quarrel with himself. It is predicated upon the possibility that an artist’s career is influenced by persistent and not altogether conscious sets of metaphors, and it implies that the artist’s imagination is not always the prime mover in its universe of created forms.
If there is another discourse that is equipped to gauge the complex implications of Yeats’s formulation—creativity as a quarrel with oneself, with the internal foreignness and opacities of one’s own mind—it is psychoanalysis. The four authors whom I consider here were all, to varying degrees and with varying levels of commitment, aware of the developments in the emergent fields of psychology and psychoanalysis in the early decades of the twentieth century. Eliot regarded Freud with suspicion but was influenced by the empiricist psychology of James, whose work he studied ardently at Harvard. Yeats was more strongly moved by Jungian psychology, though he arrived there by way of the occult and the symbolic. Both Woolf and Mann knew and appreciated Freudian psychoanalysis, but both harbored profound misgivings about its effects on art and the imagination. To do justice to the varied and heterogeneous psychological discourses that inform modernism’s passions—including not only Freud and Jung but the “new psychologists” of the late nineteenth century, like James, Mach, and Brentano—would itself require a book-length study, one that would explore, for instance, how texts as different as Mach’s *Analysis of Sensations* (1886) and Freud’s “The Unconscious” (1915) come together in Yeats’s psychosomatic daemonology. Fortunately there has been an impressive and invaluable amount of recent work on the tensions and productive exchanges between literary modernism, Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, and other early-twentieth-century discourses of psychology. And this, admittedly, is one of the reasons that I have not given psychoanalysis a more prominent place in the pages that follow. Instead, in my attempt to take a fresh look at four modernist writers and their commitments to emotion and passivity, I have chosen to rely upon the dichotomy between passion and action in hopes that this philosophical framework will prove spacious enough to accommodate the divergent modernist psychologies without imposing a single, dominant theory to which each artist either subscribes or does not.

**PHILOSOPHIES OF PASSION AND ACTION**

A brief and very selective glimpse at aspects of the classical philosophical discourse on the passions will help to clarify the terms with which I have framed this study. The specific meaning of “passion” as emotional upheaval is actually derivative of the broader distinction between “action” and “passion,” a conceptual opposition that the Western philosophical tradition inherits from Aristotelian metaphysics and psychology via the medieval scholasticism of Aquinas. That the term remains in widespread use today testifies to the way it has become structurally embedded in our view of human psychology. In short, the terms “action” and “passion” designate the relationship between an entity that acts or originates movement and an entity that is acted upon or moved. As Susan James succinctly puts it, the difference between them amounts to “a difference between the power of an object to be moved (which is a passion) and the power of an object to move itself (which is an
action)."\textsuperscript{15} Or as the phenomenon is formulated with equal lucidity by the foremost contemporary thinker of passion, French philosopher Michel Meyer, "to have a passion, in the original sense of the word pathos, simply means that the soul has suffered a movement."\textsuperscript{16} Whether they are humans or objects, all entities can be understood to share certain degrees of passivity and activity, based upon the perspective from which we observe them. Descartes adopts the Aristotelian terms to formulate his definitions in \textit{The Passions of the Soul}: "I note that whatever takes place or occurs is generally called by philosophers a ‘passion’ with regard to the subject to which it happens and an ‘action’ with regard to that which it makes happen. Thus, although an agent and a patient are quite often different, an action and a passion must always be a single thing which has two names on account of the different subjects to which it may be related."\textsuperscript{17} A baseball can be either an agent or a patient depending on whether it is breaking a window or being hit by a baseball bat; a person can be either an agent or patient depending on whether he or she strikes the baseball or is struck by it.

In the Cartesian paradigm, the umbrella of “passion” encompasses four subcategories of perceptivity, including external objects of sense perception, bodily perceptions (such as hunger and pain), perceptions of the soul or emotions, and what Descartes calls “imaginings.”\textsuperscript{18} In this broad sense, emotions such as anger or pity are clearly passions, but so are rancid smells and chicken pox, an aching back or a daydream. For Descartes and others, we “perceive” an emotion like joy or sorrow in much the same way that we perceive a thornbush or a tornado, that is, as something that acts upon us “from without,” something that affects us and is caused by a force that is not our volition. Mental passions are all “perceptions” insofar as they are “thoughts which are not actions of the soul or volitions.”\textsuperscript{19} What unites these disparate phenomena—products of the passions of the body and those of the soul—is that we, however temporarily, become passive before them. It is important to note that Descartes makes a place for the imagination among these nonvolitional passions. As long as “our will is not used in forming them,” imaginative visions and illusions can press upon our mind just as vividly as sense objects press upon our sensual organs.\textsuperscript{20} Just as heat from a boiling kettle acts upon the hand, disturbing its natural equilibrium, so too do emotions and imaginings cause disturbances in the mind; and “until this disturbance ceases they remain present to the mind in the same way as the objects of the senses are present to it while they are acting upon our sense organs.”\textsuperscript{21}

