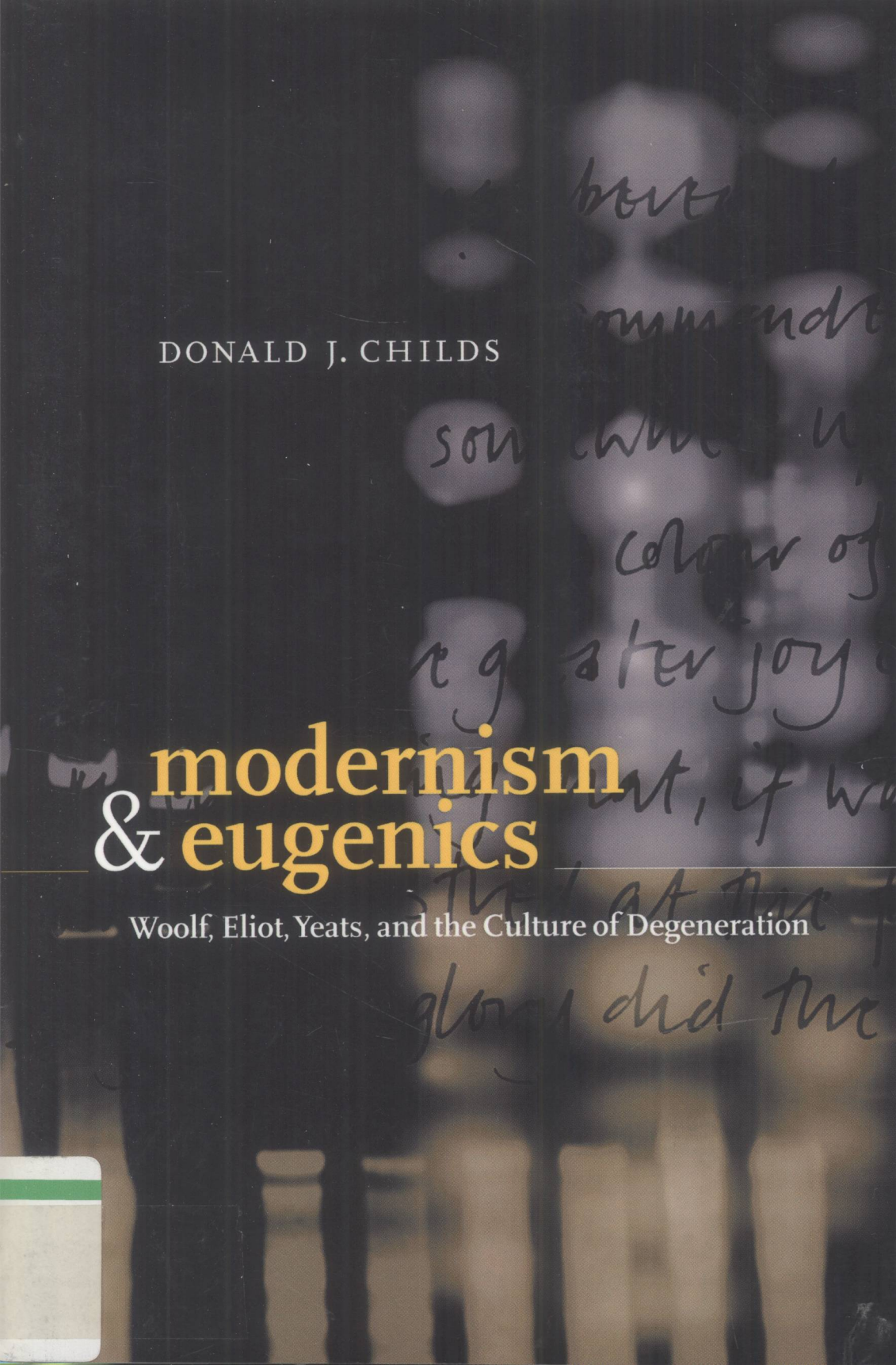

DONALD J. CHILDS

modernism & eugenics

Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration

MODERNISM AND EUGENICS

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For Janet, Kathleen, and Emma

