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The Aesthete
In Nineteenth Century Philosophy and Literature

by

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Introduction

Social roles and subjectivity: Who is the aesthete?

The aesthete, according to the political philosopher Alsdair MacIntyre, distills one of the most troubling aspects of modernity. Writing in 1984, MacIntyre argued that modern life eradicates any "distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations." The bureaucratic manager embodies this tendency in the domain of labor, handling humans as profit-generating machines. The aesthete transfers the same extremely calculating outlook to the realm of leisure and social interaction. Other individuals are, for the aesthete, merely means to obtain cultural and social capital. He views "the social world… solely as an arena for the achievement of their own satisfaction."[1]

Following William Gass, MacIntyre identified this "aesthetic attitude" as a central concern of Henry James' 1881 novel *The Portrait of a Lady*.[2] While, several characters in that novel qualify as aesthetes, MacIntyre seems to refer to the reprobate Gilbert Osmond. Osmond is a social leech who marries James' somewhat naïve protagonist to scrounge her wealth and prestige. He also happens to have expert taste in art and antiques, and at times James makes explicit the connection

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[1]MacIntyre, Alasdair, After Virtue. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 24-25.
[2] MacIntyre, 24.

between Osmond's aesthetic and social opinions. We learn that the "key-note" of his personality is an "appearance of thinking that life was a matter of connoisseurship."[3] People, as much as paintings, are merely objects to be won and enjoyed. Osmond is, as Gass wrote, a consummate "consumer of persons."[4]

MacIntyre also locates exemplary aesthetes in an earlier work: he points to the "aesthetic" individuals who populate the first volume of Soren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (*Enter/Eller*) (1843). Kierkegaard opposes the aesthetic lifestyle with the "ethical phase," as personified by the dutiful Judge Wilhelm, who voices the text's second volume. While the ethical man upholds tradition, and productivity, the aesthetes respond only to their own selfish desires. While Wilhelm advocates matrimony, the aesthetes take sexual license; the most recognizable among them is Don Giovanni, the wily rake of Mozart's opera. At first glance, Kierkegaard's aesthetes appear to structure their lives around carnal delights, to reside exclusively in the sphere of immediate gratification. More pleasure-seekers than connoisseurs, they do not even display discriminating taste.

That, at least, is the account—or caricature—of the aesthete that MacIntyre presents. I acknowledge that MacIntyre's account is idiosyncratic. The conventional definition, although irresolute, hardly pegs the aesthete as a selfish trickster:

> a person having or affecting sensitivity to beauty esp. in art. 2. a person who affects great love of art, music, poetry, etc., and indifference to practical matters –Syn: 1. connoisseur. 2. dilettante.[5]

This definition does not condemn the aesthete on ethical grounds. But the lexicographers do have their suspicions. Does the aesthete "have" or "affect" his

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[3] James, Henry. The Portrait of a Lady. (New York: Signet Classics, 2007), 268.
[4] MacIntyre, 24.
[5] *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*. New York: Random House, 1998.

"sensitivity to beauty?" Could his "great love of art" be nothing more than a display? Could his professed "indifference to practical matters" mask distasteful social aspirations? Even the synonyms for "aesthete" betray misgivings: we cannot be sure whether he is a discerning connoisseur, or a pretentious dilettante.

My project finds both the dictionary definition and MacIntyre's reading of the aesthete to be inadequate. The aesthete, as represented by several nineteenth century writers, can never be reduced to a hedonist, dandy, or social climber. I open my project with MacIntyre, however, because he develops a strong, comprehensive reading of the aesthete, which he designates as a category worth of study. In addition, I follow MacIntyre in highlighting the rarely perceived connection between Kierkegaard's version of the aesthete and aesthetes from later in the nineteenth century. As I demonstrate in my first chapter, *Either/Or* raises many of the same problems central to later assessments of the aesthete: the limitations of pleasure, the fashioning of a coherent self-identity over time, and even, to my surprise, the question of what it means to approach life as a work of art.

I depart from MacIntyre, however, in my assessment of the aesthetes from *Either/Or*, which is much more complicated, structurally and thematically, than MacIntyre allows. Although some of Kierkegaard's aesthetes lose themselves in sensual satisfactions, many expend excessive energy *contemplating* their desires. Kierkegaard uses the aesthete to criticize not only hedonistic selfishness but also an overly intellectualized experience of life. *Either/Or* opposes speculative Romanticism and Hegelianism, in favor of a philosophy of concrete applicability. Moreover, although Kierkegaard's aesthetes suffer from a troubling dissolution of the

self, they are admirably independent. The Judge's unthinking traditionalism is hardly a preferable alternative to an aesthetic stance.

Walter Pater shares Kierkegaard's hostilities towards both abstract speculation and mechanical moralism. Kierkegaard places his aesthetes at either pole on the spectrum from immediacy to reflection. But Pater, in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), names high art as a vehicle for the synthesis of immersive sensuality and intelligent engagement. Pater's philosophy leaves no place for ethics or community, a lapse that brought harsh criticism from his contemporaries. In his much later novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), Pater reconsiders the aesthete's integrity, and his despair, while recovering important classical precedents for modern aesthetes. These include grotesque texts and art works, suggesting that the independently minded aesthete does not limit his tastes according to conventional standards of beauty.

This fascination with the grotesque also characterizes the aesthetes associated with French Decadence. In my final chapter, I will examine Joris-Karl Huysmans' *Against Nature* (*A Rebours*; also translated *Against the Grain*) (1881), in which the protagonist Des Esseintes secludes himself within a carefully-constructed alternate universe, fashioning a private canon of thinkers usually considered decadent or depraved. I will then turn my attention to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), which imitates many elements from Huysmans' novel. Wilde's self-conscious borrowings parallel the aesthetic appropriations that structured the lifestyle and mentality of later aesthetes. I also show that both Huysmans' and Wilde's aesthetes ignore ethics and politics, structuring their life around material culture and

artistic texts. They reject canonical sensibilities in favor of an aesthetics of deviancy. At the same time, their refusal to participate in rituals of artistic production signifies parasitism and impotence.

In limiting the scope of my project, I have chosen to focus primarily on fictional representations of the aesthete. In very different ways, Kierkegaard, Pater, Wilde, and Huysmans were all themselves aesthetes. But I have foregone biographical analysis, focusing on literary works that provide extreme examples of the aesthetic lifestyle. Nevertheless, I do not approach the aesthete as an unchanging absolute—what Arthur O. Lovejoy called a "unit idea"[6]—but as an indefinite set of concepts employed in complicated ways by different texts. There is no single vision of the aesthete. Even their central qualities vary, from estrangement (Kierkegaard), to discernment (Pater), degeneracy (Huysmans), and mimicry (Wilde).

Despite these discrepancies and revisions, however, aesthetes share certain features and concerns. The most obvious correlations are material: all are highly educated, affluent, and eminently leisured. They have resources and time to devote to intellectual reflection and aesthetic cultivation. Perhaps because of this background, aesthetes are categorically cosmopolitan, cultured, and atheistic. They also possess a distinctive emotional disposition: they are alternately cynical and Romantic in temperament, both suspicious and imaginative. In sexual matters, they fall into one of two extreme camps: they are either either uninhibitedly promiscuous, or chaste. Finally, these figures provoke a recurring set of debates: Is the aesthete deplorably immoral, or commendably liberated? Is he eminently modern or insipidly nostalgic?

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[6] Kelley, Donald R. "What is Happening to the History of Ideas?" from *The History of Ideas*, Vol. 51, No.1 (1990), 15-16.

Inspired, confused, or merely solipsistic?

I also contend that the aesthete is more than a social role. Of course, certain aesthetes indisputably resemble cultural archetypes. Kierkegaard's aesthetes, for example, emulate the sexually adventurous libertines that rose to prominence in the 18th century.[7] Wilde's aesthetes participate in the *fin de siècle* revival of Regency dandyism in Britain, while Huysmans's protagonist epitomizes the darker dandyism that made its way to France. Indeed, the aesthete in many ways seems interchangeable with the dandy. As Ellen Moers points out in her excellent history, the dandy, like the aesthete, selfishly cultivates his own personality without regard for morality, religion, politics, or—at least superficially—financial gain. At once radical and reactionary, he opposes middle class values with an ethos of "superiority, irresponsibility, [and] inactivity."[8] The aesthete also adopts this oppositional standpoint, by declining to conform to cultural expectations. Aesthetes, like dandies, represent themselves as aloof, pure, and perspicacious; mainstream society, in turn, dismisses aesthetes as antisocial degenerates.

Yet my project maintains that the aesthete is not merely a material status or social identity. Public social roles center on performance and self-presentation. Any affluent man might choose to fashion himself as a libertine or a dandy. To be an aesthete, in contrast, one must embrace a whole way of thinking, largely in the privacy of one's own mind. The aesthete must possess a strong temperament, whether innate or cultivated, that dictates his every reaction and thought. His principles and expectations are not only moral, but epistemological and aesthetic.

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[7] Turner, James Grantham. *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. xi.
[8] Moers, Ellen, The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm. (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), 12-13.

Above all, the aesthete demonstrates a commitment to flexibility, an unwillingness to settle on any intellectual perspective. "The Rotation Method," an essay that appears in *Either/Or*, urges readers to disturb their entrenched presuppositions and viewpoints, rather than settling into habits and consistency. Pater's work also denounces "dogmatism" and "structure."[9] Unlike other prominent Victorian critics, he manages to assimilate the more anarchic aspects of modern intellectual history. Huysmans' aesthete repudiates not only conventional thought and aesthetics, but also available forms of resistance. Wilde's aesthetes also have misgivings about consistency, dabbling in diverse ideologies with agitated discontent.

At least in this limited sense, then, I offer a defense of the aesthete. Aesthetes may be short-sighted and egotistical, but they are intellectually adventurous, and willing to risk disorientation. A close reading of even Kierkegaard's and Huysmans' texts, which go farthest towards condemning the aesthete, reveal an undercurrent of approbation. Their aesthetes are principled in their refusal of all principles. Although they fail to progress, they achieve an independence of thought that might prepare the way for innovation. In many cases, this autonomy leads to despair. Without the consolations of ethical or political conviction, many of the aesthetes end up dissatisfied and unhappy, if not completely shattered.

This profound ambivalence reflects another commonality among my objects of study. Each of these texts is literary: they are slippery, disorderly, and open to multiple interpretations. The figure of the aesthete offers an opportunity to blend philosophical speculation with lyricism. These works contain few prescriptive

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[9] Iser, Wolfgang, Walter Pater: The Aesthetic Moment. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 16.

proclamations or straightforward descriptions of what it means to be an aesthete, relying instead on imagery and illustration. Literary prose in works by Kierkegaard and Pater confirms their attachment to concreteness. Huysmans and Wilde, correspondingly, structure their novels to emphasize the play of ideas over familiar fictional strategies. *Against Nature*, a novel which barely retains any trace of a plot, marks an extraordinary departure from French realism,[10] while Wilde resorts to derivative genre formulations, feeble connective tissue between epigrams and fanciful descriptions. These novels are in some sense merely testing grounds for theoretical considerations.

I propose two explanations for this persistent amalgamation of literature and philosophy. First, the domain of aesthetics, because it involves the philosophical study of sensation and to art, always comprises a node where abstract thought meets concrete experience. The aesthete magnifies this intersection, as a kind of manifest test case. Secondly, the aesthete's independence of thought demands formal innovations. Just as the aesthete defies all moral and epistemological conventions, these texts push at aesthetic boundaries.

