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Ellen Glasgow: The Great Tradition and the New Morality

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Loss by death, disappointment in love, and "social savagery" motivated the search for truth in which Ellen Glasgow considered herself to be engaged throughout her career and which she intended to dramatize in her twenty novels. She hoped that the search would culminate in a satisfactory code for living in a world which she had early found "hostile and even malign." Consequently both she and her characters were forever in pursuit of some clear and tidy answer to the question of how, with the most gratification for themselves, they could share this little world with others.

To dramatize the moral demands of all human relations Miss Glasgow needed an archetypal relationship, and to arrive at a code to live by she had to examine and evaluate the conventional code she knew. Her archetypal relationship was the marriage-relationship; it also served as the test-situation in her examination of convention. During her lifetime the redheaded lady from Richmond was convinced that she had watched the demise of a great social tradition and the evolution of a "new morality." She found both flaws and values in each code, and she thought she perceived the cause of ultimate failure in both codes.

As a social critic, Ellen Glasgow was, from the beginning, quite clear about what was wrong with the traditional code of her world. In her last novel she claimed that the tradition represented by the dying Lavinia Timberlake was compounded primarily of two elements, the "delusion of superiority" and "escape." In her eyes, arrogance and evasion of truth were flaws which had reduced the code to a thing of manifold cruelties and rendered it subject for satire. The delusion of superiority among the adherents to the great tradition, Miss Glasgow reported, found expression in social prejudice, the demand for conformity to the code, and domestic tyranny.

1 Ellen Glasgow, The Woman Within (New York, 1954), 89. After the first reference documentation of all sources is by short title in the text.
One form of prejudice in Miss Glasgow's society was, of course, class consciousness, which she embodied in persons like Randolph Byrd Culpeper, who "bore his social position as reverently as if it were a plate in church," and Cynthia Blake, who moans, when her sister announces a romantic interest in a local farm boy, "Oh, Lila, who was his grandfather?" The conviction of class superiority is complemented by the conviction of racial superiority in the society Miss Glasgow depicted. "Colored people don't feel things the way we do," is Aunt Charlotte's justification for letting the Negro boy, Parry Clay, suffer the blame for Stanley Timberlake's crime.

"Conform, or be kicked out," declares young John Welch in *The Sheltered Life.* To Ellen Glasgow, the demand for conformity to the code was another manifestation of the arrogance of its adherents: their assumption of the infallibility of their scale of values. Consequently the demand for conformity often became a form of tyranny. In *The Miller of Old Church* Abel Revercomb, becoming aware that his engagement is a mistake, cannot correct the unhappy situation. "There was no escape since it was tradition that held him by the throat." In his analysis of the code in *The Sheltered Life,* General Archibald makes the recognition that his life has been devoted to being all the expected things—good citizen, successful husband, indulgent father—everything except what he had wanted to be, a poet.

A specific tyranny of the code which engaged Ellen Glasgow's personal feeling was the demand for family loyalty, the feeling that "the individual has no right to place his personal pride above the family tie." The evolution of her ultimate decision about family loyalty can be traced by comparing an early and a late protagonist who share the same basic problem. Daniel Ordway, in *The Ancient Law,* debates the relative moral value of staying with his family, by whom he is tolerated but disliked; he questions the existence of any further obligation or responsibility to those who have rejected him. Finally his realization of his daughter's need for his help binds him there in...
spite of "an irresistible impulse of flight" (p. 313). By the
time she wrote *In This Our Life*, Miss Glasgow expressed reser­
vations about family feeling as a moral standard. She writes of
Asa Timberlake, "He had been, according to his straitened
means, a good father; but he would think twice, he meditated,
before accepting the world's estimate of family feeling. For it
seemed to him that family feeling had stood in the way of
everything he had ever wanted to do" (p. 16). At the end of
this novel Asa's friend Kate decides to save him from "family
feeling" and from "the will toward self-sacrifice" as well as
from "duty" and "an indomitable tradition." She offers him
herself and her farm if Asa will free himself from his family
(p. 377). *Beyond Defeat* shows Asa living with Kate on her
farm and refusing aid to his daughter Roy. Miss Glasgow ap­
preciated the concept of the subordination of self to others, but
subordination of self to family interests apparently became, in
her eyes, a mere relic of the tribal social order.