There are two important implications of the philosophical discourse on the passions to which I would like to draw attention here. First, no matter how normal and necessary a place the passions assume in the various typologies of human experience, they are still construed as a temporary disturbance or departure from which we must recover. For Aristotle, passion “carries a man away”; for Descartes, it is always “accompanied by some disturbance which takes place in the heart.”\textsuperscript{22}
The gear in which the normal, balanced mind idles is almost always active, conscious, and deliberate. It would seem that nothing could be more human than passion. Yet if we define “the human” with an eye toward our capacity to think, judge, and will action, passion can prove “dehumanizing” insofar as it interferes with all of these. Even the humanistic, anti-stoical thinkers in the Western tradition for whom passion is both necessary and justified nonetheless maintain that it departs from the normative states of the human organism.23 And if the human process of creative composition is fundamentally active, if the act of writing words on a page (as opposed to the imaginative passivity often characterized as inspiration) entails a self-possession and deliberate control, then passion is equally disruptive of literary craft. No matter how freely the balloon of the imagination may drift and sway (to use Yeats’s metaphor), it must eventually be hauled down by the active mind in order for composition to occur.

The second implication that I would like to remark is that “passion” tends to blur the conceptual boundaries between psyche and soma. Most thinkers agree that heartburn is not a psychological event and that solving a mathematical equation does not involve the digestive tract. But just how far anger or depression, for instance, crosses into or originates from somatic territory is not nearly so commonly agreed upon. Suffering of most sorts, it seems, often has the effect of eliding the distinction between mind and matter, or between the human and the object. In this sense, both the physical and psychological passions hasten the disturbing realization of what Eliot calls “the reluctance of the body to become a thing,” that is, our reluctance to admit our kinship to the world of objects (CPP 384). The philosophical and experiential proximity between the bodily and the psychological passions is what will allow Virginia Woolf to claim that we need a new “hierarchy of the passions” that gives equal weight to the throes of fever, the pitch of emotion, and the ecstasies of inspiration (Essays 4.194). And it is what underlies Thomas Mann’s suggestion that the infectious spread of disease, the building momentum of lust, and the slow-growing energies of creativity are all variations on a single theme, which he calls “the devastating invasion of passion.”24 These apparently dissimilar phenomena are brought together insofar as the normally active, choosing, and self-determining human agent becomes, in relation to them, a patient with qualities not dissimilar from a mute object.

In its traditional senses, then, passion is always an aberrant intervention of psychosomatic conflict and discord; it is a threatening, unusual phenomenon that demands all of our conscious powers to control and discipline it into abeyance. The pedagogical hyperbole with which philosophy frequently treats its threatening potential only serves to bring the threat into better focus. Descartes argues unconvincingly in The Passions of the Soul, “Even those who have the weakest souls could acquire absolute mastery over all their passions if we employed sufficient ingenuity in training and guiding them.”25 A consistent theme for moralists from
Cicero to La Rochefoucauld, the desire to train, guide, and master the passions reflects our suspicion of their fundamental foreignness and of the ways in which that foreignness threatens to divide us, perhaps permanently, from ourselves.

**SENTIMENTAL AND SUBLIME PASSIONS**

The philosophical discourse on the passions veers most sharply toward literary concerns in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when it becomes a key component in discussions of the sentimental and the sublime. Because contemporary scholarship has recently discerned the formative influence of these two interrelated aesthetic modes on early modernism, it will prove worth our while to linger over them for a moment. Although sentimentality properly refers to the conventions of a genre of eighteenth-century fiction, its emphasis on the various modes of passive perception—sensitive, affective, intellectual—makes it a useful way for us to address how early modern “passion” transformed from an abstract philosophical problem to an urgent point of contention among the immediate predecessors of the modernists in the late nineteenth century.

From Descartes’ passions and the similar preoccupations of the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonists, the broader discourse surrounding “sentimentalism” makes its way through the eighteenth-century ethical philosophies of Hume and Locke, is transfigured in Edmund Burke’s theories of the sublime, and reaches a turning point of sorts in the Romantic poets that were eventually so maligned in certain circles of modernism. In terms of this simplified chronology, the “sentimental” refers to the focus upon the primacy of affect in the economy of mental experience, its role in ethical and political judgment, and its centrality to the creative process. Surprising as it may seem given the term’s contemporary cultural usage, scholars of eighteenth-century literature have long recognized that sentimentality provides the affective spectrum upon which we situate, at the farthest, white-hot end, the idea of the sublime. The sentimental hinges upon the mind’s passive powers or its capacity to feel, and the sublime is (as Burke says) a product of “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”