I also attempt to permeate disciplinary limits, by combining close literary analysis with intellectual history. This project participates in an ongoing convergence of both fields. At the same time that literary scholars have increasingly historicized texts and authors, intellectual historians have become ever more interested in literature and aesthetics. On the other hand, my project might have been more responsive to the recent move away from "internal" intellectual history. As Donald

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[10] Mauldon, Margaret, "Introduction," from Against Nature. (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), xiv.

R. Kelley explained in an important historiographic article, intellectual history no longer simply traces transmissions from thinker to thinker and text to canonical text. Many historians now aim to contextualize ideas, by highlighting "external" anthropological, sociological, and economic circumstances surrounding the production of ideas. The internal methodology emphasizes the role of individual thinkers, and sometimes positions the intellectual historian within the tradition he or she studies. The external methodology takes an outsider's perspective, considering the history of ideas with the detachment of a social scientist.[11]

My project has perhaps veered too close to the outdated "internal" approach. I have relied on close readings and appeals to interpretive secondary literature, rather than related primary documents and contextualizing histories. In addition, I have not incorporated texts which reach beyond the cannon. I am not rescuing or rehabilitating marginalized writers or lesser-known works. *Either/Or*, *The History of the Renaissance*, *Marius the Epicurean*, *Against Nature*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* have all already received due attention from scholars. Despite their prestige, however, many of the texts I study (with the exception of Wilde's) are not widely read, in part because they appear maddeningly esoteric and dated. In other words, they exhibit the most frustrating aspects of the canon, along with some of the very qualities assigned to aesthetes: nostalgia and elitism.

I hope, however, to discover something freshly of interest in the aesthete. To wrdismiss the aesthete as a supercilious snob understates not only his intellectual complexity, but also his relevancy to later developments in art and culture. These writers anticipate the twentieth century fascination with what Huysmans' translator

[11] Kelley, 6-7.

calls "stylized figures of alienation."[12] The aesthete's desire to transcend proscribed categories would become a dominant interest of 20th century modernism. His challenges to originality, authenticity, and limitations on sexuality resurface in contemporary literature and philosophy. A tragic figure, the aesthete also points to the dangers of restless self-fashioning and unlimited consumption. Although my project focuses on familiar texts from the nineteenth century, I hope it will gesture towards such contemporary resonances.

[12] Mauldon, xxv.

Chapter 1

Immediacy and reflection:

The aesthetic in *Either/Or*

Kierkegaard's aesthetes abide no blunt historical connection with later incarnations. The British aesthetes could not have borrowed Kierkegaard's terminology directly, because the Danish thinkers remained almost unknown until the early 20th century.[1] Kierkegaard also adheres to a broader usage of "aesthetic," conflating all sense perception and feeling (including erotic pleasure) under a single heading. By the late 19th century, the "science of aesthetics" inspected psychological response to visual art.[2] But Kierkegaard's aesthetes do mirror both the historical and fictional personalities associated with Decadence and Aestheticism. Highly educated, affluent, and preoccupied with art and leisure, the characters in the first volume of *Either/Or* enjoy the material advantages required to embody the lifestyle of later aesthetes. They also share the intellectual worldviews and emotional dispositions expressed by writers like Wilde and Huysmans: "A" and his surrogates are at once

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[1] Poole, Roger, "The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth Century Receptions" from The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard, edited by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino. (Cambridge: Cambrdige University Press, 1998), 48-51.

[2] Small, Ian, Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 68.

cynical and impassioned. They are suspicious of conventional morality, and politically apathetic.

Kierkegaard's aesthetes explicitly participate in the move towards "enclosure" that characterized aestheticism later in the century. *Either/Or* contains two expository essays, written by an aesthete, which privilege fiction and artifice *over* natural or "real" life. The "Rotation essay" and the "Diary of a Seducer" advance a moral vision of life as art, of experience as a text available for imaginative manipulation, which anticipates the most notorious ideas of Huysmans and Wilde.

Although these thematic continuities are important, Kierkegaard also offers an opportunity to examine the figure of the aesthete in a very different context. Kierkegaard's aesthetes appear at an earlier historical moment, as an isolated character type unaffiliated with any movement or institution. In addition, although Kierkegaard engaged the developing science of psychology, his aesthetes predate the discourses of "decadence" and "degeneracy," which often oversimplified perceptions of the aesthete. Finally, Kierkegaard's 20th century interpreters, often writing within the discipline of philosophy, take the aesthetic attitude seriously as a moral possibility. They establish a framework for evaluating the aesthete against standards of emotional authenticity, ethical integrity, and spiritual zeal, concerns which are sometimes submerged in the literary scholarship surrounding aestheticism.

Radical traditionalism and literary philosophy

Kierkegaard appears intensely traditional in comparison to other major 19th century thinkers. Thoroughly Christian, he arrives at the conclusion that personal happiness can only be achieved through salvation, which requires a proper

relationship with God through Christ.[3] He rejects "both intellectualized, philosophical Christianity *and*… liberal, moralistic Christianity," the two strains that would come to dominate 19th century theology.[4] His writings would prove to be major influences on 20th century "neo-orthodoxy," as exemplified by Karl Barth and Emil Brunner.[5] The first translations of Kierkegaard into English were carried out by British and American theologians, who drew attention to the more orthodox aspects of Kierkegaard's writings, while downplaying their profanations and ironies.[6]

On the other hand, Kierkegaard emerges as an important predecessor to late modern and postmodern philosophy. For intellectual historians, Kierkegaard fits into the generation of thinkers who opposed Hegel, "the rebellion of the sons against the Hegelian father to whom they all were so deeply indebted."[7] Kierkegaard resists Hegel's totalizing universal systems, which leave little place for will or subjectivity, reducing individual man to a kind of "automaton" determined by larger historical forces.[8] Kierkegaard, in turn, assumes the role of a father figure to many of the central tendencies in 20th century thought. Heidegger's phenomenology borrows brazenly from Kierkegaard.[9] Subsequently, the existentialists embraced his discussions of subjectivity, dread, and ethics. Others claim Kierkegaard as a Marxist, arguing that his critique of mass culture and modernity anticipates the work of the

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[3] Schacht, Richard, Hegel and After: Studies in Continental Philosophy Between Kant and Sartre. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975), 5.
[4] Stromberg, Roland N., European Intellectual History Since 1789. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1981), 276.
[5] Heinemann, F.H., Existentialism and the Modern Predicament. (London: A. & C. Black, 1953), 30.
[6] Poole, 58-59.
[7] Westphal, Merold, "Kierkegaard," from A Companion to Continental Philosophy, edited by Simon Critchley and William R. Schroeder. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998). Westphal lays out the general thematic similarities between Kierkegaard and 20th century thought.
[8] Stromberg, 275-76.
[9] Poole, 52-53.

Frankfurt School and other practitioners of critical social theory. Postmodern philosophers have refigured Kierkegaard's anti-Hegelianism and concern with the individual soul as a broader protest against the legacy of Descartes and Enlightenment rationality.

But Kierkegaard's work is difficult to integrate into any narrative of intellectual history. Kierkegaard resists categorization because his writings, unlike that of most philosophers, cannot be summarized, condensed, or paraphrased. His relationship to the Danish academic establishment was openly antagonistic, and he refused to write a straightforward defense of his theoretical positions. He despised abstract speculation, favoring "concrete" demonstrations of philosophical problems. Rather than authoring Hegelian treatises or Kantian critiques, Kierkegaard commanded a squad of competing pseudonyms, who contradicted, qualified, and undermined one another across and even within individual works. He wrote, in other words, like a poet, or, more properly, a novelist, constructing literary persona who debated other voices, without evident consensus. Until recently, "official, academic philosophers" hesitated to converse with Kierkegaard. But where they identified a lack of rigor, scholars of literature, perhaps unsurprisingly, often find "virtuosity." The literary theorist Roger Poole praises Kierkegaard's "ironic, sophisticated, parodic style that allowed of no clear position for the reader and allowed of no definite result."[10] More recent philosophical work has begun to acknowledge that "twentieth-century literary theory has prepared us… to separate author and text" in order to appreciate Kierkegaard's strategies of "difference."[11]

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[10] Poole, 48.
[11] Westphal, 129.

Indeed, philosophers may consider Kierkegaard peculiar, but those who study 19th century literature may be more likely to see his writings as products of their time. Kierkegaard's contemporaries often assumed the posture of *bricoleur* in their Romantic writings, assembling fictional voices into one heterogeneous text.[12] Kierkegaard's "dialogic heteroglossias" also can be said to reflect his cosmopolitan surroundings in Copenhagen. Like Baudelaire's collections of poetic vignettes, they evoke the sound and texture of the modern city. They are filled with cacophonous "noise," inhibiting clear communication. They are an amassment of layers that never quite cohere.[13] Nowhere is this more true than in *Either/Or*, a work whose very title could suggest *either* the necessity for a verdict *or* an irresolvable dilemma. As we will see, however, this complex text develops a deeply ambivalent relation to dissimulation and Romantic irony. Through the figure of the reflective aesthete, Kierkegaard implicitly decries his own tactics of satire and elusiveness.

A Chinese puzzle box: the structure of *Either/Or*

Either/Or was Kierkegaard's first pseudonymous work (and his second major piece of writing; his master's thesis, completed under his own name, explored *The Concept of Irony*). *Either/Or* constructs a small but detailed fictional world: its two volumes each comprise a set of texts assembled by a single character, which describe a lifestyle with literary specificity. As jarring as this format may be to philosophers, the work's "aesthetic" merits are also controversial. Because its characters' "encounters" with one another are mediated through letters and papers, and because

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[12] Waldrep, Shelton, The Aesthetics of Self-invention: Oscar Wilde to David Bowie. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 10.
[13] Chambers, Ross, "Baudelaire's Paris," from The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire, edited by Rosemary Lloyd. (Cambridge: Cambrdige University Press, 2005), 109-110.

the character from the first volume never responds to the letters from the second, it will not satisfy readers who expect a traditional novel, with sequential action and dialogue. Yet it does not quite have the sophistication of a *nouvelle roman*. Although his prose is often rich and humorous, some readers complain that Kierkegaard subordinates stylistic interest to his philosophical concerns. His characters—even Johannes, whose inner world we can access through the diary—do not always come across as real, living human beings, born into specific environments. Theodor Adorno writes, "Kierkegaard's aesthetic figures are strictly illustrations of his philosophical categories, which they exemplify in primitive simplicity."[14] Adorno's denigration of *Either/Or* is flippant, but his frustration suggests that Kierkegaard's text is a kind of experiment, an effort, perhaps not wholly successful, to combine speculation and actuality.

Attributed to the fictional "Victor Eremita," *Either/Or* contains several elaborate framing devices. In the preface to the first volume, Eremita denies that *he* is the work's author, claiming to have found the set of texts which comprise *Either/Or* in a piece of antique furniture. He recounts dividing the abandoned papers into two volumes. The second was easy to arrange: it included letters by a respectable, married citizen named Judge William, who defends an "ethical" way of life. But the first volume was less orderly. It included aphorisms, essays, and a diary, which collectively describe nearly a dozen characters, all labeled "aesthetes." These various texts were in turn assembled (though not sequentially arranged) by a second unnamed editor, whom Eremita calls "A." Some Kierkegaard scholars attribute the

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[14] Adorno, Theodor W., Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic, translated and edited by Robert Hullot-Kentor. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 7.

exegetical essays to the character "A," but Eremita lets us know that such an assumption may be imprudent:

> A does not acknowledge himself as author, but only as editor. This is an old trick of the novelist, and I should not object to it, if it did not make my own position so complicated, as one author seems to be enclosed in another like the parts in a Chinese puzzle box.