In the novel *Virginia* one of the "fundamental verities" Miss
Priscilla Batte taught pupils like Virginia Pendleton was the
"superiority of man." The masculine delusion of superiority
which subjugated woman led inevitably to a circumscribed life
for woman, a tyranny against which Miss Glasgow and her pro­
tagonists rebelled: "Was that a woman's life, after all? Never
to be able to go out and fight for what one wanted! Always to
sit at home and wait" (p. 152). But above all, the masculine
delusion of superiority which culminated in the double standard
was a continuing source of wrath for Ellen Glasgow. Only
when she had finished her last novel had she finished satirizing
men like William Fitzroy, who could simultaneously maintain
a blonde mistress in New York and a reputable social position
in Richmond. Her scorn of the standard that permits license
to man and denies it to woman is most intensely expressed in
*They Stooped to Folly*. Virginia knows that he should have
fired his secretary, Milly Burden, when he first found out about
her "trouble," but the implication is perfectly clear that he
would have felt no such compunction about a philandering male
employee. Indeed, men like his son-in-law, husband to one
woman and lover to another, receive attention and sympathy,
as from Mary Victoria, while women like Agatha Littlepage,

9 *Virginia* (New York, 1913). 11.
Milly Burden, and Amy Dalrymple are considered ruined, fallen, lost; they are expected to give up their lives to repentance and shamed seclusion.

The code which forbade license to woman took woman’s virtue for granted, a fact which resulted in the paradox that the code which subjugated woman also venerated her. The attitude is represented by Judge Bassett, in *The Voice of the People*, who “held it to be a lack of courtesy to dissent from praise of any woman whose chastity was beyond impeachment.” It accounts for the community demand which compels Ralph McBride, in *Vein of Iron*, to marry a girl he has not really compromised because the girl’s account of the incident in question is the one which must be believed.

This attitude led, ultimately, to a further paradox. The veneration with which woman was regarded allowed her to dominate the very society which subjugated her. Under the tenets of such a code an unscrupulous woman can become a domestic tyrant. Angelica Blackburn, for example, can safely misrepresent her husband and shame him publicly, knowing that the code of chivalry forbids his refuting her charges, much less retaliating against her. Thus the “fundamental verity” of the superiority of man ironically created a fundamental actuality of the superiority of woman, resulting too often in another twisted and cruel expression of arrogance.

The second element in Lavinia’s code was escape, Miss Glasgow claimed. It was in reference to this second element that she used her famous phrase, “evasive idealism”; the simple disinclination to face unpleasant truth. It causes the blue-blooded Mrs. Culpeper to try not to think of the plebian Gideon Vetch as Governor of Virginia (*One Man*, p. 75), and it makes the elder Honeywell in *The Romantic Comedians* prefer to die without knowing if there is anything wrong with the Episcopal Church or the Democratic Party. As the young Annabel says of this generation, “You were all so busy trying to pretend things were what you wanted them to be that you hadn’t any time to spare for looking facts in the face.”

The sheltered life is another form of evasion, one which Miss Glasgow describes not only in the novel called by that

10 *The Voice of the People* (New York, 1900), 116.
11 *The Romantic Comedians* (New York, 1926), 63.
name but also in others, like Virginia.

Virginia Pendleton's genteel Victorian world shelters her from contact with ugly reality by denying her any meaningful education. "Her education was founded upon the simple theory that the less a girl knew about life, the better prepared she would be to contend with it" (Virginia, p. 22). She is also denied, in her youth, any meaningful experience. "Spare Virginia" is the maternal motto which prevents her from learning at first hand even the simple household procedures to which she will later be expected to devote her life. The expectation of being spared becomes so engrained in her that later in life it destroys her ability to face unpleasantness when she must. Even after she and her husband have finally mentioned openly the break in their marriage, she continues unconsciously to assume that something will prevent the inevitable, and in her desperation she simply declines to read the letter from Oliver which she knows will ask for release from their marriage.