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Introduction

Before eugenics was born as a science in the work of Francis Galton late in the nineteenth century, the concerns that it would address were gathering. On the one hand, the age of European exploration confronted Europe with races and cultures that had to be explained in terms of the assurance in the Book of Genesis that we all descend from Adam and Eve. As late as the nineteenth century, many ethnologists and anthropologists were content to assume that all human beings indeed descended from Adam and Eve, but that some branches of the human species had been cursed for their sins and so had degenerated from their original noble state. On the other hand, in Galton's Britain, increasing urbanization confronted the middle class with an apparently permanent underclass of poor people – beggars, thieves, prostitutes – often in poor health, apparently indolent and lazy. This underclass, moreover, was increasing in size relative to the middle class because of the differential birthrate, and increasing also was the frequency of such social problems as murder, pauperism, disease, mental illness, alcoholism, and prostitution. Was the British nation degenerating – its very survival threatened by the potentially fatal fertility of its degenerates?

As early as 1871, analysis of records of the height, weight, and general health of army recruits throughout the nineteenth century in Britain suggested "a progressive physical degeneracy of race."[1] The early defeats of the British army in the Boer War (1899–1902) confirmed for many that degeneration had become a national problem. In *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel: 1880–1940*, William Greenslade offers an excellent history of the emergence of belief in degeneration during the last half of the nineteenth century, a belief that could explain "the growing sense in the last decades of the century of a lack of synchrony between the rhetoric of progress . . . and the facts on the ground, the evidence in front of people's eyes, of

poverty and degradation at the heart of ever richer empires." Analyzing the role of medicine, psychology, urbanization, feminism, and politics (among other factors) in the emergence of this discourse, Greenslade notes that at the turn of the century "the crucial topic of the differential birth-rate . . . emerged into social, medical, and political discourse." Observing that less desirable elements in the population were out-breeding all others, "Edwardian race-improvers" undertook to "save the nation from degeneration."[2]

Alarmists like the eugenist R. R. Rentoul raised the spectre of "race suicide": "Day by day, hour by hour, and year after year we add diseased humanity – the children begotten by the diseased, idiots, imbeciles, epileptics, the insane . . . Does any one contend that such a scheme of pollution works for race culture? Rather, I contend, that it works for race suicide."[3] Karl Pearson, Galton's "principal successor in eugenics," lectured in similar terms:

> It would be possible to paint a lurid picture – and label it Race Suicide. That is feasible to any one who has seen, even from afar, the nine circles of that dread region which stretches from slum to reformatory, from . . . hospital and sanatorium to asylum and special school; that infernal lake which sends its unregarded rivulets to befoul more fertile social tracts.[4]

Ensuring that fears about national degeneration and race suicide would receive serious attention in the newspapers and in parliament was the international political context. As Greta Jones points out, "[t]he growing imperial rivalry between the European nations increased the fear that British resources of fit and healthy manpower were on the decline. Moreover, industry also paid a heavy price for the diseased and the debilitated among the working class."[5] How long would Britain's imperial and industrial sway continue in the face of degeneration?

Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection and his cousin Francis Galton's studies of heredity made it possible to understand these problems in biological terms. Many argued that natural selection had ceased to operate in the British population because public and private charity now enabled the weakest to survive. Herbert Spencer therefore called for a social Darwinism that would allow natural selection once more to take its course:

> [T]he well-being of existing humanity and the unfolding of it into . . . ultimate perfection, are both secured by that same beneficial though severe discipline, to which the animate creation at large is subject. It seems hard that an unskilfulness . . . should entail hunger upon the artisan. It seems

hard that a laborer incapacitated by sickness . . . should have to bear the resulting privations. It seems hard that widows and orphans should be left to struggle for life or death. Nevertheless, when regarded not separately but in connexion with the interests of universal humanity, these harsh fatalities are seen to be full of beneficence. . .[6]

Similarly, Galton called for a "science of improving stock" that would study "all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had."[7]

Called eugenics, this new science of human breeding would supplement natural selection in two ways – negatively and positively. As the philosopher and eugenist F. C. S. Schiller explains, "Negative eugenics aims at checking the deterioration to which the human stock is exposed, owing to the rapid proliferation of what may be called human weeds." He warns that "negative eugenics is not enough," however, for it "can only arrest deterioration": "If we want improvement, progress, the creation of superior types of humanity . . ., we must look to positive eugenics, which sets itself to inquire by what means the human race may be rendered intrinsically better, higher, stronger, healthier, more capable."[8] Judged unfit to propagate, human weeds are to be eliminated by segregation, sterilization, or euthanasia; judged fit to propagate, the flowers of humankind are encouraged to have large families.