It is plausible that each of the sections may have a different author. Alternately, all of Volume 1 may have been written by the conniving "A," who pretends to be an editor but is actually a "novelist." Another possibility is that Eremita has written the *entire* work (both volumes), and here underhandedly acknowledges the "trick" he has played on the reader. In any case, Kierkegaard, who really has constructed this puzzle box, playfully draws attention to his own "complicated" relation to the various persona.

I want to highlight these architectural intricacies because many of the confusions surrounding *Either/Or* emerge from efforts to consolidate its diverse characters and persona. Nowhere is this more awkwardly attempted than in the debate over the "immediacy" of the aesthete. Kierkegaard uses the term "aesthetic" to refer to the senses, evoking "the ancient Greek distinction between sense and intellect." Whereas ethical and intellectual judgments require the intervention of consciousness, "aesthetic" refers to responses that are manifestly sensual.[15] Within the discourse of traditional philosophy, then, an aesthete is someone whose experience of life is immediate, that is, not mediated by reflection, contemplation, or even, potentially, language.

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[15] Westphal, 129.

Several of the aesthetes in Volume 1 of *Either/Or* are indeed characterized by immediacy. Don Juan and Don Giovanni, in particular, seem barely cognizant of their own behavior, oblivious to ethics, religion, or anything else other than the fulfillment of their sensual urges. As the philosopher of religion Mark C. Taylor explains in his attentive study of Kierkegaard (his own first publication), "the world," for the immediate aesthete, "is experienced as a ceaseless flux of sense impressions… one is fully determined by desire, or by sensuous inclination." Don Juan and Don Giovanni, "though grown, remain children," incapable of self-consciousness or abstract thought. Their selfhood is "given," not consciously developed. Their bodies and social roles mold their behavior (Taylor does note that the immediate aesthetes can themselves be stratified, according to the maturity of their inchoate ability to distinguish themselves from the objects they desire).[16]

Not all of the aesthetes, however, are so fatuous. The author of the essays *about* Mozart's characters (whether "A" or someone else) has enough wherewithal to pass careful judgments on works of art, and to synthesize his responses with exegetical grace. The author of "The Rotation Method" even manages to give a systematic account of his own principles, something the "immediate" aesthetes could never have accomplished. And the seducer Johannes is also extraordinarily thoughtful and introspective, constantly evaluating his own behavior. Rather than "immediate," these aesthetes are "highly reflective." And reflection, of course,

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[16] Taylor, Mark C. Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 133-34, 161-62, 129.

mediates experience. To use Kierkegaard's own terms, reflection is *im*mediacy's "negation."[17]

Friendless rebels: the reflective aesthetes

Kierkegaard delineates the habits and composure of the reflective aesthete in "The Rotation Essay," "The Seducer's Diary," and the "Diapsalmata." We should note that these texts are each potentially attributed to different literary persona. However, the "Rotation" essay arguably functions as a theoretical companion to the narrative of the "Diary," while the "Diapsalmata" offer clearly related epigrams and declarations. I will therefore treat all three texts as an extended discussion of the reflective "type."

An inveterate cynic, the reflective aesthetes greet all available intellectual standpoints with doubt. They take delight in undermining conventional wisdom, and are suspicious of social and political optimism ("all this talk about society and the social is partly inherited hypocrisy, partly calculated cunning"[18]). Volume 1 contains assaults on reason, political freedom, and morality, values which might earn the allegiance of more credulous (or more self-assured) minds. In the "Diapsalmata," "A" boasts of his unorthodoxy, but bemoans his lack of confidence, writing, "I have the courage, I believe, to doubt everything… to fight with everything; but I have not the courage to know anything; not the courage to possess, to own anything."[19] Profound skepticism involves valor, but also impoverishment: the man who scoffs at the fiction of currency may end up penniless.

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[17] Taylor, 172.
[18] Kierkegaard, Soren, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life: Volume One*. Translated by David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 236.
[19] Kierkegaard 1, 18.

The only time Volume 1 comes close to delivering a moral program is in the "Rotation" essay, whose author acclaims amusement and cites boredom as the root of all evil. In answer to those who endorse the "procedure" of "starting from a principle," the author supplies his carefully-considered, universal belief "that all men are bores."[20] Even as he satirizes reasonable discourse, however, the aesthete makes a compelling case for agitating and reconfiguring patterns of thought. "Boredom" designates not unwelcome idleness, but something like habituation. "Boredom" could even refer to taking *too much* interest in the world, the triumph of crude "business," of absorption in routine. As a remedy, the author prescribes the "rotation method," which, like the rotation of crops, renews one's mental soil. Rather than constantly exposing himself to novel stimuli—a self-defeating strategy—he "rotates" his mental apparatus, in order to reevaluate the world. He strikes a mental pose, and regards the world from that perspective. The author cites the stoic Marcus Aurelius' exhortation, "it is in your power to review your life, to look at things you saw before, from another point of view."[21] Like the stoic philosopher, the reflective aesthete believe that significance is a product of viewpoint, and of will.

Rotation proscribes sustained affection for another human being. For the reflective aesthetes, sexual and even fraternal infidelity operate as tropes for intellectual detachment. The "Rotation" essay derides the prospect of friendship, callously pronouncing, "it is impossible for one human being to be anything to another human being except to be in his way." Although the reflective aesthete is no brutish predator, he is characterized by sexual license. The "Rotation" essay declares

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[20] Kierkegaard, 234.
[21] Kierkegaard, 239.

that love affairs should last no more than six months.[22] In his diary, Johannes obsessively plots to seduce the innocent young Cordelia, but he maintains an unnerving objectivity. His love is a form of conquest, not capitulation. As Taylor explains, Cordelia is merely "one moment in the elaboration of a subtle personal mood, the occasion for a personal experiment in poetic reflection."[23]

In their emotional estrangement, too, the reflective aesthetes resemble the stoic philosophers, who aimed to sever their attachments to the world. The former slave Epictetus advised his followers not to regard their wives and children with too much fondness, so as to avoid grief upon the occasion of their inevitable deaths.[24] Much like the reflective aesthete, Epictetus achieves invulnerability by alienating himself from other people. Kierkegaard scholar Richard Anthony Furtak fruitfully elaborates on this surprising affinity, observing that just as the stoic becomes indifferent to all external occurrences, objects, and persons, the reflective aesthete also refuses to recognize external objects as inherently worthy of concern. His objective is regulation: he *chooses* whether and how to feel, whether and how to invest an object or a person with meaning.[25]

Unlike the stoics, of course, the reflective aesthete does not withdraw from worldly amusements or gratification. This makes his ethical status more dubious. While we might esteem an ascetic who shunned social connections (or a Roman emperor who pretended to), the aesthete consciously strives to seduce vulnerable

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[22] Kierkegaard, 242.
[23] Taylor, 168.
[24] Epictetus, The Enchiridion, translated by Elizabeth Carter. (http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/epicench.html, accessed 1/29/08).
[25] Furtak, Rick Anthony. Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 34-38.

young women. The reflective aesthete seeks out experiences of sensual and even emotional intensity, but protects himself from both injury and delight through cogitation, as stipulated in the "Rotation" essay:

> One ought to devote oneself to pleasure with a certain suspicion, a certain weariness, if one desires to give the lie to the proverb which says that no one can have his cake and eat it too. The carrying of concealed weapons is usually forbidden, but no weapon is so dangerous as the art of remembering. It gives one a very peculiar feeling in the midst of one's enjoyment to look back upon it for the purpose of remembering it.

The aesthete hopes to strike an impossible balance between "devotion" and "suspicion," stimulation and ennui. By transforming the present moment into a candidate for instantaneous "remembering," the aesthete denies that thought, action, or emotion are anything more than representations. As Furtak paraphrases, the aesthete wants "to eat his cake by partaking in temporal experience and to keep it by preserving abstract detachment as an available sanctuary."[26]

This alternately emotive and aloof stance implies a kind of bad faith, an ineradicable insincerity, which Kierkegaard ascribed not only to the aesthete but to his intellectual contemporaries, both Hegelian and Romantic. A reflective personality pretends its is never "personally implicated," always a "spectator," as if one's own life were a painting to be scrutinized, or a play to be watched. Reflective aesthetes and scholars alike assess an object based on whether it is "interesting," never risking a judgment of whether it is "good." They "contemplat[e] beauty and ugliness, good and evil, from a position of detachment."[27] The aesthete cannot even relate to himself authentically. As Taylor demonstrates, Kierkegaard detested Hegelian speculation, not because it was *uninteresting* but because it was "directed away from the self."

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[26] Furtak, 79.
[27] Furtak, 58.

Abstract reflection, whether by an young seducer or a respected academic philosopher, should not become an intellectual indulgence. Hegel's compendious phenomenologies were, for Kierkegaard, unproductively masturbatory, much more so than inwardly-directed reflection that "intend[s] to arrive at the self-clarification requisite for purposeful activity."[28] The Romantic mind, similarly, is too enamored of its own powers to recognize and respond to things—including the self—for what they are. The Romantic and the aesthete both attempt "to maintain infinite freedom, or unlimited possibility by denying historical actuality." Both treasure theory and disdain practice. [29]

In other words, the reflective aesthete is insincere and indecisive, incapable of both truthful evaluation and real action. "A" and the individuals he describes are impressively self-aware, but they are unprincipled, undisciplined, and disjointed, lost in a maze of "indeterminacy." In contrast, Judge Williams' "sincere commitment" to matrimony, to justice, and to convention lends him not only public respectability but also private integrity of character.[30] He evaluates external conditions according to tradition, and his response to a given situation is therefore predictable. Where the aesthete pursues fleeting assignations, the judge consigns himself to marriage. He enjoys, in short, self-possession. Unlike the aesthete, he has the courage to "possess" and to "own" a point of view (if not to "doubt"). According to Furtak, this position does not preclude growth, or even passion. The "stability available to the truly ethical

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[28] Taylor, 163.
[29] Taylor, 176.
[30] Golomb, John. In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 57-58.

person described by the judge" is "not the steady temperament of the Stoic, but the security of knowing that one's passions are grounded in consistent dispositions."[31]

"A" does not "care for anything." His posture is interminably ambivalent; he cannot decide whether "to lie down" or "to get up."[32] He scorns the masses who go about their "business," absorbed in a routine of petty rewards and penalties. But without any such investment, the aesthete assumes the role of a "spectator" to his own life.[33] Later continental thinkers, most notably Heidegger, would identify "care" as the most basic structure of human subjectivity. By this standard, the aesthete is not only temporally disintegrated—"a self with no given continuities"[34]—but hardly present in the world. His solipsism, paradoxically, deprives him of his self-identity.

Why is this carefree state dangerous, rather than liberating? According to many Western thinkers, the extirpation of concern and resulting effacement of subjectivity can be rewarding. Despite his emphasis on the contingency and transience of human affairs, Marcus Aurelius was no nominalist. He believed that accepting the order of the universe, thereby expunging the *ego*, put one in touch with the Platonic Good. Likewise, Christian negative theologians figured "unconcern" and "detachment," the breakdown of presence and consciousness, as strategies to achieve union with God.[35] Unfortunately, the aesthete, because he rejects all metaphysical transcendentals, cannot arrogate "mystical ecstasy." No divine perfection can fill the void left by his absent self.