Evasions shape the sheltered life of Jenny Blair Archbald. As a child Jenny Blair realizes that she is the victim of an adult conspiracy to keep things from her—"asking questions when you are in doubt is one of the very worst ways of finding out the truth about things" (p. 56). The code which demands the sheltered life for women intends to impose a stringent restraint, but the consequence of the code is paradoxical. Shielded from the truth, even such basic elements as the facts of life, Jenny Blair is free to flirt in deadly innocence with her best friend's husband and ultimately to be the cause of his murder. In her last novel Miss Glasgow portrays, in Lavinia Timberlake, a lady whose house has its shades "drawn against daylight" (Beyond Defeat, p. 3). From beginning to end the novelist had established her point: evasive idealism made people insensitive and blind.

Idealism which was evasive in nature led almost inevitably to what Miss Glasgow considered to be one of the most serious flaws in the code: the hypocrisy of its adherents. Many of the ladies and gentlemen she satirizes are excessively concerned with making things appear to be what they are not. On the comic level it may involve nothing more serious than the ladies who pretend in the afternoon that they have not been doing...
common housework in the morning, or the case of Gabriella Carr, the protagonist in Life and Gabriella, who is disappointed to learn that her mother-in-law is willing to wear cheap under­wean in order to have more money to spend on expensive gowns — Miss Glasgow’s symbol for the false facade into which the code had degenerated.

It is a short step, however, from keeping up appearances to outright lying and pretense, and Ellen Glasgow shows that too many of her ladies and gentlemen were practitioners of these arts. In The Romantic Comedians Annabel demands, “What is there so moral or delicate in lying?” (p. 140). The idea is echoed in the words of Duncan Littlepage in They Stooped to Folly: “What is there so heroic in pretending the world is what it isn’t?” The young people’s question, obviously, is the author’s own, and it concerns an attitude she thought prevailed throughout her lifetime.

The Sheltered Life is a veritable study of skill in pretense and deception. In addition to the hollow pretense which the Bird­songs maintain about their failing marriage, there is the crimi­nal lie that will be perpetrated about George’s murder, which will be passed off as suicide. But even more shattering is the demonstration, as the story develops, of how the young Jenny Blair is trained, by the example of her elders, to develop her own skill in deception. George Birdsong contributes to this portion of her education by conspiring with her to keep secret the fact that she had found him at his mistress’ house where she was taken to regain her breath after a skating accident. “The best part of it is that you are sparing your mother, because she would be distressed to know how near you were to being hurt,” he tells the little girl (p. 66). Jenny Blair masters her lessons very early. Told to run away and tell homely Aunt Etta how sweet she is looking, Jenny asks, “Is she really looking sweet, Mamma, or am I just to pretend?” (p. 91).

General duplicity had become so much an earmark of the code that Miss Glasgow lavished some of her most effective ironic epigrams upon it. Judge Honeywell, we are told, “was disposed to encourage liberty of thought as long as he was convinced that it would not lead to liberal views” (Comedians, 57).
Thus, by the time she began her analysis of it, the code had become distorted. Once admirable, it had begun to decay from its own intrinsic weaknesses, which resulted in stagnation, degeneration—"a slowly disintegrating world of tradition."13 But if the great tradition was dying, Ellen Glasgow was unconvinced that the new morality promised resurrection for man's hopes for a moral order. In fact, she considered the new code vitiated by precisely the same flaws as the old: egocentricity and evasion.

Judge Honeywell is forced to wonder, in The Romantic Comedians, if his young wife's audacity in breaking with the established mores is not merely part of "the modern mania for self-exaltation" (p. 324). Annabel is a "cold little thing" who thinks she cannot live without love and beauty. She accepts the beauty the Judge can buy for her but rejects the love he tries to share with her and leaves him for a man her own age. Discussing her first love, lost before she met the Judge, she declares, "He belonged to me. No one else had a right to him" (p. 94). But in the course of their lovers' quarrel he had married someone else. "It is having to sit still and bear it that I can't stand," Annabel moans. "I could get over it so much quicker if I could only hurt him as much as he hurt me" (p. 97). In This Our Life is Miss Glasgow's most exhaustive expose of self-interest as the chief motivation in the younger generation. The young woman, Stanley Timberlake, embodies the modern ecocentricity Miss Glasgow ascribed to the new morality. She is satisfied just to be worshipped, willing to run away with her sister's husband, anxious for someone else to suffer for her crimes.