According to Galton, eugenics would inevitably come to supplement conventional religion:

[Eugenics] must be introduced into the national conscience, like a new religion. It has, indeed, strong claims to become an orthodox religious tenet of the future, for Eugenics co-operate with the works of Nature by securing that humanity shall be represented by the fittest races. What nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly.[9]

William and Catherine Whetham, a potent husband-and-wife team of eugenists, pushed this line by adapting the language of the New Testament to eugenics:

Not only are we our brother's keeper, but the guardian of the physical, mental, and moral character of his remotest descendents. . . The first care must always be to ask with regard to each proposal . . . "Will it help to increase our knowledge of mankind, so that we shall be able to separate the sheep from the goats, and to discover what elements among the people are best and most worthy of encouragement?"[10]

Rentoul did the same with a more Old Testament turn of phrase: "I consider that the most fiendish form of Christian devilry and torture is in our permitting diseased parents to beget diseased offspring. . . We seem, indeed, to forget that the Almighty has practically said to man and womankind – 'I shall no longer create human beings. I appoint you to act as my deputy. . .'"[11]

A generation later, the rhetoric was the same. Schiller asked: "is it not very near blasphemy to assume that the creative *nisus* was exhausted in evolving us, and cannot be trusted to sustain further efforts if we will make them?"[12] Albert E. Wiggam argued that "the biological Golden Rule, the completed Golden Rule of science, [is] . . . *Do unto both the born and the unborn as you would have both the born and the unborn do unto you.*"[13] Even Julian Huxley, a perceptive critic of the "right-wing" and "nationalist and imperialist politics" implicit in much of main-line eugenics, still saw eugenics as the religion of the future: "Once the full implications of evolutionary biology are grasped, eugenics will inevitably become part of the religion of the future, or of whatever complex of sentiments may in the future take the place of organized religion."[14] Thus eugenics was positioned by writers from the 1880s to the 1930s to assume responsibility for a creation recently orphaned by the death of God.

Of course not all scientists, politicians, and social reformers accepted the eugenist's model for addressing social problems. Indeed, the majority did not. In particular, Catholics resisted the suggestion that some lives were more or less sacred than others. Conservatives resisted the central planning that would be necessary to implement most eugenical schemes. Representatives of the working class resisted the tendency to elide the differences between poverty and feeblemindedness. Feminists resisted the suggestion that educated middle-class women who chose careers over childbearing were neglecting their duties to the race. And of course squeamish "Victorians" of all stripes did not want to talk about reproduction at all.

Opponents of eugenics could take heart from the fact that the nature versus nurture argument was no more settled in the early twentieth century than it is now. Many believed that the social environment was more responsible than biological determinism for such problems as pauperism, disease, alcoholism, and prostitution. Eugenists themselves often acknowledged the importance of environment in shaping human nature and behavior by incorporating within

their explanation of heredity Lamarck's theory that acquired characteristics could be inherited. In fact, because of its usefulness in this regard, Lamarckism continued to influence eugenics long after most biologists had dismissed Lamarck in the neo-Darwinism that prevailed after August Weismann's publication of his germ plasm theory (1892) and the rediscovery of Gregor Mendel's experiments in heredity (1900) combined to suggest that germ plasm was unaffected by the acquired characteristics of its host.[15] Laypeople like T. S. Eliot could be forgiven for thinking that Jean Baptiste Lamarck was still an important figure in the science of heredity long after serious scientists had abandoned him, for in 1916–17 the *Eugenics Review* gave space in four successive issues to E. W. MacBride's Lamarckian "Study of Heredity," which Eliot called "the most valuable contribution" to its field that year. Eliot's summary of the essay reveals this Lamarckian eugenist's interest in both biological and environmental reforms:

> Professor MacBride draws two conclusions of social importance: (1) That in former times the struggle for existence was enough to keep down the defective element in the population; but under present conditions these people are protected and multiply. He advocates therefore segregation and sterilization for the benefit of society. (2) The transmissibility of acquired characters makes the problem of education of the highest importance: we must adopt such a system of education that "the next generation may start at a very slightly higher level of capacity than their fathers."[16]

At least in part as a function of the great desire to find a compromise between the extremes of the environmental and strict hereditarian positions, Lamarckian eugenists – scientists and laypeople alike – flourished well into the 1920s.

Belated Lamarckians aside, however, eugenists increasingly discounted the practical value of social reform of the environment, especially scientists like Pearson, who headed the Galton Eugenics Laboratory:

> If the bad man can by the influence of education and surroundings be made good, but the bad stock can never be converted into good stock – then we see how grave a responsibility is cast at the present day upon every citizen, who directly or indirectly has to consider problems relating to the state endowment of education, the revision of the administration of the Poor Law, and, above all, the conduct of public and private charities.[17]

Ethel Elderton, a researcher in Pearson's laboratory, argued that "[p]ractically all social legislation has been based on the assumption that better environment meant race progress, whereas the link

between the two is probably that a genuine race progress will result in a better environment."[18] As Lyndsay Farrell notes, "[c]onvinced that 'social problems' were due to inherited factors . . . Pearson directed research based on these convictions. He expected to confirm that 'environmentalism' was not the way to eliminate the social problems under investigation."[19]

In addition to environmental explanations of social problems, however, opponents of eugenics could also counter it with critiques of its racism, classism, and sexism. As Farrell points out, "Pearson and Galton were representative of the eugenics movement in believing in the innate superiority of the white races over all other human populations. Such racist views were often combined with a vigorous nationalism in the writings of many eugenists in the years immediately before the First World War."[20] Julian Huxley recognized this problem and warned against the "danger of mistaking for our eugenic ideal a mere glorification of our prejudices": "It is not eugenics but nationalist and imperialist politics if we speak in such terms as subject races or miscegenation."[21]

Eliot, blind to Leonard Darwin's prejudices on class, wrote approvingly of Darwin's essay (his "articles always deserve attention") on "methods for encouraging reproduction on the part of the best classes in the community, and for discouraging reproduction on the part of the incompetent, thriftless, and pauper element."[22] Representatives of the working class, however, were particularly suspicious of a point of view that regarded the class war as a biological war. Not surprisingly, opposition to the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913, which allowed the detention in mental deficiency institutions of "moral imbeciles" and those who "should be deprived of the opportunity of producing children," and opposition to the defeated Sterilization Bill of 1931 was centered in the Labour movement.[23] The eugenist C. P. Blacker acknowledged the classism and the need to "undo the unfavorable impression" created by those who had emphasized "the question of class": "If you want the help of the dysgenic you are not very likely to enlist their sympathy if you speak about them as dregs and scum."[24] Huxley's observation is on the mark again: "It is not eugenics but right-wing politics if we merely talk of favoring the breeding of the upper classes of our present social system at the expense of the lower."[25]

Similarly, feminists complained of sexism. When the Whethams blamed working women for the low middle-class birthrate ("As soon

as the married woman becomes a wage-earner, the birth-rate drops disastrously"[26]), Edith Bethune-Baker complained that they were "prejudiced against the woman's movement."[27] In the face of the Whethams' suggestion that it is "essential to the race that the ablest, healthiest, and finest women should be encouraged, tempted, compelled if necessary . . . to devote themselves to family life," Bethune-Baker responds: "A declining birth-rate would be for some of us no matter for regret if the race can only be perpetuated on such terms . . . Better 'race-destroying occupations' . . . than the soul-destroying atmosphere of the eugenic materialism which is advocated here."[28]