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[31] Furtak, 73.
[32] Kierkegaard, 15.
[33] Furtak, 58, 63.
[34] MacIntyre, 33.
[35] See: Pseudo-Dionysius, The Mystical Theology; Meister Eckhart, "On Detachment;" Jean-Luc Marion, God without Being.

The psychological result of the aesthete's attitude can only be despair. The aesthete remains unsurprised, unmolested, and therefore alienated. As "A" laments in the Diapsalmata, "my melancholy is the most faithful mistress I have known."[36] Immensely reflective, the aesthete desires meaning, but cannot produce it. As Golomb observes, "one loses one's own self in the aesthetic mode of life but cannot get rid of the psychological effects accompanying this loss of self."[37]

Mounting a defense: the optimistic aesthete?

Either/Or's dialectic, however, cannot be so easily resolved. Some interpreters have questioned Taylor's argument that the reflective aesthete is incapable of decision. The aesthete, they point out, does choose, in that he *declines* to evaluate the world according to systematic ethical principles. Even MacIntyre, for whom the aesthete amounts to a selfish fraud, contends that "the aesthetic *can* be chosen seriously," taking as an example the disillusioned veterans of World War I, who deliberately "invented the aesthetic triviality of the nineteen-twenties" in order to evade traditional values.[38] While MacIntyre may oversimplify the Jazz Age, it seems that aestheticism does require deliberation and willful allegiance to a set of beliefs, a kind of regime of arbitrariness.

In addition, MacIntyre highlights "the conservative and traditional character of Kierkegaard's account of the ethical." The judge may decide to embrace custom, but he does so with neither rational nor passionate conviction.[39] The judge is dignified and content, but complacent. His unnamed wife cares for his home, while

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[36] Kierkegaard, 16.
[37] Golomb, 58.
[38] MacIntyre, 41.
[39] MacIntyre 43.

he takes care of his obligations as an official of the state. The reflective aesthetes view such a lifestyle as crushingly mundane. Indeed, although the judge may seem to have the last word, the first volume provides a compelling critique of the kind of person who is "prompt to meals, and prompt to work." Upstanding citizens makes no distinction between labor and leisure, turning everything into "business." They "fall in love, marry, listen to a joke, and admire a picture with the same industrious zeal."[40] If the aesthete is a cynical atheist, the judge is a dutiful but uninspired priest, observing the proper rituals and keeping up appearances, but incapable of real spiritual enthusiasm.

When contrasted with the judge, the aesthete appears more sympathetic. Yet any attempt to recover the aesthete as an admirable or even sympathetic figure is hermeneutically suspicious, necessarily scraping "against the grain" of the text. In his later works, Kierkegaard undercuts any possibility for the aesthete's redemption, concluding that only the truly "religious" person is capable of (the monotheist's) principled zeal. The aesthetic and the ethical are merely "phases" on the path to a teleological ideal: salvation, not through the institutional church, but through self-discipline and an intimate relation to Christ. *Neither* romantic-philosophical conjecture *nor* unthinking obedience to tradition are satisfactory. To rehabilitate the aesthete, one must resist the apparent logic of Kierkegaard's thought, arguing that *Either/Or* either tacitly suggests or inadvertently permits readings it does not outwardly condone.

Yet Furtak does exactly that, even going so far as to argue that the aesthete, rather than rejecting Romanticism, embodies an unusually sympathetic brand of that

[40] Kierkegaard, 19, 237.

movement. In this view, the aesthete may recognize no gods, no privileged institutions, no truths—but he is far from a nihilist. His stance of "ironic detachment," his opinion that the world is not "transparently meaningful," can be understood as a kind of idealism; "On a charitable reading, his hesitancy in coming to terms with public standards of evaluation is based upon a refusal to reduce himself to trivial conformity." Furtak even goes so far as to entertain the notion that "far from a scornful misanthropy" the aesthete might possess "a lofty conception of human dignity."[41]

This reading ignores the aesthete's manipulations and conquests, particularly the psychic damage Johannes inflicts on the woman he seduces. But it does seem possible to argue that the aesthetic stage is not wholly worthless or immoral. Taylor, among other scholars, observes that the progression, over the course of the first volume of *Either/Or*, from aesthetic immediacy to aesthetic reflection suggests the possibility for growth and improvement. While the immediate aesthetes never manage to sublimate their desires, remaining in a phase of infantile exigency, the reflective aesthete has progressed to a slightly more sophisticated juncture,[42] which might be said to approximate adolescence. The Judge's ethical routine might, if we continue this analogy, represent regular adulthood. Few manage to distinguish themselves through religious excellence. The aesthetic sphere, like adolescence, might be an indispensable phase on the way to fulfillment.

Alternately, the aesthetic phase might be valuable in itself. The aesthetes' hostility to habituation and custom takes a certain amount of courage, probably more

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[41] Furtak, 83-84.
[42] Taylor, 158-60.

so than the automatic, one-dimensional "ethics" of the judge. The reflective aesthetes have the courage to acknowledge the fleetingness of time, and the inessentiality of the self, crucial ontological realities which will underlie the philosophy of Walter Pater. Moreover, they are prescient in their adoption of the "dangerous… art of remembering." The belief that life is like a work of art, that every memory and experience can be continuously manipulated, determines the main current of later Aestheticism. If nothing else, we might see the reflective aesthete's attempt to insulate himself from experience, and take control of his own self-representation, as an attempt, however misguided, to avoid despondency.

Chapter 2

The rewards and perils of experience: Pater's "Art for its own sake"

Pater's sentiments can be just as deeply, even violently felt as Kierkegaard's. But his prose is much more refined, shaped by a literary tradition of English gentleman and Oxford intellectuals. His adroit style compresses complicated arguments, subtle qualifications, and even entire intellectual disciplines into a single sentence, as Carolyn Williams points out in her tremendous 1989 study of Pater's career.[1] Pater is occasionally stirring, almost ecstatic, but he can also be tediously stolid, lacking in Kierkegaard's fervor. Aside from the "Conclusion" to The *History of the Renaissance*, generally hailed as the founding manifesto of British Aestheticism, few of Pater's works inspire devotion.

They did, however, manage to inspire controversy. Critics responded harshly to his most original ideas, which brushed off Victorian decency. His art criticism, in particular, sloughed the moral principles of John Ruskin, who dominated British

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[1] Williams, Carolyn, Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 15.

criticism for much of the 19h century. Pater privately venerated Ruskin,[2] but went to great lengths to distance himself from himself from Ruskin's influence.[3] He rejected his precursor's prejudice that art must be "serviceable," whether morally or politically.[4] Nor did he share Ruskin's reverence towards the natural world. In his volume on British receptions of Romanticism, Kenneth Daley writes, "there is no theophanic vision on the mountaintop for Pater, no mystical communion with Nature."[5]

Pater was interested, however, in natural science, along with other expressions of what he called "modern thought." He judged that his own fiction and philosophy must address the whole development of Western intellectual history, from the classical era to his contemporaries. He makes astonishing, credible connections among eras and disciplines. Yet he did not resort to abstraction. Pater, like Kierkegaard, deplored theoretical speculation. He sought a philosophy of concrete experience, which would liberate aesthetically-minded people from convention. At the crucial moment in the "Conclusion," he quotes the German romantic Novalis, a contemporary of Kierkegaard; "to philosophize is to awaken." For Pater, philosophy should arouse and illuminate, rather than dictate indisputable systems; the "Conclusion" explicitly denounces the "facile orthodoxies" of philosophers like Hegel. Theories can help to filter the otherwise overwhelming flow of experience. But only a gravely misguided individual would value theories over lived experience.[6]

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[2] Crinkley, Richmond, Walter Pater: Humanist. (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1970), 5.
[3] Bloom, Harold, "Walter Pater: The Intoxication of Belatedness," *Yale French Studies* No. 50. (1974), 172.
[4] Donoghue, Denis, Walter Pater: Lover of Strange Souls. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 121.
[5] Daley, Kenneth, The Rescue of Romanticism. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001), 1-2, 6.
[6] Williams, 40.

For Kierkegaard, the reflective aesthete is likely to commit such a mistake, precisely by aestheticizing his own life. But in the Conclusion to *History of the Renaissance*, Pater presents aestheticism as a way to *affirm* experience. One must live with abandon, cultivating "experience itself." The Conclusion may seem to condone the libertine's quest of immediate gratification; many readers continue to assume that Pater's exclamations represent a call to unchecked debauchery. In fact, Pater presents art as a middle ground between reflection and immediacy. After delineating the incentives to nihilism and hedonism proffered by science and epistemology, he asserts that art offers an experience that is both concrete and demanding. The aesthete, by immersing himself in art, will enjoy a more vibrant, challenging mode of existence.

Pater's contemporary readers tended to miss this subtle, fairly conservative aspect of his argument. In response to harsh criticism, Pater undertook a novel, *Marius the Epicurean*, which both clarified and qualified his statements in the Conclusion. *Marius*, much like *Either/Or*, explores philosophical principles through the destiny of particular characters. The protagonist Marius is an aesthete, and we come to know his intellectual development and inner worldview very thoroughly. Pater demonstrates the attractions of an aesthetic lifestyle, but also its drawbacks, as Marius eventually suffers from his wholesale rejection of guiding principles and social comforts. Still, *Marius* is an autobiographical work, which goes a long way towards exploring the aesthete's psychology, and establishing his classical pedigree.

"Modern thought" in the Conclusion

Pater often breached the boundaries separating fiction, criticism, and philosophy. *The History of the Renaissance*, Pater's first major work, has an odd structure. The bulk of the text consists of critical essays about Italian paintings, written with lyrical zeal (William Butler Yeats famously included Pater's analysis of the *Mona Lisa* in a volume of modernist poetry[7]). The preface is even more daring: it contains some broad comments about Pater's approach to art, and refutes some of the central assumptions of Victorian criticism. But it is the dazzling, notorious Conclusion, which provides a prodigiously dense, sweeping declaration of philosophical and aesthetic principles.[8] The Conclusion is strangely out of place in a collection of critical essays; as Williams notes, it was not originally written as a capstone to the *Renaissance*, but as part of a meditation on the poetry of William Morris.[9] Perhaps because of this incongruity, it was immediately recognized as a remarkable piece of writing, worthy of attention, if not always understood.

As Williams demonstrates, the first two paragraphs of the text manage to summarize and reconcile disparate strains of 19th European century thought, while alluding profusely to their sources in classical antiquity. Pater commences with the observation that to view all "things and principles of things as inconstant modes or fashions has more and more become the tendency of modern thought."[10] Modern thinkers, in other words, view all "principles" as competing ideologies, whether short-

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[7] Crinkley, 3.
[8] Williams observes that beginning with the "Conclusion" has become "an almost traditional gesture" in Pater scholarship. Williams, 11.
[9] Williams, 11.
[10] Pater, Walter, "Conclusion," from Studies in the History of the Renaissance, reprinted in Literature and Culture at the *Fin de Siècle*, edited by Talia Schaffer. (New York: Pearson Education, 2007), 10.

lived or durable. Moreover, they view "things" themselves (physical objects and mental states) as momentary coincidences. This is especially true of positivist science. In the scientific view, "our physical life" is a nothing more than a confluence of biological, chemical, and ballistic circumstances. Positivism reduces even "the moment…. of delicious recoil from the flood of water in summer heat" to a quantifiable "combination of natural elements." Ruthless "elementary forces" govern the behavior of our bodies in the same way they organize the rest of the physical world: "birth and gesture and death and the springing of violets from the grave are but a few out of ten thousand resultant combinations." Anarchic influences, like "whirlpools" or "flames," inevitably devour and erode all that exists.[11]

And yet our minds try to impose order on this chaos. We attempt to arrange sense impressions—the "flood of external objects"—the face of a friend, for example. But according to modern epistemology, such categories are fictitious. When we assign a name to a thing or concept, we delude ourselves; there is no single essence common to all trees. Such an "image" (the face of a friend) only earns any coherence in its *difference* from an intricate network of similarly dubious mental constructions (head; hands; other faces). It is "a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it."[12] In this first paragraph, Pater beautifully synthesizes the refusal, on the part of many radical 19th century thinkers, to concede that our words and mental concepts correspond to reality (the same refusal that found its most terrifying expression in Nietzsche's essay "On Truth and Lying in the Extra-Moral Sense," published the same year).