Ellen Glasgow saw materialism as first cause in the new morality. "I'd rather have money than anything in the world!" Annabel exclaims in The Romantic Comedians (p. 69). Social status is rated by plumbing rather than by ancestry, Asa Timberlake observes (Our Life, p. 34). William Fitzroy is the leading citizen of Queensborough because he is also the wealth-

iest, the author reports (p. 55).

It seemed to her that the new morality was no more free of evasion than the great tradition had been. In They Stooped to Folly Milly Burden represents the modern revolt against tradition, yet in not informing her lover of the birth of their child so that he will have only happy memories of their affair, she is practicing a deceit that parallels, both in nature and purpose, the evasive idealism of the Victorians. The unwillingness to think, to face things as they are, results in a frantic escapism that has not even the dignity of idealism to commend it.

The lack of a pattern of social behavior was, in Miss Glasgow’s view, another major weakness of the new morality. The traditional code, with the passage of time, had retained a rigid pattern but lost its core, as General Archbald perceived. The new morality had never had a core, and Miss Glasgow’s criticism of the fact became progressively sharper in the novels of the latter third of her canon. Once Milly Burden has rejected the traditional moral law, Virginius notes in They Stooped to Folly, she has nothing left. Her iconoclasm has broken old idols, but it has nothing to offer as a replacement for what has been destroyed. She therefore has nothing to sustain her when tragedy strikes — no mores to carry her through moments of panic, no ideals to comfort her in moments of loss. In Vein of Iron John Fincastle regrets that the young people of “the new age” confuse mere change with progress, and that life is “without a pattern, without a code, without even a center.” He thinks gloomily of aimless speeding automobiles, of seventeen-year-old girls in parked cars in dark country lanes, of an American culture that was becoming merely infantile.14 John’s daughter Ada is also alarmed about the new age: about young people buying what they cannot pay for and not saving for something better because they seem not to believe that there is anything better to come; about youth dismembering the past and beginning again within a foundation, building a life that was like an air-plant; about an age that was “distraught, chaotic, grotesque,” an age “of cruelty without courage” (p. 373). Miss Glasgow’s final protagonist decides that he probably does not really belong to the age in which he is living. At fifty-nine,

Asa Timberlake finds it difficult to adjust to different standards — "or rather, to an absence of standards" (Our Life, p. 68). Miss Glasgow hardly needed to write, in the preface to the novel, that she found the modern temper "confused, vacillating, uncertain, and distracted from permanent values."\(^{15}\)

Even when it does uphold a value, the new morality lacks commitment. In This Our Life, particularly, dramatizes the moral flabbiness that permeates the age. The novelist says of the young reformer, Craig Fleming, that ideas matter to him, but not enough. Justice and truth are ideas that matter to him, Asa perceives, but they do not matter enough for him to take positive action in an actual case of social injustice. He joins the rest of the family in their attempt to make the Negro youth, Parry Clay, take the blame for and the consequences of Stanley Timberlake's homicide.

Furthermore, the generation who condemn evasion in their elders and seek escape for themselves also deride hypocrisy in their elders and practice duplicity themselves. Pursuing his errant wife, Judge Honeywell finds Annabel in New York with her lover, "vivid, rose-coloured, still wearing the sable toque and the mink coat he had bought for her in Paris" (Comedians, p. 319). She and Dabney are living in a cheap hotel. "And Annabel, who had said that she would rather die than live without beauty, was apparently oblivious of the stale air, of the dirt and the dinginess" (p. 321).

In fine, Ellen Glasgow's analysis revealed that the core which was missing from the new morality was morality. Practitioners of the new morality, Miss Glasgow seemed to decide, tended to break the old idols not so much because of their concern for their fellow man as because of their desire to get what they wanted. By 1943 the author who had considered herself a rebel against the old code wrote to Clara Claasen that she "felt ashamed of an age so soft that all moral values have decayed at the roots" (Letters, p. 320).