The Roman Catholic Church was another prominent opponent of eugenics, opposing the eugenist's discrimination between human weeds and human flowers with the argument that all life is equally sacred. In *The Church and Eugenics* (1912), Father Thomas J. Gerrard saw in the assumption of certain eugenists that humankind's "betterment is chiefly if not entirely a matter of germ plasm, milk, fresh air, sentimental art, and illuminated certificates" of eugenical worth the danger of "a complete return to the life of the beast."[29] In "The Catholic Church and Race Culture" (1911), he reminded readers of *The Dublin Review* that "[t]he Church declares the root cause of degeneracy to be sin . . . and the root cause of betterment to be virtue."[30] Ultimately, eugenics was among the modern tendencies (like divorce and birth control) condemned by Pope Pius XI in the 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii*.[31]

Yet Galton's eugenics made for a church as broad as that of its opponents. For all Huxley's awareness of the dangerous prejudices exemplified in mainline eugenics, he was nonetheless a eugenist. Similarly, dissenting voices notwithstanding, many socialists were eugenists.[32] The Fabian socialist George Bernard Shaw was a eugenist whose sense of eugenics' religious mission matched Galton's:

> I believe that if we can drive into the heads of men the full consciousness of moral responsibility that comes to men with the knowledge that there never will be a God unless we make one – that we are the instruments through which that ideal is trying to make itself reality – we can work towards that ideal until we get to be supermen, and then super-supermen, and then a world of organisms who have achieved and realized God.[33]

Man and Superman's John Tanner explains the socialist element in Shaw's eugenics: "Equality is essential to good breeding; and equality . . . is incompatible with property."[34] Similarly, the Webbs were both Fabian socialists and eugenists – Beatrice thanking Shaw for dis-

cussing in *Man and Superman* "the breeding of the right sort of man" (a discussion that this "Angel in the House" was too delicate to undertake herself), Sidney arguing that the unregulated birth in Great Britain of "Irish Roman Catholics and the Polish, Russian, and German Jews, on the one hand, and the thriftless and irresponsible . . ., on the other, . . . can hardly result in anything but national deterioration."[35] In *The English Review*, the editor Austin Harrison argued that the working class could force employers to meet their demands if they were to launch a "strike of human life" by refusing to reproduce the next generation of workers:

> A strike on those lines would paralyze the whole foundations of capitalism, while economically vastly improving the lot of the working-man. He might still marry, but like those in better conditions, he would avoid a family. . . With a population falling to pieces, the State would have to yield to any demands imposed upon it; would, as a consequence, have to take upon itself the problem of the proletarian family; see that it was adequately housed, fed, educated, and buried, for the alternative would be race extinction.[36]

As Feisal Mohamed points out, the "lament about the degeneracy of the lower classes usually found in eugenic discourse is here turned on its head. The working class becomes the truly valuable genetic stock of the nation, for it is the foundation of capitalism."[37]

Similarly, some feminisms were compatible with eugenics. Bethune-Baker described herself as "a believer in 'eugenic' thinking," despite her reservations about the Whethams' attitude toward women – and she was joined in her eugenical beliefs by many other women.[38] Daniel Kevles notes that in the early years of the Eugenics Education Society (established 1907) "[f]ully half the membership . . . consisted of women, and so did about a quarter of its officers."[39] Jones observes that as late as 1937 "The Eugenics Society had a high female membership of just over 40 per cent."[40] In explanation of these facts, Kevles suggests that on the one hand "[e]ugenics . . . focused on issues that, by virtue of biology and prevailing middle-class standards, were naturally women's own" and that, on the other, certain feminists found in the eugenics movement a legitimate public platform for engagement in social activism and involvement with the world of science – a platform not otherwise easy for women to come by.[41] Jones, however, argues that "women in the social hygiene movement, drawn as they were from largely conventional middle class and upper class backgrounds, were socially conservative in their views" and that "even the female social hygienists who were feminists

were often ferocious economic moralists of the old *laissez-faire* school."[42] Yet the "feminist" socialist eugenist Herman Muller shows that even socialist feminists could find a point of contact with eugenics: urging that the workplace be made woman-friendly, that community child-care and mother-support programmes be established, that the medical profession's attitudes toward childbirth become woman-centered, and that birth control be promoted, he argues that "[o]nly by lightening the physiological, the psychological, the economic, and the social burdens on the mother now caused by child-bearing and child-rearing can we attain to a state in which real eugenics is feasible."[43]