At its uppermost extreme, the sentimental verges toward Burkean sublimity, the mental state that occurs when the passions are wrought to such a high pitch—that is, when they demonstrate their indisputable primacy by annulling all other mental faculties—that our response is limited to mute astonishment or reverence. The historical debate about whether the sublime is an external, objective characteristic or an internal, subjective response is a direct result of the ambiguity that allows the Cartesian passions to straddle both internal and external perceptions. Burke’s sublimity is primarily an arbiter of passion in the sense of both emotion and passivity; part 2 of his *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757) begins explicitly with the subtitle, “the passion caused by the sublime.” The sublime provokes astonishment, fear, a “delightful terror” not dissimilar from what Wordsworth would later call the
“beauty, which . . . hath terror in it” or from Eliot’s “awful daring.” But it also renders the mind’s active faculties bewildered and ineffectual. The soul’s conscious motions are helplessly suspended, Burke says, while the passion of the sublime “hurries us on by irresistible force.” For the purposes of my argument, Burke’s most compelling insight into the sublime is its connection to self-preservation and thus its relationship to the classical model of catharsis. Whatever pleasure we derive from the sublime, he suggests, arises from what it reveals about our tenuous hold on life. That is, Burke discerns in the sublime an escalated version of the same threatening, dehumanizing potential of passion in the philosophical sense, the power to disrupt and disturb those actions whereby we define human physical and mental activity.

Burke’s emphasis on cathartic self-preservation helps to explain the facility with which the passion of the sublime could paradoxically become, in the hands of Romantic poets, not only a reification of the self but a mode of self-transcendence, of the self’s dialectical approach to the infinite and withdrawal back into temporality. In book 1 of The Prelude, for instance, Wordsworth registers the spontaneous outburst of receptivity, feeling, and poetry as both a blessing and a temporary disturbance to be allayed; eager to “give / A respite to this passion,” the speaker hastens toward more moderate, less overwhelming pleasures. In the second book he returns to the “extrinsic passion” of Nature and how it “peopled the mind with forms sublime.” And before long he elevates passion to its rightful place in the Romantic hierarchy of feeling, referring to it as “passion, which itself / Is highest reason in a soul sublime.” The Wordsworthian speaker explicitly pairs sublimity and the passions, and he suffers the sublime passions as if they were part of an existential test, an initiatory trial that seems to endanger but ultimately exalts the unity and transcendence of the self.

With no small help from the classicist philosophies of Irving Babbitt and T. E. Hulme, many modern writers learned to distrust this possibility, which came to seem wishful and self-aggrandizing. Thus they could not subscribe to the sublime as a singular, aberrational state, one into which the mind perilously descends only to make its timely, triumphant recovery. But they were not willing to dismiss it from the necessarily capacious emotional spectrum of modern poetics, nor from the realm of intuitive possibilities toward which Henri Bergson’s influential philosophy had gestured. So in effect modernism seeks to free sublimity from a mute, anomalous state of response—or from a state of “poetic” rapture and emotional excess—and instead to make it a fundamental aspect of creative activity in general, one whose threat to self-preservation and psychic autonomy does not impede but rather “hurries on” (in Burke’s phrase) literary composition.

Insofar as the sentimental in all of its forms was often aligned with the Romantic and the “feminine” literary traditions, it earned the censure of modernists like T. E. Hulme and Ezra Pound. Their advocacy of technical craftsmanship and
Augustan classicism (especially in Eliot’s and Pound’s quatrains of 1918–20) was articulated in explicit opposition to the formal liberties that, they suspected, resulted from the overvaluing of emotion. The mainstream modernism of Lewis, Pound, Woolf, Eliot, and Joyce, it is often argued, constituted itself precisely by denying its sentimental heritage. Critics remind us of Pound’s desire for a poetry that is “austere, direct, free from emotional slither,” or Hulme’s directive that emotion in art be subservient to clarity and precision. In short, we have learned—at times from scholars, at times from the artists themselves—to view the sentimental as modernism’s other, as a force operating from within modernism whose potential for subversion was realized solely by feminist and politically progressive artists in opposition to the conservative philosophy of more mainstream writers. On the contrary, I hope to show that Eliot, Yeats, Woolf, Mann, and others, despite their frequent diatribes against the sentimental tradition and the Romantic sublime, were deeply invested in the kind of intense emotional self-awareness to which the commitments of these traditions gave rise. It was, in fact, Eliot who brought the term “sensibility”—a standard term in the lexicon of sentimentalism—back into widespread use in literary criticism. The various discourses of passion allowed modernists like Eliot to recapture the emotional primacy of the sentimental tradition—including the role of the sublime not only in the reception of literary forms but in their creation as well—while distancing themselves from those elements of it that they considered dangerously “feminine” or passive, though as I demonstrate, these more dangerous elements were precisely those that fascinated them the most. Although I do not often refer to them explicitly, the discourses of the sentimental and the sublime will help us to grasp the historical and philosophical basis for the conflicts that I outline in the following chapters, and they are a crucial subtext for the later-nineteenth-century repudiation of passive suffering and the modernist tensions that it engendered.