However, the novelist's purpose was not denigration but evaluation. If she saw the flaws in both the great tradition and the new morality, with her usual flexibility of mind she

\(^{15}\) A Certain Measure: An Interpretation of Prose Fiction (New York, 1943), 249.
also saw the values in both codes.

Miss Glasgow disapproved of the effete, but she recognized that the old order inculcated a sensibility which produced fine manners. It is this refinement that makes Laura Wilde, in The Wheel of Life, deliberate upon the "three ways of conduct" that are open to her before opening a letter not originally addressed to her. The code of beautiful behavior also enables Mrs. Gay to bear sorrow nobly and Eva Birdsong to maintain a heroic bearing in the face of betrayal. The major value of the code, in substance, was its development of character, the kind of character which carries Mrs. Pendleton from "the dignity of possessions" to "the finer dignity of a poverty that can do without" (Virginia, p. 39). Miss Glasgow wrote of Mrs. Pendleton that all her strength had gone "into the making of character" (p. 396), and it was this same quality — character for its own sake — that the author admired in her protagonist in the last two novels. When Asa Timberlake calls the Commonwealth's Attorney to report his daughter's crime, the author intends to portray a stoic rectitude derived from the tradition.

Less important than the development of heroic character but having their own value in Miss Glasgow's view were the graces of living which seemed to her to be lost in modern times. Generosity, hospitality, taste, dignity, grace, and beauty added luster to life. She wrote that in The Battle-Ground she had tried to portray the grace and beauty and gaiety of the aristocratic tradition (Measure, p. 13). It was a grace and beauty for which Ada Fincastle still expressed nostalgia in a book written more than thirty years later. Admiring an old yellow house with its Doric columns and grassy terrace, Ada thinks that it must be beautiful to live like that, where they have kept dignity and where things still move with ceremony. The niceties of life still concerned the author in her last books. Asa Timberlake, living in a new, cheap house, misses the dignity of his former Georgian home. In the new house there is mere convenience.

In the new morality Miss Glasgow perceived two basic values. One was the intention to be honest. Asa, a conservative in

many regards, thinks of his iconoclastic daughter Roy that “her very mockery was a tonic, for she mocked openly at all the images which he had feared and obeyed in his conscious mind” (*Our Life*, p. 41). The novelist did not approve of mockery for its own sake, but she did insist that tradition be re-evaluated, and although she did not admire everything about the new morality which she embodied in the two young women who rebel against the code in her social comedies, she did personify in them the demand for such re-evaluation. Milly Burden, chided about demolishing conventions before she has tested them, points out that preceding generations have tested them only to have them “all break to pieces.” She insists upon the right to choose her ideals for herself (*Folly*, p. 41). “I haven’t many virtues... but I hate shams.” Annabel Upchurch declares in *The Romantic Comedians*. Annabel feels obliged to “make an effort to find out the truth,” and wonders if there is not a “sounder reality beneath this complicated system of living” (p. 148).

Personal freedom is a second basic tenet of the new code to which Miss Glasgow gave rather fervent allegiance. She writes with the power of personal conviction when she has Milly Burden cry, “I don’t want to feel safe. I want to feel free” (*Folly*, p. 239). She writes with similar conviction when she has Milly declare her right to happiness as long as she plays the game fairly and doesn’t hurt anyone but herself. The happiness to which she has the right is love; one freedom she wants to feel is freedom from the bonds of marriage. From an older, masculine point of view, Virginius Littlepage has reservations about what he thinks of as “the new freedom,” but eventually decides that “society was probably safer, though men were less so, since seducers had ceased to be anonymous and seductions had ceased to be private” (p. 111). In short, the new morality condemned the double standard as one of the shams of the older tradition. But the new morality, as Miss Glasgow apparently saw it, did not limit the license of men so much as it made the same license available to women.