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[11] Pater, "Conclusion," 10-11.
[12] Pater, "Conclusion," 10.

This epistemological skepticism is of course not identical with the ideology of positivist science. But for Pater, the two discourses "interlock logically as well as rhetorically,"[13] because they challenge the idea of a permanent human subject. For scientists as for modern philosophers, the self amounts to a fiction. We may be isolated by "that thick wall of personality," which distinguishes us from other people, and which we can never explode. But when we turn our attention "inward," we find no essence that persists over time. We change from moment to miniscule moment, in a process of "strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves."[14] This problem is, for Williams, the "very opposite of solipsism:" there is no self upon which we can reflect or which can absorb our emotions and thoughts.[15] The finitude of human life only compounds this instability. Science promises no afterlife; epistemology holds that even this life is an illusion.

Pater closely engages the premises and implications of "modern thought." His synopsis is so compelling and insightful that many readers assume he accepts the more radical dimensions of modern science and epistemology. But his relation to these discourses is actually ambiguous. Because Pater never explicitly endorses them, certain scholars have interpreted the Conclusion's first two paragraphs as strictly descriptive. Richard Wolheim, who wrote extensively on Pater's intellectual background, suggests that we read this passage as if it were bracketed by quotation marks.[16] But Pater is undeniably sympathetic to some aspects of "modern thought." He does not dispute the claims of science. He does regard mental and linguistic

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[13] Williams, 25.
[14] Pater, "Conclusion," 10-11.
[15] Williams, 25-26.
[16] Williams, 13.

concepts as products of the imagination; he accepts that "it is only the roughness of the human eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike." And he possesses a sense of urgency. His thought attempts to make the most of lived experience, despite life's "awful brevity."[17]

Art and aesthetics: between immediacy and reflection

In the second half of the Conclusion, Pater argues that this—the pursuit of vital forces in the face of death—is the task of philosophy, and of art. Almost miraculously, he addresses the same question raised by Kierkegaard in *Either/Or*: how can one achieve a life dominated neither by reflection nor immediacy? Kierkegaard believes that the aesthete easily falls prey to one extreme or the other. But for Pater, the aesthete might manage to avoid both useless reflection and thoughtless hedonism, by orienting his life around art. Art is eminently concrete, but demanding of real engagement, rather than submission to the purely sensual.

At the same time, Pater rejects the dull solidification of concepts that characterizes Kierkegaard's "ethical" mode; we should not fall prey to convention or routine, but should constantly refresh our sense of being present in the world. Pater evokes the most compelling parts of Kierkegaard's "Rotation" essay: the arguments against settlement, familiarity, and inattention. The human "failure," he writes, "is to form habits:" without active involvement in our own experience, we "sleep" through "this short day of frost and sun."[18] Although Pater is perhaps incapable of self-righteous scorn, he would at least pity a man like Judge Wilhelm, who, caught up in his daily routine, is barely alive to experience.

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[17] Pater, "Conclusion," 12.
[18] Pater, "Conclusion," 11-12.

Of course, almost the same charge has been leveled at the aesthete: absorbed in intellectual speculation, the reflective aesthete does not properly live. Pater recognized that habits can dictate our thoughts as well as our actions. But he argued that philosophy, rather than reinforcing our entrenched habits, could awaken us to our own experience, provided it was not unduly abstract:

> The service of philosophy, of speculative culture, towards the human spirit, is to rouse, to startle it to a life of constant and eager observation. Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us,--for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end. [19]

Pater makes a significant departure from the first two paragraphs here. Whereas science and epistemology tend to dissolve "forms," in this passage coherent formations become possible. An external natural form or an inner "excitement" can become "irresistibly real and attractive," at least to our minds. But these forms are impressionistic, and accessible only for a "moment." We must pursue them with "eager observation," which entails active cognizance. Ideally, "speculative culture" can "startle" us into such consciousness.[20] Not through broad theories—"the fruit of experience"—but by forcing us to pay attention to the specific contingencies of experience.[21] Intellectual thought should never involve the unquestioning adoption of received viewpoints, or stubborn commitment to personal prejudices. For both Pater and Kierkegaard, much of philosophy fails to generate such liveliness. Hegel becomes an emblem of "facile orthodoxy," because he wants us to "sacrifice"

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[19] Pater, "Conclusion," 11.
[20] Williams, 28.
[21] Iser, 17.

experience for "abstract theory." Such generalization, Pater assures his readers, "has no real claim upon us."[22]

But if philosophy works, if it forces us to root out entrenched ways of thinking and stirs us into rapturous appreciation, then we will seek out experiences of welcome intensity:

> To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life… While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend.[23]

At this point in the text, the range of experiences at which we "may well grasp" is remarkably diverse. Pater dismantles distinctions between object and fellow subject, high and low art, even immediate sensual experience and intellectual insight. An "exquisite passion" seems to elevate and liberate as effectively as a "contribution to knowledge." A sensual confrontation with exotic odors or pigments can be as valuable as "work of the artist's hands," a masterpiece that demands contemplation. Capping Pater's list is "the face of one's friend," as if to suggest that even the most familiar images can rouse us, so long as we do not merely consign them to available categories. Pater comes close to a leveling hedonism here. He has not yet announced an alternate standard of value, but appears to endorse, like Kierkegaard's aesthete, a supreme "flexibility and freedom… from any preordained commitments."[24]

Pater's colorful prose reflects his commitment to specificity, and makes his writing enormously quotable. But extracting this *carpe diem* sentiment from its context, admittedly a tempting proposition, misrepresents the Conclusion. In the

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[22] Pater, "Conclusion," 12.
[23] Pater, "Conclusion," 11-12.
[24] Iser, 15.

essay's final paragraph, Pater adopts a more conservative tone, re-introducing the distinctions between "passion" and "wisdom," pleasure and art:

> Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us. Only be sure it is passion—that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire for beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.[25]

This passage radiates in several puzzling directions. What is "enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise"? Could Pater be referring to the same kind of cold enjoyment (disinterested enthusiasm) obtained by Kierkegaard's aesthete? If so, how could such activity "come naturally," and why to "many," but not to all? There seems to be some grammatical ambiguity in the first sentence: an undertow in the syntax suggests that "activity" and "love" may not qualify as "great passions." In the next sentence, Pater advises, "be sure that it is passion," but rather than what? Perhaps he opposes real passion to the *simulation* of passion, through experiences we tend to regard as emotionally charged. "Love," for instance, may *seem* to generate "ecstasy and sorrow," but only because we expect it to. It does not "yield" a truly disorienting, profoundly unfamiliar experience, much less "multiplied consciousness."

In any case, it seems clear that art is a privileged vehicle for "wisdom," and for the desirable kind of "passion." It is the most reliable source for "quickened, multiplied consciousness," because it does not allow one to lose oneself in immediacy, or take refuge in reflection. Sensation may be too thoughtless, too easy, too habitual; art *mediates*, it startles and awakens, but *without* resorting to abstract

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[25] Pater, "Conclusion," 12.

speculation. Of course, we must engage "art for its own sake," without trying to deduce any abstract principles. The aesthetic experience can only benefit us *in the moment*; to reflect back on it, whether morally (as Ruskin does) or theoretically (in the case of Hegel) misses the point.

Heretical conclusions: criticism of *The Renaissance*

These final statements are extremely condensed, almost hurried, as if Pater suddenly realized he must chasten his argument. He does not provide any guidance for distinguishing "enthusiastic activity" from the more cultivated passions, only tells us that we must be careful. The text betrays a discomfort with non-aesthetic passions, and perhaps with the erotic potential of a life lived with abandonment. For some recent critics, the appeal to aesthetics is an almost reactionary maneuver. It is easy to portray Pater as a reactionary snob, propounding the positive influence of Renaissance painting and classical literature while ignoring other kinds of cultural material. Alternately, his "desire of beauty" and "love of art for its own sake" can be seen as an endorsement of the status quo. In his book *Cultivating Victorians*, which examines the affinities between mainstream 19th century British liberalism and aesthetic discourse, David Wayne Thomas argues that the incorporation of high art into a "rhetoric of self-determining power" was "at the core of liberal agency, with all its social and political investments." Pater's aesthete may have been entirely "congenial" to the middle class and British intellectuals.[26]

Yet this approach seems to understate the more obviously subversive rhetoric of the Conclusion. Certainly, Pater does not advance the middle class imperatives of

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[26] Thomas, David Wayne, Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2004), x-xiv.

conformity and postponed gratification. And although he tempers his pursuit of "experience" by valuing beauty and aesthetics, he provides no place whatsoever for morality or ethics. Victorian critics fixated on these more subversive elements of *History of the Renaissance*. The journalist and literary scholar William John Courthope criticized *History of the Renaissance* for initiating speculation on those questions lying at the very foundation of society:

> It throws new and attractive colours over doubts on religion; it presents an imaginative form of subtle casuistry about matters of morality, which the unsophisticated conscience had been accustomed to decide off-hand.[27]

Courthope wavers on the merit of Pater's work. He concedes that Pater's case against religion is "attractive," while opposing its "imaginative" skepticism to the moral inertia of the "unsophisticated." But in Courthope's view, Pater's prose is dangerous. It ignores social and economic relations, and makes the selfish pursuit of personal fulfillment into the ultimate standard of value. Referring to Pater's essays on Renaissance painting, Courthope argues that Pater transforms "love" into "an epicence something between physical impulse and intellectual curiosity;" this phrase certainly brings to mind Kierkegaard's immediate hedonists and calculating seducers. Even Thomas acknowledges that Pater's text "paradigmatically challenged" Courthope's "traditionalism."[28] Other intellectuals were similarly disinclined to greet the *History of the Renaissance* as "conservative" or "congenial." In the wider press, the *Renaissance* was considered "a sinister invitation to hedonism" that contested the "norms of English life."[29]

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[27] Daley, 5.
[28] Thomas, xi.
[29] Adams, James Eli, Dandies and Desert Saints. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 150.

The backlash was unwelcome. Although Pater was celebrated by an "elite counterculture" at Oxford (a circle who would become the Aesthetes),[30] the intellectual establishment scorned his work. Pater did not seek out scandal. He bowdlerized and then attempted to suppress completely the "Conclusion" in later editions of *History of the Renaissance*.[31] But the damage was done. When Ruskin resigned from his position at Oxford, Pater applied for but was denied the same professorship. In response, he began to write more sedate work; Williams dismisses his post-Renaissance output as "less and less vivid restatements of his original positions."[32] But these works are also sophisticated reflections of Pater's own predicament as an aesthete. His series of "Imaginary Portraits," works of varying length detailing the intellectual development of fictional historical characters, function as veiled explorations of Pater's philosophical positions.[33] The most theoretically provocative of these works is undoubtedly *Marius the Epicurean.*

The perils of experience: Marius the aesthete

With *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater demonstrated the rigor of his aestheticism, while mitigating some of its extremism. The text discusses a fictional Roman emperor, who embodies many of the qualities of the aesthete. Marius attempts to live out the principles espoused in the "Conclusion," as a kind of "existential test," to determine "to what extent the aesthetic attitude could be sustained in life." The result are somewhat dispiriting, as the aesthete's perspective proves to be, in the scholar

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[30] Williams, 11.
[31] Bloom, 178.
[32] Williams, 11.
[33] Rosenblatt, Louise M, "The Genesis of Pater's Marius the Epicurean," *Comparative Literature* Vol 14, No. 3 (Summer, 1962), 244.