MODERNISM AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY PASSIONS

Of the many influential pressures that later-nineteenth-century poets exerted on subsequent theories of poetics and emotion—the development of the new dramatic monologue and the objectification of Romantic expressivity are among the two most often remarked—few were so crucial to modernism’s own self-definition as the tensions surrounding the role of passion and emotional expression, in terms of both psychology and artistic creation. Adela Pinch has demonstrated, for instance, that nineteenth-century writers in England were deeply fascinated by both the power and the threat of what she calls “the vagrancy of emotions.” Victorian passions, she argues, seem to possess an independent, “transpersonal” life of their own, an extravagant autonomy that threatens to invade and infiltrate certain segments of society like an infectious disease. Another scholar reveals that even popular discourse in Victorian dictionaries and magazines connected the
passions of the mind and those of the body—heartaches may cause heart attacks, for instance, and excessive joy may end in “instantaneous death”—in vivid admonitions against weakness and passivity. “The obsessive manner with which writers treat the relation between disease and emotion, body and feeling,” she argues, “is itself an indication of the anxiety that the subject could provoke.”37 The Victorians passed this anxiety along to their modernist descendants, who sensed and suffered it even more keenly because of their growing certainty that such dangers were intrinsic to the artistic enterprise. Nowhere is the anxiety so immediately legible as in modernist critiques of Victorian artists, whom they invariably portray as succumbing to the wrong passions.

Though it is often accepted as the definitive modernist statement on passivity, Yeats’s repudiation of World War I poetry in his introduction to the 1936 Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892–1935, offers a valuable example of modernism’s tendency to adopt and renegotiate Victorian tensions about passion. His introduction is a withering condemnation of passivity that, for long afterward, cinched his reputation as the Nietzschean poet par excellence, champion of modern iconoclasm and the indomitable will: “Passive suffering,” Yeats famously declares, “is not a theme for poetry.” When it becomes one, he suggests, the poet no longer traverses the frontiers of sublime tragedy; instead, “some blunderer has driven his car on to the wrong side of the road—that is all” (LE 199). In light of such a stark and trivializing censure, my claims about the centrality of passion to modernist thought might seem to be swerving dangerously toward the blunderer’s side of the road as well.

Of course, as with so many of his seemingly ex cathedra aphorisms, Yeats’s admonition relies for its force both upon the tensions that it consciously elides in his own work and those that it unconsciously reproduces from the late-nineteenth-century literary tradition. His resistance to passivity and his recourse to its ethical implications as viable criteria for aesthetic judgment explicitly point us back to Matthew Arnold’s similar warning in the preface to his Poems: A New Edition (1853). In the preface Arnold rejects the poetic value of passivity—in terms that rely similarly upon its ethical dimensions—by condemning his own “Empedocles on Etna,” a narrative in which he himself had tipped the scales between passion and action too far. “What are the eternal objects of Poetry?” Arnold asks; “they are actions; human actions.”38 Certain literary themes, however, do not promise the kind of noble enjoyment necessary for a great work of art to persist, he continues: “What then are the situations, from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived? They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. . . . When they occur in actual life, they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also.”39
Arnold’s well-known critique is directed not toward suffering or passivity itself, which can attain the status of tragedy if the will defiantly rises to meet it, but toward the prolongation of suffering that finds no release valve in action. What most troubles him is the possibility that passion might prove to be an inescapable psychological condition and not a temporary state, that the will might encounter forces—especially internal forces or “mental distress”—that it simply cannot resist or overcome. One might say that Arnold glimpses the potential permanence and irrevocability of passion but cannot envision this state in terms other than debilitating distress.

Perhaps we could take this declaration at face value if “Empedocles on Etna” were not the product of his own imagination, if he himself had not grotesquely envisioned the human soul as a mirror that the Gods have strung upon a vast cord, a “gusty toy” passively battered by the wind and capable only of offering partial reflections of the expanses over which it dangles and whirls. In this context, Empedocles asks, “Can our souls not strive, / But with the winds must go, / And hurry where they drive?” And in the same volume—this time without the safety net of the dramatis persona—Arnold’s speaker declares, “We cannot kindle when we will / The fire which in the heart resides; / The spirit bloweth and is still, / In mystery our soul abides.” If the intention of Arnold’s warning in the preface is to exalt the aesthetic and ethical virtue of action over passion, its ultimate effect is to register his own profound ambivalence about the roles of passion and passivity in art, their potentially painful and permanent consequences both in life and literature.

The tension carries over from Arnold’s thinking about aesthetic judgment to his more speculative thinking about poetic composition as well. In fact, the very aspect of his own work that he so strenuously resists in the preface—the diminishment of the will, its “feminine” tendency to passively receive and perceive—later becomes the primary basis for a critique of his own foremost Romantic predecessor. Thus Arnold in the preface he contributed to the 1879 edition of Wordsworth’s Poems writes, “To give aright what he wishes to give, to interpret and render successfully, is not always within Wordsworth’s own command.... Here is the part of the Muse, the inspiration, the God, the ‘not ourselves.’ In Wordsworth’s case, the accident, for so it may be called, of inspiration, is of peculiar importance. No poet, perhaps, is so evidently filled with a new and sacred energy when the inspiration is upon him; no poet, when it fails him, is so left ‘weak as is a breaking wave.”