There were many ways, then, in which eugenics could be incorporated both into one's understanding of the past and present *and*, more interestingly and more controversially, into one's vision of the future – whether that vision was progressive or reactionary. Although it by no means earned everyone's trust and support, the science of eugenics and the social-policy debates to which it gave rise interested everyone in the early years of the twentieth century. Neither the variety of writers interested in eugenics nor the variety of ends that their interest in eugenics served, therefore, should surprise us.

Notwithstanding the Nazi atrocities in the name of eugenics that were still to follow, the eugenics of some writers was notorious even in their own day. The Fabian Shaw's eugenics was at times extreme: "Extermination must be put on a scientific basis if it is ever to be carried out humanely and apologetically as well as thoroughly . . . [I]f we desire a certain type of civilization and culture, we must exterminate the sort of people who do not fit in."[44] In his equally notorious book *Anticipations*, the equally Fabian H. G. Wells contemplates the threat to the New Republic of the future represented by the proliferation of "vicious, helpless and pauper masses":

> It has become apparent that whole masses of human population are, as a whole, inferior in their claim upon the future, to other masses, that . . . their characteristic weaknesses are contagious and detrimental in the civilizing fabric, and that their range of incapacity tempts and demoralizes the strong. To give them equality is to sink to their level, to protect and cherish them is to be swamped in their fecundity.

Whereas in the old world the fatal fertility of the degenerate masses was unopposed, in this new world, "[t]he new ethics will hold life to be a privilege and a responsibility . . . and the alternative in right

conduct between living fully, beautifully and efficiently will be to die" – a "merciful obliteration of weak and silly and pointless things."[45] Pregnant by Wells, Rebecca West gestured toward the eugenical beliefs of her Fabian friends as justification of her ostensibly hypocritical secrecy about her pregnancy (given her articles at this time criticizing society's attitude toward unwed mothers): "Pale Fabians would say that I was The Free Woman and that I had wanted to be the Mother of the Superman."[46] The notoriety of its superstar eugenists was sufficient to make the discourse of eugenics an important part of Fabian public policy and private gossip alike.

No Fabian, but as extreme in his negative eugenics as Shaw and Wells, D. H. Lawrence outlines a plan of extermination for society's outcasts as early as 1908:

> If I had my way, I would build a lethal chamber as big as the Crystal Palace, with a military band playing softly, and a Cinematograph working brightly; then I'd go out in the back streets and main streets and bring them in, all the sick, the halt, and the maimed; I would lead them gently, and they would smile me a weary thanks.[47]

He displays at least the virtue of consistency in a similar comment in 1923: "we must look after the quality of life, not the quantity. Hopeless life should be put to sleep, the idiots and the hopeless sick and the true criminal. And the birth-rate should be controlled."[48] The solutions proposed by Lawrence, Wells, and Shaw testify to the magnitude of the problem of fatal fertility that seemed to them to loom over the future of humankind.

Of course the negative eugenics of other writers was not necessarily so extreme, and there was also a widespread interest in positive eugenics. In *The Playboy of the Western World*, J. M. Synge's publican Michael Flaherty expresses the eugenist's fear of human weeds when explaining his preference for Christy Mahon over Shawn Keogh as his daughter Margaret's husband: "it's the will of God that all should rear up lengthy families for the nurture of the earth. . . and I liefer face the grave untimely and I seeing a score of grandsons growing up little gallant swearers by the name of God, than go peopling my bedside with puny weeds the like of what you'd breed, I'm thinking, out of Shaneen Keogh."[49] How much of Michael Flaherty's positive eugenics is Synge's is impossible to determine because of Synge's pervasive irony, but it is clear that Synge knows something of the eugenical discourse concerning human weeds.