Wolfgang Iser's words, a "genesis of longing and anxiety."[34] At the end of his life, after a prolonged confrontation with Christianity, Marius dramatically departs from aestheticism, in an attempt to give his life meaning. But *Marius the Epicurean* does not constitute an outright rejection of aestheticism. The book not only explores the classical precedents for the aesthete, but also contributes to Pater's larger project of defending the aesthete's peculiar temperament.

Marius' marriage of philosophical speculation and literary specificity mirrors the form of *Either/Or*. But while Kierkegaard makes use of Romantic conventions, Pater's novel more closely hews to the standards of Realist historical fiction. Although the novel contains several unusual digressions (for example a retelling of the story of Cupid and Psyche), overall it coheres into a single narrative, which diligently traces the life of one character from birth to death. Marius is multi-dimensional rather than mythic: he can be somewhat unpredictable, unlike Kierkegaard's entirely consistent, one-dimensional aesthetes. Moreover, 19th century realist historical fiction usually features a character who captures the spirit of an age, but makes no impression on it (one example would be Dorothea in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*). Pater deliberately chose this kind of protagonist over a more noteworthy candidate. Originally, he was inspired by contemporary writing on Marcus Aurelius; and in fact the emperor figures prominently in the book, as a member of Marius' social circle. But Aurelius had already been called "a man like ourselves" by Matthew Arnold, whose work Pater knew well. In fact, Aurelius was so widely held to be an ancestor of modern thought that the critic Frederic IV. H.

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[34] Iser, 141, 146.

Myers, writing in 1882, wondered if the comparison had lost its "literary freshness."[35] So Pater chose to create a lesser-known proxy. Marius, despite his extraordinary intelligence, leaves no mark on European history. Pater actually takes this convention to an "extreme:" because of his peculiar personality, Marius absorbs his historical moment, but his "very sensitivity… renders him passive."[36]

In his extreme sensitivity, at least, Marius *is* an archetypical character, if not quite a Romantic. As Williams suggests, Pater manages both to portray a very specific historical moment, while suggestng that such moments recur over time, albeit with different concerns and details.[37] Pater's narrator, or more properly his literary persona, is very much of the nineteenth century. He frequently alludes to medieval and modern literature and philosophy, and even explicitly addresses Marius' contemporary relevance, in a passage that recalls Matthew Arnold's remark:

> that age and our own have much in common—many difficulties and hopes. Let the reader pardon me if here and there I seem to be passing from Marius to his modern representatives—from Rome, to Paris or London.[38]

Despite his careful historicism, Pater ignores—or occludes—the differences between not only between English and French, but across centuries. He constructs a vision of a trans-historical figure, shaped not so much by his nationality or era as by his extremely rare and pronounced temperament, and perhaps also by his residence in a cosmopolitan center of imperial power. In doing so, he calls our attention to certain affinities between certain aspects of classical thought and the 19th century British dandy, or Parisian intellectual.

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[35] Rosenblatt, 243, 246.
[36] Williams, 181.
[37] Williams, 170.
[38] Pater, Walter, Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas. (London: MacMillan, 1910), Vol II, 14.

Marius' close connection to the stoic Marcus Aurelius shapes his aestheticism; like Johannes the seducer, he aims to control his relation to the influence of the world. But Pater finds another compelling classical precedent for the aesthete in the Epicureans. As we have seen, the stoics reinforced their impassiveness by attempting to abstain from all consumption and contemplation, limiting their emotional contact with the world. Epicurus and his followers were much more engaged with their surroundings. They rejected all abstract ideals and Platonic forms, grounding their philosophy in concrete experience. A good life meant intensifying pleasure and diminishing fear and anxiety. They were not outright hedonists; Epicurus held that overindulgence only amplified anxiety. He advocated strategic self-denial, such as eating less, in order to take extreme pleasure in a small meal. Nor would the Epicureans have condoned destructive social conduct, since criminal and manipulative behavior usually brings unpleasant consequences, or at least the fear of them.[39] But the Epicureans eventually arrive at a philosophical perspective that resembles Pater's own proposal in the conclusion: reject all abstract speculation and ethical values, in order to live in the moment. Act responsibly, not out of ethical principles, but to protect your own welfare.

Marius enthusiastically adopts these principles. Fiercely independent, he rejects abstract theories and ethical ideals. He flirts with a more radical, hedonistic offshoot of Epicureanism called Cyrenaicism. The Cyrenaicists advocated overconsumption—the kind of overeating, inebriation, and sexual libertinism perpetrated by Don Giovanni and Don Juan, which continually increases the threshold

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[39] "Epicurus," from The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epicurus, accessed 3/10/08).

of satisfaction.[40] But ultimately Marius decides that the unthinking quest for pleasure is misdirected. The true aesthete will lose himself neither in reflective speculation nor immediate gratification. Rather, he will acknowledge his own imminent death, and, as explained in the "Conclusion," attempt to get the most out of human experience. "Speculative culture" can aid in this endeavor: Marius decides that a "true philosophy" should aim to elicit "candid discontent," by upsetting one's habits and presuppositions.[41] But the most fulfilling, "real" experience involves the contemplation of beauty, whether natural or manmade.

For Pater, the aesthete is an utterly serious man, defined by his pronounced visual sensitivity, and his willingness to acknowledge his own mortality:

> With the brevity of that sum of years his mind is exceptionally impressed; and this purpose makes him no frivolous dilettante, but graver than other men: his scheme is not that of a trifler… He has a strong apprehension, also, of the beauty of the visible things around him; their fading, momentary graces and attractions.[42]

For Pater, the aesthete is "no frivolous dilettante" or "trifler." Rather, he has an exceptionally "strong" awareness of the beauty that surrounds him. Pater's definition of beauty here quite broad, and surprisingly eccentric for his historical moment. For most Victorian critics, beauty involved balanced compositions and stable forms; such images were supposed to achieved an enduring elegance that could be recognized by different cultures across time. But Marius' "beauty" is a far different affair. It refers to the "fading, momentary graces" of individual forms, which are our only way of accessing the world. Marius exhibits an "almost exclusive pre-occupation with the *aspects* of things; with their aesthetic character." But this preference is motivated "not so much" by "enjoyment,"

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[40] "Epicurus," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosphy.
[41] Pater, Marius the Epicurean, Vol. II, 220.
[42] Pater, Marius the Epicurean, Vol. II, 26.

> as because to be occupied, in this way, with the aesthetic or imaginative side of things, is to be in real contact with those elements of his own nature, and of theirs, which… are matter of the most real kind of apprehension…. In the prosecution of this love of beauty, he claims an entire personal liberty, liberty of heart and mind, liberty, above all, from what may seem conventional answers to first questions.[43]

Pater here returns to some of the central themes from the "Conclusion." We can never know the external world directly; our "apprehension" *must* involve "aesthetic" impressions and the workings of the "imagination." Marius recognizes the preeminence of aesthetics, and revels in it, in his overwhelming devotion to beauty. As an aesthete, he can make no concessions, but must take extreme "liberty," never submitting to the "conventional" ways of understanding the world, of answering ontological "first questions."

For James Eli Adams, who studies Victorian masculinities, Marius' skepticism, far from being hedonistic or nihilistic, represents a "form of strenuous, even religious, self-discipline."[44] According to the narrator, Marius "feels himself to be something of a priest," whose "contemplation of what is beautiful" serves as "a sort of perpetual religious service."[45] Yet beauty cannot supply all the consolations of religion. As Wolfgang Iser demonstrates, Marius' aestheticism falter precisely because it offers no source of stability. Without sources of "legitimation" or "comfort," Marius is controlled by his moods. Aestheticism offers no resources to confront the ways the present moment is responds to the past, and is inextricably yoked to the future.[46] Moreover, Marius can never escape the feeling that simply by using language and interacting with culture, he estranges himself from the true,

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[43] Pater, Marius the Epicurean, Vol. II, 26.
[44] Adams, 150.
[45] Pater, Marius the Epicurean, Vol. II, 17.
[46] Iser, 140.

inarticulable and untamable force of the world. Although he hopes to remain alert to experience, he finds it difficult to maintain such a state. "Entering vividly into life," he still "feels all that while… that he is but conceding reality to suppositions, choosing of his own will to walk in a day-dream, of the illusiveness of which he is at least aware."[47] He wanders through life as if in a dream, aware of his tenuous relation to the external world, but also alienated from society and history (perhaps this is why Bloom calls Pater's work "more a historicizing reverie than… a historical novel"[48]).

Ultimately, Marius' estrangement leads to a crisis. He becomes lonely, and begins to miss the solace of human community.[49] Epicurean aestheticism strongly discourages both politics and sexual involvement, and these restraints stifle Marius. Epicureanism does permit close friendships, and Marius does manage to maintain certain lasting bonds, even with women (women who occupy maternal rather than sexual rules). But he remains too isolated and aloof to enjoy the pleasures of sympathy; he detects:

> some cramping, narrowing, costly preference of one part of his own nature… if certain moments of [the Epicureans'] lives were high-pitched, passionately coloured, intent with sensation… if, now and then, they apprehended the world in its fullness, and had a vision, almost 'beatific,' of ideal personalities in life and art, yet these moments were a very costly matter: they paid a great price for them, in the sacrifice of a thousand possible sympathies… from which they detached themselves, in intellectual pride, in loyalty to a mere theory that would… assent to no approximate or hypothetical truths.[50]

Here, the aesthete is presented as stifled, confined, and unrealized. The privileging of the aesthetic aspect no longer seems to put him in contact with the whole "nature of things," or his whole personal potential. The Epicureans may refuse to acknowledge

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[47] Pater, Marius the Epicurean, Vol. I, 213.
[48] Bloom, 179.
[49] Iser, 140.
[50] Pater, Marius the Epicurean, Vol. II, 21-22.

"approximate or hypothetical truths," the imprecise generalizations and simplifications of language and thought that Pater discusses in the "Conclusion." But they find it impossible to sustain the "hard, gem-like frame" of ecstatic experience. do not, Marius finds, manage to sustain the "hard, gem-like flame" of ecstasy. Although Marius may occasionally achieve communion with the "ideal," his "pride" isolates him from the world. What the aesthetic attitude lacks, he realizes, is any room for "sympathies:" compassion, community, or even a vague feeling of collectivity.

Perhaps it is this deficiency that makes Marius so surprisingly receptive to certain elements of Christianity. Although Marius is too skeptical to develop a true religious passion, he embraces the "spirit of Christian self-sacrifice,"[51] giving up his own life in order to save that of a Christian friend. Pater, like Kierkegaard, seems to find the aesthetic attitude ultimately unsatisfying; Marius' sacrifice even brings to mind the intelligent leap of faith in Kierkegaard's religious phase. We might interpret his conversion as a decisive rejection of every variation on aestheticism that he has preliminarily adopted.