According to Arnold, Wordsworth’s passive dependence upon the “not himself” runs a risky gambit; it lifts him to great heights but also drops him from those heights into tedium and mediocrity. In Arnold’s eyes, Wordsworth’s passive attendance upon a force foreign to his own will brings him too close to Empedocles’ prolonged suffering at the hands of the gods. “Nature herself seems to take the pen out of his hand,” Arnold famously writes of Wordsworth, “and to write for him with her own bare, sheer, penetrating power.”Arnold’s gendered metaphors
essentially feminize his predecessor, whom he imagines to have been passively ravished and penetrated by nature itself. More important, he can effectively conflate Wordsworth—a sometime prophet possessed by the energies of Nature—with his own fictional Empedocles—a lifeless mirror blown about by the winds of fate or chance—because what compels his resistance to both is not the particular agent to whom poet and hero are patients but rather the disturbing effect of being a patient at all. Whatever inscrutable entity or force we choose as the agent of such a passion (perhaps Arnold puts it best by concluding his list of possibilities—Muse, inspiration, or divine—with simply the “not ourselves”), the aesthetic and psychological dangers to the recipient, the patient, remain the same.

If the Victorian ambivalence toward passion is, as I believe, a complex inheritance of the sentimental and sublime traditions as they intersected in Romanticism, then we can expect to find that Arnold is not alone in his anxieties about passivity and the “not ourselves”; we can expect to find his contemporaries engaged in a similar critique of their Romantic predecessors. And we will not be disappointed if we turn directly to Walter Pater and his thought about the passive and active aspects of composition. In his essay on Wordsworth in 1874, Pater invokes the dialectic to a similar purpose: “He who thought that in all creative work the larger part was given passively, to the recipient mind, who waited so dutifully upon the gift, to whom so large a measure was sometimes given, had his times also of desertion and relapse; and he has permitted the impress of these too to remain in his work. And this duality . . . gives the effect in his poetry of a power not altogether his own, or under his control, which comes and goes when it will, lifting or lowering a matter, poor in itself; so that the old fancy which made the poet’s art an enthusiasm, a form of divine possession, seems almost literally true of him.”

Pater discerns the risks associated with this kind of passivity and distinguishes them from the benefits with perhaps even more urgency than does Arnold. If Wordsworth’s poetry has a fault, it is precisely that it does not seem the product of the active, deliberating craftsman, whom he portrays unsurprisingly as “the gem engraver blowing away the last particle of invisible dust.” The mysteries of art, for Pater—its ambiguities and opacities—should occur in the realm of reception, not production; that is, how it affects us is mysterious, not how it is made. The artist, he suggests in “Style” (1888), should labor at his craft like the carpenter at his workbench, and the work, upon completion, should embody and manifest the gestures of the triumphant will. It should dazzle us with “all the freshness of volition,” not the mysteries of inspiration. The strongest art, Pater implies, bears the indelible imprint of a strong, active will. Instead Wordsworth was often the victim of “periods of intense susceptibility,” and during those times “he appeared to himself as but the passive recipient of external influences.” While Pater nowhere denies the potential of such passivity in terms so harshly derisive as Arnold’s, he does resist the idea that the artist must suffer himself to be possessed
for his work to come to fruition. He touches briefly upon this modernization of Plato’s divine “mania” in his essay on Dante Gabriel Rossetti, pausing only long enough to remind us that poetry of this sort possesses “a mere insanity incidental to it . . . into which it may lapse in its moment of weakness.” Like Arnold, Pater implies that passion in art—whether in its role as creative force or thematic focus—ought to consistently demonstrate its own transience, its accidental, nonnormative character.

As with Arnold’s admonitions, however, these warnings do not quite veil Pater’s own ambivalence about the centrality of passion and receptivity to the creative act. It is, after all, his own Marius the Epicurean who—in a moment with tremendous implications for modernist theories of impersonality—desires to transform himself into a “complex medium of reception.” And Pater himself takes great pains to emphasize the centrality of “passion” in the closing passages of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), invoking it with chant-like repetition. “High passions,” “great passions,” “poetic passion”: how appropriate that so conflicted a term appears among the final notes struck by the famously conflicted and misunderstood “Conclusion.”