Another of the personal freedoms incorporated in the new morality was freedom from the tyranny of family relations. With a realism similar to that of Hemingway’s, the young people in her later novels insist upon examining the truth about
their feelings instead of accepting without question what they have been taught they are supposed to feel. Told that she should show proper respect for her mother, Milly responds, “Do you want me to say I love her? I don’t. I don’t even like her” (p. 27). Roy Timberlake, motivated by the same desire for realism, observes her own lack of affection for her mother. “Why do people talk as if love were bound up in every physical tie?” (Our Life, p. 295). Having made the realistic recognition, the new morality made the corresponding rejection. “Like other superstitions . . . filial affection is out of date,” Craig says in Beyond Defeat (p. 86).

Having seen both the values and the flaws Miss Glasgow perceived in the code in which she was trained and in the code by which it was superseded, it is possible to anticipate the result. The author was at war with herself throughout her career—both drawn to and repelled by two different sets of attitudes. Conflict between the old and the new codes is not merely a matter of conflict between the generations in her work. In the novels Miss Glasgow’s own inner conflict is often expressed in terms of conflict within a single character’s consciousness.

Virginius Littlepage, in They Stooped to Folly, provides her with such a consciousness. Now middle-aged, he looks back over a life in which he has bridled his impulses, respected convention, and deferred to tradition, “yet to-day . . . all the sober pleasures he had known appeared as worthless as cinders” (pp. 3-4). Attracted to Mrs. Dalrymple, Virginius regrets that, at an earlier period in his life, he had observed the traditional moral restraints in regard to her charms. “What a fool I was!” he thought bitterly, so far had he travelled from the moral idealism of the nineteenth century” (p. 98). Yet he finds the new code, personified in Milly Burden, “too hard, too flippant, too brazen,” and, ironically, feels an aversion to her because “she had once forgotten her modesty” (p. 6). In The Sheltered Life General Archbald, like Virginius, finds his sympathies drawn two ways. Though he tells Jenny Blair that he is “a believer in not doing the things one did not wish to do” he also acknowledges that “his prejudices were on the side of society” (p. 173). Still he determines that if his daughter Isabella decides to marry her carpenter he will stand by
her, in defiance of class consciousness. Ultimately, however, he continues to subscribe to evasive idealism. With his decision to cover up his friend Eva's crime, at the end of the novel, he settles back into the hypocrisy of the established order he had once defied.

Miss Glasgow's most sustained analysis of this inner conflict is her characterization of Asa Timberlake. In This Our Life opens with Asa appearing to be a conservative, striving "to keep a discredited sense of values hidden away from his children" (p. 14). But he has actually entertained serious questions concerning the traditional code. For the sake of tradition he had always done what he hated and never done what he liked, only to see his code of conduct discarded by a later generation. It is bad that the self-discipline of the old code forces him to deny his nature; it is worse, however "to feel that the moral universe, the very foundation of all order," has toppled (p. 53). He concedes that family feeling has done harm, but appreciates the fact that it has held things together in time of crisis. He is sympathetic with much of youth's urge to rebellion, but is unable to agree with the new standards. Asa seems to decide in favor of the conservative point of view. The young have ideas, but no order, no logic. When Peter deserts Roy for Stanley, Asa regrets passionately that the Code which would have authorized righteous killing is now out of date. Yet the end of the novel finds Asa contemplating escape from his own traditional obligations, especially to his family. He decides that escape may not be easy, but it is possible, and his only concern about convention now is that it can be turned into a dangerous weapon against him.

What Ellen Glasgow said of the young Craig Fleming, in the same book, could be said of any of her characters in conflict with themselves about the values of the great tradition and the new morality: "Though Craig accepted the new social labels, he still harbored the old moral antipathies" (p. 220). It is also true not only of Asa, but of General Archbald and Virginius as well. The sympathy and the knowing detail with which the author presented their cases obviously suggests that it was also true of Ellen Glasgow.

Although Miss Glasgow saw some values in both the old and
the new codes, her very uncertainty about which code to subscribe to revealed that she was much more aware of what was wrong with each of them than she was of what was right. The real problem she had to face was not a relatively simple matter of choosing which of two codes of behavior to adopt; the real problem was how to cope with the fact that both codes had failed. The question which followed, of course, was why rules of conduct failed to resolve moral conflicts. Her discovery was that rules of conduct were in themselves sources of conflict. Twice she wrote to Bessie Zaban Jones that the major theme of *In This Our Life* was “the conflict of human beings with human nature” (*Letters*, pp. 302, 304). In the preface to the book she wrote again, “My major theme is the conflict of human being with human nature, of civilization with biology” (*Measure*, p. 250). She saw human beings embroiled in the larger and immemorial conflict between the natural urges and civilized ethics, not merely in a conflict between specific codes of ethics.