On the other hand, we might attribute Marius' self-destructive inclinations *to* his aesthetic attitude. Marius' death recalls an earlier passage from the novel, about a Cyreniac teacher whose lectures drive his students to suicide. This incident points to as flaw in the basic teachings of Epicurean aestheticism; "that this was in the range of their consequences… was surely an inconsistency in a thinker who professed above all things an economy of the moments of life."[52] Pater might self-consciously reflects

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[51] Rosenblatt, 257.
[52] Pater, Marius the Epicurean, Vol. II, 24.

on the darker side of his own aestheticism, which can easily spiral into nihilistic despair.

Indeed, *Marius the Epicurean* presents a morbid version of aestheticism. Marius is an enthusiastic reader of Lucius Apuleius, whose decadent "Golden Book" (*The Golden Ass*) shapes his intellectual development (a transmission that Oscar Wilde will restyle in Dorian Gray's keenness for the French "Yellow Book"). Apuleius renders the young Marius sensitive to deviant sensibilities, artworks which aim to create an impression of humor or disgust rather than beauty. Although he condemns the cruelty of the amphitheater, he appreciates the sacred violence of sacrifices. This distinction between vulgar voyeurism and the artfully grotesque was already established as a feature of French aestheticism (Pater's narrator praises Marius' delight in the satirical and the grotesque as a "luxury of disgust… worthy of Theophile Gautier" [53]).

Although *Marius the Epicurean* seems to present a pessimistic view of the aesthete, Marius' ability to appreciate much more than the sacred or the beautiful suggests a unique sensitivity to a wide range of art. While Pater acknowledges that the "theory that things are but shadows" can lead to "nihilism," he does not resolve whether Marius' own self-destruction is typical. For some aesthetes, the fleetingness of human existence becomes a "stimulus" to live passionately, to siphon vigorous experience from a brief life; the "soil" of an individual human personality determines aestheticism's "reception." This idea is very much in line with Pater's art criticism. In the preface to *History of the Renaissance,* he writes that a perceptive "temperament" is much more important than "abstract definitions" in evaluating

[53] Pater, Marius the Epicurean, Vol. 1, 60-61.

individual paintings and sculpture.[54] This belief that certain people were exceptionally inclined to appreciate art was familiar to Victorian critics; John Ruskin famously calculated that "hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see."[55] Marius' aesthetic orientation is a "natural susceptibility… enlarged by experience;"[56] Pater suggests that the aesthete is uniquely discerning, and determined to develop his abilities.

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[54] Pater, Walter, "Preface," from Studies in the History of the Renaissance, reprinted in Literature and Culture at the *Fin de Siècle*, edited by Talia Schaffer. (New York: Pearson Education, 2007) xi,
[55] Bloom, 165.
[56] Pater, Marius the Epicurean Vol. II, 26.

Chapter 3

Deviancy and mimicry:

Against Nature and *Dorian Gray*

In my introduction, I noted that the aesthete is often defined as someone with a sensitivity to beauty. Kierkegaard's aesthetes have an extremely complicated relation to art; although they sometimes strive to give their lives the structure of artistic texts, they are not elevated by an experience of beauty or high art. Pater places the strongest emphasis on beauty, which he proposes as alternative standards of value in the wake of modern skepticism. According to Pater, art, rather than advancing a particular agenda or facilitating abstract thought, should intensify experience, by embodying classical ideals of beauty and timelessness. In this chapter, I find that "beauty" cannot adequately encompass the artistic sensibilities of later aesthetes. Rather, they recognize better than most that not all good art is beautiful. Nor do they respect the distinction between high art and sensual excitement, which Pater attempts to reinforce. High art and ornamentation, romantic ideals and practical consumption, are all unified in the mind of these aesthetes. They share the earlier

aesthetes' intellectual independence, which they apply very concretely to their taste in lifestyle and art.

The protagonist of Huysmans' *Against Nature*, a young man named Des Esseintes, goes farther than any other in removing himself from society. Des Esseintes cloisters himself in an estate outside of Paris, where he can avoid extravagant aristocrats, the drab bourgeois, and even the indulgences of bohemia. He refuses all social roles, explicitly distancing himself from the "dandy" and the "libertine."[1] Carefully manipulating his environment, he seeks the utmost intensity of sensation. Brief moments of intense insight illuminate his secluded existence, as he attempt to transcend all received ideals and aesthetic standards. Yet ultimately he succumbs to decadence and degeneracy.

Wilde's novel openly emulates *Against Nature*; through paradoxical wordplay, it effects the same double-negation of received categories of thought. Moreover, Wilde's protagonist models himself after Des Esseintes, adopting the same stance of consumption. Dorian is at once eminently original and hopelessly derivative; Wilde draws attention to this paradox as a central one for the aesthete.

Aesthetic consumption, in other words, can serve as the aesthete's primary method of identity-formation. Huysmans' and Wilde's fictional aesthetes are indeed obsessed with aesthetic effects. They conceive of the world in terms of style and taste, subsuming religious, ethical, and political considerations into the aesthetic. Their modes of aesthetic consumption structure their interactions with the social order.

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[1] Huysmans, Joris-Karl, Against Nature. (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), 6-7.

The degenerate estate: Des Esseintes and the aesthetics of double negation

In "An Aesthetic Midday Meal," an 1880 cartoon by the Englishman George Du Maurier, one of the cartoonist's "aesthetic young men" sits at a table in a restaurant, "lost in contemplation" of a lily in a glass of water. "Shall I bring you anything else, sir?" asks the waiter, to which the aesthete replies: "Thanks, no! I have all I require, and shall soon have done!"[2] As Ian Small notes in his book on the late nineteenth century literary field *Conditions for Criticism*, Du Maurier's cartoon satirizes practitioners of Aestheticism for their absurd fondness for visual beauty over all other aspects of life, even meals. Du Maurier targets the popular perception that aesthetes "bestowed" their praise "on an assorted and apparently quite random set of objects… for their alleged formal qualities and 'aesthetic perfection.'"[3] This set of objects famously included the lily, among other flowers. But the cartoon does not resolve whether or not this aesthete genuinely enjoys or merely feigns satisfaction with the flower. Is he pretentiously adopting the conventions of the movement of Aestheticism? Or is he genuinely drawn to this particular specimen? And is the appeal of the lily purely formal? Or might the aesthetics of the lily correspond to a set of social, political, and economic preferences?

To begin to answer these questions, we might turn to Huysmans' *Against Nature*, which helpfully spends considerable time tracing the horticultural preferences of its antihero Des Essenties. Huysmans began his career as a realist, whose novels were often compared to those of Émile Zola.[4] In 1884, he unexpectedly published

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[2] Du Maurier, George, "An Aesthetic Midday Meal," from *Punch* No. 79 (July 17, 1880), 23. Reprinted in: Small, Conditions for Criticism, 4.
[3] Small, 6.
[4] Mauldon, xxi.

Against Nature, which magnificently synthesized the darkest aspects of French Decadence. *Against Nature* traces the life of a particular figure, whose commitment to aesthetic experience guides his mentality and behavior. Huysmans' protagonist reflects the French interpretation of dandyism. Whereas in England the dandy was governed by very specific cultural expectations, in France the dandy became "an abstraction, a refinement of intellectual rebellion." According to Moers, the French dandy, inaugurated by Baudelaire, was the supreme loner, a figure who attempted to live outside of both traditional social structures and the mainstream of Bohemia.[5]

From the beginning of *Against Nature*, Des Esseintes attempts to live out this ideal of complete isolation. In addition to eschewing both the aristocracy and the middle class, he possesses intense suspicions about apparently like-minded individuals; he is convinced that he will never encounter "another intellect" as committed to "studious ineffectiveness."[6] Without any social affiliation, he retreats to a life of isolation in his estate outside of Paris. But Des Esseintes hardly manages to divest himself of all cultural baggage. He has a hyperawareness of the social resonances a symbolic object can accumulate. Even a "horticulturist's shop," for Des Esseintes, becomes "a microcosm in which all categories of society were represented." He does not judge a flower by isolating its formal characteristics; he imagines *who* might purchase it, and what kind of home it is fated to adorn:

> He did still feel a certain interest in, a certain pity for, plebeian flowers which are debilitated, in poor neighbourhoods, by the vapours from sewers and drains; but, by contrast, he detested flower arrangements designed to harmonize with the cream and gold drawing-rooms of the newly erected houses; and lastly, he set apart, for the unalloyed pleasures of his eyes, plants that were elegant, rare, and of exotic origin, preserved with cunning

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[5] Moers, 13.
[6] Huysmans, Joris-Karl, *Against Nature*. (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), p. 7.

> skill in artificial equatorial zones produced by the carefully measured warmth of stoves.[7]

Des Esseintes' opinions towards these various flowers reproduces his swift assessment of the French class system in the novel's Prologue. "Plebian" flora earn his sympathy, because he can romanticize the "provocative squalor of extreme poverty,"[8] which serves only to complement his patrician sensibility. In contrast, the "pretentious, conformist, stupid flowers" common in the homes of the bourgeois disgust him. He scorns these plants—particularly the rose—because they are cultivated "to harmonize" with the tastefully bland mansions "newly erected" by a recently ascendant class of uncultured industrialists.[9]

In opposition to insipid conformity, Des Esseintes prefers to "set apart" certain "rare" and "exotic" plants "of high lineage." If the "arrangements" of the middle class exhibit the classical characteristics of balance, grace, order, and stasis, these delicate specimens embody the aristocratic Baroque. They are flamboyant and exaggerated, and even hint at sexual transgression by delivering "unalloyed pleasure." Corporeal, precarious, and unstable, they must be cared for through an expensive artificial process that resists the middle class imperatives of convenience and convention. In fashioning himself as an aesthete, Des Esseintes emulates the French understanding of the dandy, who was "not middle-class and drab, not philistine and stupid, not buried in [a] tedious, undistinguished existence."[10]

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[7] Huysmans, 72.
[8] Huysmans, 8.
[9] Bourdieu, Pierre, The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field. (Stanford University Press, 1992), 48-49.
[10] Moers, 13.

Des Esseintes, however, quickly abandons this rather obvious species of extravagance. Even the glamorous orchid does not demand enough "discrimination." Still in Paris, Des Esseintes arrives at an even more unusual floral fetish: he learns to love fake flowers. While orchids retain a veneer of nobility, synthetic plants are more difficult to integrate into traditional tastes. They flirt with Camp, a sensibility which, as Susan Sontag notes in her classic essay, values "stylization," "theatricality," and "artifice." Until the second half of the twentieth century, Camp was always a marginal taste; Sontag calls it "a variant of sophistication but hardly identical with it," a phrase which aptly captures the deviant snobbery of *Against Nature's* peculiar protagonist.[11]

And yet while Camp is often deployed "when sincerity is not enough,"[12] Huysmans suggests that Des Esseintes' early tastes are sincere, rather than affected, a product of his paradoxically "natural inclination towards artifice."[13] Indeed, artificial flowers actually prove to be *too natural* a choice for Des Esseintes, a feature of his immature sensibility. At Faubourg, the same impulse that once drove him "to forsake the real flower for its replica" disrupts the very distinction between nature and artifice: "he now wanted real flowers that mimicked artificial ones." This requirement can be satisfied in several ways. Des Esseintes enjoys flowers that resemble man-made fabrics and mechanical objects, "starched calico" or "pieces of punched metal." The plants he finds most fulfilling, however, are those that resemble

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[11] Specifically, camp emerged from elite homosexual circles in the late 19th century; Sontag writes that camp draws on the "mostly unacknowledged truth" that "the most refined form of sexual attractiveness… consists in going against the grain of one's sex."
[12] Sontag, Susan, "Notes on 'Camp,'" from Against Interpretation and Other Essays. (New York: Picador, 2001), 275-77.
[13] Huysmans, 73.

wounded human flesh, "fake skin scored by artificial veins… as though eaten away by syphilis and leprosy:"

> Others were the bright pink of scars that are healing, or the brownish tint of scabs in the process of forming; others were blistering from cautery or puffing up from burns; still others revealed hairy skins pitted by ulcers and embossed with chancres; and then, finally, there were some which looked as though they were covered with dressings, plastered with black mercury ointment, with green unguents made from atropine, or sprinkled with the glittery-yellow dust of iodoform powder.[14]

Des Esseintes very often declines a refined or eccentric pleasure in favor of something much more uncomfortable. While we might expect a character obsessed with art and decoration to indulge in beautifully composed, appealingly hued paintings by Raphael or Watteau, Des Esseintes owns disquieting works by El Greco, Goya, and Jan Luyken, along with certain strange Symbolist canvases by Moreau. These artists share a fascination with bodies and torture, the monstrous and the bizarre: in short, with "the grotesque."