An identical tension animates John Ruskin’s best-known appraisal of the imaginative faculties in the third volume of *Modern Painters* (1856), particularly in his discussion of the pathetic fallacy. Ruskin grants a degree of respectability to the artist who allows himself to be overwhelmed by emotion. Clearly, he argues, a dry rationality or a dull insensitivity to affective forces is less desirable than a keen albeit confused receptivity to “emotions which are strong enough to vanquish, partly, the intellect.” It would be difficult to overstate the importance of Ruskin’s parenthetical qualification, “partly”; this sort of hesitance is paradigmatic of the ambivalence toward passion in Victorian poetics. States of aesthetic passion are, he continues, “more or less noble” in proportion to the strength of the emotions which motivate them. But these are also the sort of dangerous psychological conditions—when the mind is “borne away, or over-clouded, or over-dazzled by emotion”—that result in the errors in judgment and perception that the pathetic fallacy reveals in the artist. More desirable than the strong emotions themselves, he concludes, is the ability of the mind to subject them to its dominance, “to assert its rule against, or together with, the utmost efforts of the passions.” As before, the conscious mind preserves its sovereignty only by exercising its will against (“or with,” in Ruskin’s formulation, which means essentially the same, in that the intellect marshals the passions against themselves) that which threatens it. In distinguishing the levels of this hierarchy, Ruskin makes explicit the tensions that both Arnold and Pater intimate. The uncontrollable, he implies, is of crucial importance to art, but only insofar as it is ultimately controlled, insofar as the imagination asserts and reifies its essentially active condition, proving passion temporary and subordinate.
Yeats and Eliot not only inherit this ambivalence toward passion but eventually find themselves struggling to balance the tensions that I have remarked in their Victorian predecessors. Pater’s formative influence on Yeats has been widely remarked. And I cannot help but imagine that the tensions in Pater’s prose contributed to the peculiar “attitude of mind” that, Yeats suggests in The Tragic Generation, sent the poets of the 1890s tiptoeing precariously across a tightrope in the midst of a raging storm (Au 235). Was it Pater, Yeats wonders, who led his early contemporaries astray, who lured them toward the Hodos Chameliontos, that overpowering, uncontrollable realm of imaginative fantasy and nightmare that Yeats aligned with madness and loss of control?

Eliot’s agonistic relationship with Arnold mirrors Yeats’s with Pater. In the Charles Eliot Norton lectures that he delivered at Harvard in the winter of 1932–33, Eliot gives “Empedocles on Etna” a singular, ascendant place in Arnold’s poetic corpus. The very stone that Arnold rejected, Eliot implies, should have been the foundation for his other work. This gesture alone should signal Eliot’s desire to renew and reestablish the tensions between passion and agency that, in his mind, Victorian poetry had so insistently suppressed. As if in direct response to Arnold’s original criteria for rejecting the poem and its theme, Eliot claims that Arnold lacked a “discipline of suffering,” a capacity for confronting and engaging the kind of radical passion that prompted both the composition of “Empedocles” and its ultimate dismissal.53 Decrying the rarity with which Arnold’s prose addresses the actual experience of composition from the poet’s point of view, Eliot suggests, “One feels that the writing of poetry brought him little of that excitement, that joyful loss of self in the workmanship of art, that intense and transitory relief which comes at the moment of completion and is the chief reward of creative work.”54

Of course, because this speculation depends for its evidence wholly upon the absence of any evidence at all, it tells us little about Arnold’s poetics. It is, however, an oblique and revealing commentary on Eliot’s singular interpretation of Arnold and on how he allowed that interpretation to shape and influence his own experience of creative composition. Elsewhere Eliot returns to this passive, momentary “loss of self”—which he envisions occurring simultaneously with active workmanship—with even greater emphasis on the conflicting emotional upheavals that it entails and the sense of irrevocability that follows. Both intense and exciting, joyous and horrific, for the poet who is willing to confront it in all of its complexity, this experience is “something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable” (TVP 30).

Not only does this description significantly complicate his earlier, widely misunderstood claims in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” about the relationship between poetry and emotion, but it also situates his creative engagement with Arnold as one of the primary catalysts of the influential theory of impersonality. In confronting the radical passion of poetic composition and in accounting for the
full range of affective experience that this passion provokes, Eliot is consciously responding to a shortcoming that he perceives in his foremost literary predecessor. He is attempting to reveal and reinstate the tensions that Arnold aimed to elide in the preface, tensions that—once back in play—challenge the poet’s status as the self-transparent, conscious agent of his work. In short, Eliot discerns in Arnold’s resistance to passion and passivity a willful refusal to surrender the “self” that, in his view, the composition of poetry puts at risk.

It is striking, then, to return to Yeats’s introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* and find the same critique rehearsed by a poet who, only pages before, had repudiated the poetic value of passive suffering altogether. In fact, when he begins to discuss Eliot explicitly, Yeats admits that it is precisely these themes—the relationship between passion and action, or between suffering and doing—that he finds most captivating in his younger contemporary’s work. While he was preparing his introduction, Yeats began to meet with Eliot more regularly than ever before, arranging for new contributions to the *Criterion*, introducing him to the poetry of Dorothy Wellesley, and even discussing the possibility of staging the recently completed *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) with the Group Theatre. He was present for director Martin Browne’s lecture on Eliot’s new play at the Abbey in September 1935, and he attended a performance of it two months later at the Mercury Theatre, where the reflections on passion and patience in *Murder in the Cathedral* seems to have struck a familiar chord with him. When it came time to offer his concluding remarks on Eliot for the *Oxford Book* introduction, Yeats intuitively turned to these troubled elements of the play. “‘They know and do not know,’” he quotes at length from Eliot’s opening act,

that acting is suffering  
And suffering is action. Neither does the actor suffer  
Nor the patient act. But both are fixed  
In an eternal action, an eternal patience  
To which all must consent that it be willed  
And which all must suffer that they may will it.