Aldous Huxley speaks in his own voice to much the same effect as

Synge's publican. As much a eugenist as his brother, although lacking the latter's alertness to the strains of classism and racism in his eugenics, Huxley takes up the same concern about the proliferation of human weeds. Just months after finishing *Brave New World* (1931), he observes: "So far as our knowledge goes, negative eugenics – or the sterilization of the unfit – might already be practised with tolerable safety. On the positive side we are still very ignorant – though we know enough . . . to foresee the rapid deterioration, unless we take remedial measures, of the whole West European stock."[50] Two years later, after the introduction of the Nazi Eugenical Sterilization Law, his thinking remains the same: "What is the remedy for the present deplorable state of affairs? It consists, obviously, in encouraging the normal and super-normal members of the population to have larger families and in preventing the sub-normal from having any families at all."[51]

Of course there were many writers who remained suspicious of eugenics or condemned it outright. It was the newspaper founded by Hilaire Belloc, *Eyewitness*, that, as Jones points out, "ran the toughest campaign against the 1913 Mental Deficiency Bill."[52] As early as 1901, G. K. Chesterton had accused Pearson of preaching "the great principle of the survival of the nastiest."[53] Jones sees Chesterton and Belloc united in "a variety of Catholic radicalism" that "believed an intimate connection existed between capitalism and eugenics."[54] Yet Chesterton's anti-eugenical essays also articulate a more secular humanism. Negative eugenics is "the social justification of murder" – but murder nonetheless, however much its proponents might prefer to call it "Social Subtraction" or "Life Control."[55] According to Chesterton, for Dean Inge to believe that "some absurd American statistics or experiments show that heredity is an incurable disease and that education is no cure for it," and for Arnold Bennett to believe that although "many of his friends drink too much . . . it cannot be helped, because they cannot help it," is a "humiliating heresy" – "the really intolerable insult to human dignity" of saying that "human life is not determined by human will."[56]

James Joyce attributes the same Catholic and humanist suspicion of eugenics to Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when Stephen dismisses the hypothesis "that every physical quality admired by men in women is in direct connection with the manifold functions of women for the propagation of the species." Stephen dislikes this explanation of woman's beauty: "It leads to eugenics

rather than to esthetic." He caricatures eugenists (like Galton, Rentoul, and the Whethams) for whom eugenics has become the new religion: in his "new gaudy lectureroom," the eugenist stands "with one hand on *The Origin of the Species* and the other hand on the new testament" and "tells you that you admired the great flanks of Venus because you thought that she would bear you burly offspring and admired her great breasts because you felt that she would give good milk to her children and yours."[57] Although at virtually the same time in the United States, the undergraduate F. Scott Fitzgerald was framing the same issue much more ambiguously in his poem "Love or Eugenics" – "Men, which would you like to come and pour your tea, / Kisses that set your heart aflame, / Or Love from a prophylactic dame" – Stephen clearly declares that he, like Chesterton, will not accept a definition of the human in terms of the animal.[58]

The novel's timeframe indicates that this conversation is set in 1902 – implying that *both* the academic Stephen *and* the vigilantly non-academic Lynch to whom he is speaking are familiar with the term "eugenics." This word was first used by Galton and other scientists in the mid-1880s and was being used occasionally in the English periodical press of the 1890s, so it is just possible that these two university students could have used the word in this casual way without the much weaker student Lynch, not otherwise reluctant to push Stephen for definitions, having to ask for an explanation of it.[59] Given, however, that Stephen does not mention eugenics in very similar conversations with Lynch in *Stephen Hero* (1904–06), and given that the fifth chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in which eugenics is for the first time mentioned was not completed until 1914 (after the founding of the Eugenics Education Society in 1907, after the publication in *The Dublin Review* of Father Gerrard's 1911 essay "The Catholic Church and Race Culture," and after the controversy about the 1913 Mental Deficiency Bill, including the controversy about whether it should be extended to Ireland), it is likely that the conversation represents a mild anachronism. That is, it presumably reflects not so much Stephen's concern about eugenics in turn-of-the-century Dublin as Joyce's own concern about eugenics at the time he was writing the novel's concluding chapter.

Clearly, although not all writers were eugenists or sympathetic to eugenics, eugenics touched upon the interests – if not the very lives – of many more of them than were eugenists. The list of major and