“To have had one emotion that was bigger than you or your universe is to have had life, my dear,” Uncle Tucker tells a niece in *The Deliverance* (p. 199). It is his way of saying that he is glad he gave rein to the natural man at least once in his lifetime, and it is the part of his past that he likes best to recall in his later years. The natural impulses are not necessarily evil, Ellen Glasgow was saying, nor is the body always misinformed. Marmaduke Littlepage, painting “with vehemence in firm strokes of red, blue, and yellow” (*Folly*, p. 29), is painting the real and the true, which is not altogether without beauty. Miss Glasgow’s quarrel with civilization was that it did not appreciate either the firm strokes or the primary colors of the naturalist.

It was a quarrel in which she was engaged throughout her career. In the very early books, before she evolved the phrase “barren ground,” she wrote of “barren soil.” In *Phases of an Inferior Planet*, the phrase refers to “long self-repression,” where “natural tendencies” have “atrophied.”17 “If only what men call civilization were not hostile to youth and to joy!” John Finchastle thinks in his grief for the frustrated young lovers.

17 *Phases of an Inferior Planet* (New York, 1898), 144.
in *Vein of Iron* (p. 114). This is Ellen Glasgow's quarrel with the traditional code; it is repressive and it creates stagnant lives.

Nature can sometimes be a better guide to conduct than the wisdom of the ages. Virginius, for example, has "been true to his ideals" but regrets that for him life has never meant "anything more affirmative than an escape from experience" (*Folly*, p. 306). While he has spent his life trying to conform to other people's ideals, his brother has insisted in his own life upon "liberation of spirit," and has thus been free to be himself. General Archbald represents, in *The Sheltered Life*, the same dilemma as Virginius does in his story, having sacrificed for thirty years "all the vital instincts that make a man to the moral earnestness of tradition" (p. 33). Yet General Archbald has been astonished by the achievement human nature sometimes attains without the benefit of tradition, and he is aware that character becomes warped by training quite as frequently as nature allows impulses to run wild. Furthermore, tradition could engender delusion. "By the Sheltered Life, I meant the whole civilization man has built to protect himself from reality," Miss Glasgow wrote to Allen Tate (*Letters*, p. 124). General Archbald, the man who "made a good living by putting an end to himself" (*Sheltered Life*, p. 283), embodies the "struggle of personality against tradition and the social background" that Miss Glasgow claimed was the theme of her three tragicomedies of manners (*Letters*, p. 206). "How can there be any civilization without regular hours?" Victoria inquires in *They Stooped to Folly*. She is perturbed about her brother-in-law, who "eats only when he is hungry, and then without laying a cloth" (p. 97). Admirable as it has sometimes been, civilization has its limitations. Its rigid structure interferes with or even destroys natural values, like eating when one is hungry, or fulfilling one's love.

To Ellen Glasgow, the consequent necessity was obvious. When the novelist said it of General Archbald, she said it of all civilized souls: "Something within himself . . . had always longed . . . to be free, to be selfish, to live its own life untrammelled by consideration for others" (*Sheltered Life*, p. 178). Asa Timberlake shares the General's dream of freedom. "He wanted an escape. He wanted to live, not according to a rule or a pattern, but in response to the demands of his own
Within the framework of her love stories, Miss Glasgow was saying that the conventional code engenders dishonesty in its denial of human nature, and that this denial results in failure and unhappiness in human relations. Civilization as protection from reality is an unwholesome protection.

But Miss Glasgow also wrote that "the most tragic figure in our modern society . . . is the truly civilized man who has been thrust back upon the level of Neanderthal impulses."18 In the conflict between human beings and human nature it is necessary to release the natural man, but it is also necessary to restrain the beast. There was a single point concerning which books of philosophy agreed, the novelist claimed, and that was that "human nature would be better and happier if it were different. But poor human nature, having known this ever since it left the tree-tops, went on, just the same, being all the time the thing it was obliged to be" (Miller, pp. 263-264).