(*LE* 194)

I do not think it an accident that, in the midst of one of his rare written commentaries on Eliot, Yeats quotes precisely these lines. In Eliot’s meditations on the paradoxical simultaneity between passion and action (“Can I neither act nor suffer / Without perdition?,” the same protagonist demands elsewhere [*CPP* 193]), Yeats finds a mirror for his own ambivalence about passion and poetry, for the tensions that he had inherited from Pater and that he hoped to simplify by issuing his edict against passive suffering and excluding the World War I poets from the modern canon. Surprisingly, however, his one concern about Eliot’s new work is not that it places too much emphasis on passion and surrender. In fact, Yeats claims
quite the opposite: “There is little self-surrender,” he concludes, “in [Eliot’s] personal relation to God and the soul” (*LE* 192). How strange that Yeats—the self-proclaimed herald of the imaginative will-to-power—would find Eliot to be lacking in the capacity for self-surrender. Wasn’t it Eliot, after all, who had claimed that art demands nothing less than continual self-sacrifice and surrender of the artist to the work? Isn’t this the author of *The Waste Land*’s most urgent question and its unexpected answer: “what have we given? / . . . / the awful daring of a moment’s surrender” (*CPP* 49)?

Poets are notoriously bad at reaching a proper estimation of their contemporaries. Though they are intuitively sensitive to the problems faced by other artists (primarily because those problems are theirs as well), they are too close to the fray, too occupied with struggling against the same rough beast, to give a reliable account of the battle. I’d like to conclude by turning to a poet whose generational distance from the early modernists enabled him to see more clearly the stakes and widespread ramifications of the debate that I’ve been tracing thus far. In *The Struggle of the Modern* (1963), Stephen Spender distinguishes between the two modes of ego or self-identification that he sees at work in early-twentieth-century literature: the “Voltairean I,” which appears to stand outside of temporality, claims to adjudicate with reason and intellect, and belongs to those whose “sensibility was not the product of the times that they deplored,” and the “modern I,” a more fragile, contingent, historical self whose decisions and judgments are characterized by fallibility, incompleteness, and suffering. He continues: “What I call the ‘Voltairean I’ participates in, belongs to, the history of progress. When it criticizes, satirizes, attacks, it does so in order to influence, to direct, to oppose, to activate existing forces. The ‘Voltairean I’ of Shaw, Wells, and the others acts upon events. The ‘modern’ I’ of Rimbaud, Joyce, Proust, Eliot’s *Prufrock* is acted upon by them. The Voltairean ‘I’ has the characteristics—rationalism, progressive politics, etc.—of the world the writer attempts to influence, whereas the ‘modern’ I’ through receptiveness, suffering, passivity, transforms the world to which it is exposed.”

I know of no other poet or scholar willing to claim so boldly that what is “modern” about modernism is its capacity for receptiveness, suffering, and passivity, and that these common attributes are not merely negative but instead possess a positive, substantive, transformative value. The distinction that Spender draws between the “I” that originates action and the “I” that is acted upon cuts to the heart of my argument here, even if it supports a dichotomy that the modernists whom I address will challenge and complicate. If, as Spender concludes, “the modern is the realized consciousness of suffering,” then it is a suffering that creates and transforms, a passion that is simultaneously an action of the highest caliber.

This is a tension, I believe, that will not be resolved by recourse to the conventional paradigm wherein passion is simply a momentary departure from action, a temporary aside on the path to self-possession and rational autonomy. The burden
of this book will be to follow the ways that modern writers struggle to articulate this tension—so important to their thinking about both poetics and human experience—and to perform it in ways that do justice to the affective extremes to which the mind is given when its self-sovereignty is threatened, to the emotional and psychological turmoil that each passion scene attempts to recapture.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Eliot is at the center of my argument, and the two chapters in part 1 set the conceptual boundaries for the rest of the book. Yeats is a counterpoint of sorts; part 2 shows how his drastically different phantasmagoria of passion arises from a set of concerns very similar to Eliot’s and central to broader modernist preoccupations. The four chapters on Eliot and Yeats follow a similar structure: The first chapter on each investigates how the poet envisions an ideal imaginative response to passion. The second then takes up an alternative model of passion and its theoretical implications: in Eliot’s case, a realization of psychological limitation characterized by suddenness and surprise; in Yeats’s, an aesthetic upheaval characterized by anxiety and emotional turmoil. The two shorter chapters in part 3 explore alternative modes of passion in the fiction of Woolf and Mann, both of whom emphasize the painful physicality and materiality of being moved, Woolf from without, Mann from within.

The first chapter discusses Eliot’s changing ideas about how the mind responds to passion—affectively, intellectually, and imaginatively—and about how one might experience passion as a normative and creative mental state rather than an aberration or temporary suspension of activity. With the etherized patient as my guiding thread or passion scene, I address how Eliot learns to imagine and dramatize a state of permanent passion—one which is psychologically constitutive rather than transient. I gauge the pressure that this realization exerts on his aesthetic theories by demonstrating that he increasingly makes a place, late in his career, for intuitive and noncognitive elements of creativity that would have been antithetical to his early classicist ideals. I conclude by arguing that a more thorough estimation of Eliot’s ideas about passion, in turn, offers us a corrective to long-standing critical perspectives based solely on his early, best-known essays.

In chapter 2 I focus on a complementary model of passion in Eliot, which he develops by experimenting with what he calls the “recognition scene.” I trace the development of this scene to show how he learns to calibrate the relationship between intense emotions and the limitations of the human mind. I first address the philosophical and psychological theories that Eliot uses to formulate the recognition scene, a disturbing realization of mental incompleteness that he captures by imagining himself surprised by a ghostly presence standing just over his shoulder. Eliot uses the recognition trope to envision a sense of internal vulnerability or doubling and, ultimately, to confront the emotional implications of the mind’s
loss of self-sovereignty and self-transparency. His repeated and increasingly complex attempts to dramatize this ambivalence reveal the value that he places upon receptivity, emotional intensity, and the mind’s capacity for dwelling within limitations.

Chapter 3 turns to Yeats with concerns parallel to those that the first chapter addressed with Eliot. I examine how he envisions the ideal imaginative response to passion, one that will do justice to its violent energies without relinquishing a degree of control and self-possession. I discuss how he enlarges the conceptual precincts of passion to accommodate what he calls the “abnormal restlessness” of the mind, that is, how he envisions the paradoxical simultaneity of action and passion in the mind’s movement toward the visionary. I suggest that while Yeats contributes to the characteristically modernist discourse of the decentered subject, what he calls “the dissolution of the fixed personality” actually arises from an intensification of affective conflict and sensitivity rather than—as is usually supposed—a fascination with literary form or symbolic abstraction. Drawing on a number of unpublished letters and manuscript materials, I conclude by offering a revisionary account of Yeats’s daemonic theories of inspiration and by situating these theories as a dynamic fulcrum in his dialectical volume *Last Poems and Two Plays* (1939).

In chapter 4 I shift focus to examine Yeats’s aesthetic passion, that is, to demonstrate how another Yeatsian passion scene—the Japanese fable of the “painted horses”—demands that we rethink conventional ways of conceptualizing modernist perspectives about the aims and “afterlife” of art. For Yeats, all art must assume an autonomous (“independent,” “self-moving”) life of its own, especially if it is to bring about personal and political change. I address the risks and emotional upheavals that result from Yeats’s theory, and I show how his genuine concerns over these risks pervade even his later work, where the painted horses seem to have all but disappeared. The implications of this theory of art’s autonomy pose a trenchant challenge to the still-prevalent critical perspectives on modernism’s commitment to “aesthetic autonomy,” which involves a text that somehow remains closed and insulated to external cultural and historical forces. With recourse to Frank Kermode’s discussion of the “Romantic Image,” I argue that this Yeatsian passion scene takes the symbolist aesthetic to its logical extreme, making it impossible for such an insulated autonomy to exist.

My starting point in chapter 5 is Virginia Woolf’s well-known essay “On Being Ill” (1926), wherein she issues her call for “a new hierarchy of the passions,” one that will account for the intense ambivalence and the rich yet dangerous vulnerability of artistic perception (*Essays* 4.139). I show that Woolf’s myth of the origins of personality—in which the inchoate mind is shaped by an atomic storm—is predicated upon a violent passion that precedes human consciousness, and I argue
that this violence remains an integral part of a passion scene that recurs throughout her career, that of the wounded or vulnerable human eye. The profoundly sensitive membrane of the artist’s eye is, I propose, the site of Woolf’s most complex and conflicted thinking about passion, and I conclude by discussing how she dramatizes this conflict in two complementary characters in *The Waves*.

If Woolf’s passions emphasize a physical violence from without, Thomas Mann’s passions relentlessly turn our attention toward a physical, even biological, violence within. The final chapter examines how Mann conceptualizes passion in terms of disease, specifically as a hidden, invisible infection devastating its victim slowly and imperceptibly before its presence becomes known. Drawing from each of the major novels and a number of political essays, I discuss how his protagonists all struggle with the suspicion of an intrinsic susceptibility to internal corruption and disease but also with the resemblance that this condition bears to the ecstasies of artistic inspiration. I examine the development of a narrative strategy that Mann uses to reproduce the infectious manifestation of passion on a structural level, and I demonstrate how his political commitments in the decade before World War II intensify his longtime ambivalence toward the dangerous, noncognitive aspects of passion. *Doctor Faustus* (1947), I conclude, dramatizes this ambivalence by coupling the protagonist’s moral and emotional devastation with his ultimate success in bringing passion into enduring, artistic form.