Ellen Glasgow thought she suffered no illusions about what poor human nature was obliged to be. "Man the Killer," she wrote to Van Wyck Brooks (Letters, p. 286). She felt cruelty to be so compulsive an instinct that if not assuaged by war it would find expression in racial and religious animosity or in vicarious cruelties (Believe, p. 105).

Man the Killer is also man the coward. In This Our Life is intended to reflect a world "driven by unconscious fears toward the verge of catastrophe." the author wrote in the preface; she thought individual fear of life to be a "modern malady" (Measure, p. 256). Man's gift for self-delusion is an innate urge, the cause rather than the product of evasive idealism.

"All human nature . . . is tarred with the same brush and tarred with selfishness," Gideon Vetch declares in One Man in His Time (p. 222). Given something, people only want more, Corinna Page discovers when her tenants move into the out-houses so as to rent out at extortion prices the houses she has recently renovated for them.

Selfishness is a single manifestation of the larger problem: human nature is essentially egoistic. Everyone wants to care...
about Mrs. Birdsong, who is critically ill, but each individual is caught up in his own feelings and is unable to perceive her situation except as it affects himself. George Birdsong is shaken into a realization of how much he loves her, but her being hospitalized affords him time and opportunity to flirt with Jenny Blair Archbald. Eva is Jenny Blair’s friend, yet Jenny Blair cherishes her foolish little affair with George. Eva is the General’s ideal personality, but he laments that she is so involved in her own feelings and her own situation that she cannot attend to what he would like to tell her about himself.

Furthermore, human nature is powerless against its own biology. Gabriella Carr cannot perceive George Fowler’s true personality for seeing his physical self. The quality in Kemper that tempts Laura Wilde toward disaster is “a mere dominant virility” (Wheel, p. 94). “I cannot be too grateful that I married a man who hasn’t that other side to his nature,” says Victoria, at the moment that both Mrs. Dalrymple and Virginius can’t be too sorry that that other side of his nature is so inhibited (Folly, p. 146). Ironically, Victoria herself laments that she is satisfied by no love that Virginius can offer, and dreams of being carried off by a Lochinvar. “What is wrong with the world nowadays,” Asa Timberlake wonders. “The same old Adam,” Kate tells him (Our Life, pp. 186-187).

Indeed, in her report on human relations Miss Glasgow had already shown what poor human nature was obliged to be: egoistic, emotionally motivated, sensual.

It was necessary to restrain man to savage, man the animal, but man’s attempts to civilize himself, as Ellen Glasgow knew them, had been unsatisfactory because it was also necessary to afford expression to the natural man. The problem left her in the ambivalent position which was typical of all her thinking. All she could do was to try to salvage the best of both the social codes she knew.

She was aware that her evaluation of the new morality was as ambiguous as that of the tradition. There was good in both the old and the new. “From the past, then, I should like . . . to retrieve a few individual graces of culture, while I would . . . seek to preserve and develop the broader comprehensions of . . . the modern point of view” (Measure, p. 119). She de-
clared that in *Vein of Iron* she was concerned with testing not only the force of tradition, as embodied in Grandmother Finch- castle, but the strength of the new morality, as embodied in Ada and Ralph (p. 173). Unfortunately, *Vein of Iron* ends at a beginning, leaving the reader with no clear notion of whether or not Ada and Ralph will succeed in building a satisfactory life in the community whose mores they have shattered, and therefore whether or not their inherited vein of iron will have sufficient strength. The situation is typical of Ellen Glasgow’s ambiguity concerning the values of both the old and the new morality. It further suggests her uncertainty that civilization could win in its battle with biology.

In the search for “something to live by,” Miss Glasgow also examined the religious tradition of her milieu, but with equally ambivalent and unsatisfactory results. Ultimately her world view was deterministic, although what she intended to be a statement of scientific naturalism was, perhaps unconsciously, depicted as something closer to Calvinistic predestination. The pessimistic, stoic relativism which she finally evolved as a code for living was almost certainly not the ethos she had hoped to develop when she began her search for truth.