In his study of Rabelais, the Russian critic Mikhail M. Bakhtin writes that within the grotesque imagination, the body is never perfect or complete, but always "in the act of becoming… the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world." Through "convexities and orifices," and the processes of injury, penetration, and ingestion, "the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interrorientation."[15] Des Esseintes' flowers exemplify this tendency in that they resemble wounds, unwelcome openings of the self onto the environment (smearing one's body with unguents or dust in an effort to "heal" only further confuses the boundary between body and exterior). Fittingly, Des

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[14] Huysmans, 74.
[15] Bakhtin, Mikhail, "The Grotesque Image of the Body," from Rabelais and His World. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1968).

Esseintes' favorite plants are carnivorous "vegetable ghouls" like the Antilles Fly-Trap, which allow him to observe the processes of digestion and incorporation of "actual meat" through a gaping mouth.[16] Arguably even more than baroque or Camp sensibilities, the grotesque offers a stark contrast with the emphasis of classical aesthetics on wholeness, stasis, and beauty (and especially the idealization of the female nude). These flowers are not merely odd, but unthinkably reprehensible; the ravenous Nepenthes "transcends the acknowledge boundaries of eccentricity."[17]

The Decadent fascination with the grotesque departs from Dandyism and popular Aestheticism. The dandy scorns "instinctual reactions, passions, and enthusiasms."[18] Pater's relation to the grotesque is somewhat more complicated. In the "Conclusion," he praises beauty and art as refined pleasures; moreover, the bulk of *The History of the Renaissance* discusses classical icons of beauty. But there are hints, in *Marius the Epicurean*, of a more wide-ranging aesthetic. Marius' fascination with the Golden Book, as I wrote in the last chapter, suggests a more perverse sensibility. Des Esseintes takes this tendency to its absolute extreme; his favorite art works show stylized versions of injured bodies. In the world of Huysmans' novel, such a taste for the repellently weird represents the height of artistic sophistication, the favorite object of Des Esseintes' "clarified and corrected" judgment, free of the "impurities" of "received opinion."[19] Des Esseintes has moved far beyond taking in a lily for breakfast. If anything, he desires to subvert traditional aesthetic standards, including those that defined the dandy. Huysmans, according to Moers, drives the

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[16] Or vagina dentate; the flower morphs into a woman in Des Esseintes' dream later in the chapter.
[17] Huysmans, 74-76.
[18] Moers, 18.
[19] Huysmans, 72.

figure of the dandy "into negation;" "For Huysmans the man of the crowds became a complete solitary, the artist became a sterile sensualist, the convalescent relapsed into disease… There is nothing here left of dandism, except its rejection."[20]

But does Huysmans' protagonist, by fixating on the grotesque, actually manage to transcend received aesthetic categories? Or is Des Esseintes, as Max Nordau charged in his 1896 screed *Degeneration*, merely "an ordinary man with a *minus* sign," someone who mindlessly opposes dominant standards but is still determined by them? Certainly Des Esseintes is motivated at least in part by an urge to distinguish himself from the masses. As Nordau points out, Des Esseintes' love for Goya is tempered and diminished by the public's "universal admiration" for the Spanish artist.[21] But perhaps it is unfair to dismiss this outlook as superficial or pretentious. Rather, we might say that Des Esseintes exhibits an enviably profound—if maddening—sensitivity to the interrelations among the domains of domesticity, art, and philosophy. The flower shop may be exceptionally microcosmic, but for Des Esseintes every preference (and every purchase) has far-reaching ramifications.

Moreover, Des Esseintes, in his madness, seems to be aware of this impossible saturation of meaning, what Huysmans' translator Margaret Mauldon calls the "welter of cultural references."[22] Nordau's simplistic condemnation does not begin to account for Des Esseintes' startlingly nuanced meditation on mankind and nature, which goes far beyond an adolescent affection for ugliness. Surveying his menagerie, in which "not one [flower] appeared real," Des Esseintes remarks to

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[20] Moers, 303.
[21] Nordau, Max, Degeneration. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895), 309.
[22] Mauldon, Margaret, "Introduction," from Against Nature. (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), p. xxiv.

himself that "cloth, paper, porcelain, metal, seemed to have been lent by man to Nature to enable her to create her monstrosities:"

> …most of the time Nature is incapable of creating, all on her own, such noxious, degenerate species; she provides the raw material, the seed and the soil, the nurturing womb and the elements of the plant which man then grows, fashions, paints, sculpts as he chooses.
>
> …man is able to bring about in a few years a range of choice that slothful Nature can only produce after several centuries; unquestionably, as matters stand today, the only artists, the real artists, are the horticulturists.[23]

Humans have, over the course of a few decades of remarkable scientific achievement, managed to manipulate and to violate the natural world, to tame and pervert what was formerly wild and spontaneous. Des Esseintes insists that aesthetics should respond to this disruption. Romanticism and mimesis no longer supply sufficient aesthetic standards, when a plant itself can be the horrible product of human effort.

Huysmans also toys with another opposition: the competing claims of naturalism and beauty that dominated debate in the late 19th century Parisian art world. Interpreting public reactions to Manet's *Christ Mocked by the Soldiers*, in which Jesus is portrayed as an immediate, corporeal presence, vulnerable to humiliation, Claude Bazire wrote in 1884:

> People were fanatical about prettiness, and would have liked to see appealing faces on all the figures, victim and executioners alike. There is and always will be a group of people who need to have nature embellished and who will have nothing to do with art unless it is a lie… the Empire had idealized tastes and hated to see things as they are.[24]

For Bazire, art is either gritty or pretty, true or a lie. Embellishment serves only to beautify or idealize, masking an essential, more troubling reality. Huysmans, a former follower of Zola,[25] insists that artifice can be equally appalling (in response to

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[23] Huysmans, 79.
[24] E. Bazire. *Manet*. Paris, 1884, quoted in Bourdieu, 59.
[25] Mauldon, ix.

Bazire, he might insist that *Christ Mocked* is in fact quite artificial—that Manet, more so than any Romantic or Neoclassical artist, stressed the two-dimensionality of his canvases). *Against Nature* conflates the natural and the artificial, suggesting that they are equally capable of creating "monstrosities." In doing so, the novel does not so much reconcile the flamboyantly artificial and the consummately organic grotesque—competing alternatives to classical aesthetics—as entangle them.

Rather than merely *negating* traditional categories, then, Des Esseintes enacts what sociologist of art Pierre Bourdieu calls the "double rupture" of aestheticism. According to Bourdieu, late 19th century artists and writers shared—and were in fact defined by—a "concern to place situate themselves on a plane above ordinary alternatives." This impulse was primarily political; disillusioned with the failure of the 1848 revolution and the reactionary Second Empire, they rejected *both* political radicalism *and* the conformist establishment. But the rupture extended also to artistic matters. Des Esseintes fits rather neatly into this paradigm; he self-consciously defines himself as neither Bohemian nor aristocratic, neither Romantic nor Bourgeois. Indeed, the entirety of the Prologue, along with Des Esseintes' musings on the flower shop, closely follow Bourdieu's "formula" of aestheticism: "I detest X… but I detest just as much the opposite of X."[26] In this light, Des Esseintes' progression through a range of heterodox aesthetic modes—from the Baroque to Camp to the Grotesque—reflects a dissatisfaction not only with classical aesthetics, but also with traditional categories of nonconformity.

[26] Bourdieu, 79.

Materiality and mimicry: Lord Henry and Dorian Gray

As Bourdieu writes, the group of artists and writers who would "invent" the "purely aesthetic… impose an extraordinary discipline on themselves, one which is deliberately assumed against the facile options that their adversaries on all sides permit themselves..[27] This discipline aptly describes the verbal maneuverings of another famous fictional aesthete: the stylish wit Lord Henry Wotton, from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Lord Henry voices some of Wilde's most famous paradoxical epigrams, which, like Des Esseintes' meditations, pursue a way of thinking beyond "ordinary alternatives." Sometimes, these epigrams amount to little more than comical counterintuitive quips ("the ugly and the stupid have the best of it in this world"). Others acknowledge a suggestive discrepancy between private self-assessment and public estimations. Discussing the rewards of immoral behavior, Lord Henry comments, "the only things one never regrets are one's mistakes."[28] Occasionally, Lord Henry manages to reduce a boldly dissident sentiment to a few well-chosen words, as when he asserts that "conscience" is a synonym for "cowardice:" the "trade-name of the firm."[29] Such skillful puns challenge the expectation that social critique must be delivered with a straight face.[30] Lord Henry's most successful witticisms, however, manage to collapse two apparently contradictory linguistic categories. He exposes the hypocritical double-talk of English moralism, while exhibiting the structure of Bourdieu's double-negation;

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[27] Bourdieu, 77.
[28] Wilde, Oscar, The Picture of Dorian Gray. (New York: Tess Press, 1891), 5, 43.
[29] Wilde, 8.
[30] McCormack, 99.

paradoxes provide "the way of truth." As Lord Henry himself avers, "to test reality we must see it on a tight rope."[31]

Lord Henry's most characteristic paradox concerns the distinction between authenticity and artifice, particularly in regard to personal conduct. Lord Henry does not expect to be taken seriously. He does not even take himself seriously. His words are not meant to express inner convictions; his skepticism is all-encompassing, directed inward as much as towards society and language. Early in the novel, the artist Basil Hallward accuses Lord Henry of morality and, worse, sincerity, announcing, "your cynicism is merely a pose." Lord Henry does not dispute Basil, but counters, "being natural is simply a pose, and the most irritating pose I know."[32] Both cynicism *and* earnestness, in other words, are equally artificial; the appearance of acting "natural" is merely another mode of self-fashioning.

There is an unrealized potential for political conviction in Lord Henry's aestheticism. As Terry Eagleton notes, the man who "takes nothing seriously, cares only for form, appearance and pleasure, and is religiously devoted to his own self-gratification" might, in some ways, be considered "radical."[33] Certainly, Lord Henry resents liberal-capitalist purposefulness. He does not believe that labor, whether physical or intellectual, enhances life, but prizes leisure, uselessness, and belatedness. Rationality and precision, the principles that governs business and imperial endeavors, imply neither progress nor elevation. Lord Henry scorns "brute reason,"

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[31] Wilde, 41.
[32] Wilde, 6.
[33] Eagleton, Terry, "Saint Oscar," from The Eagleton Reader, edited by Stephen Regan. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 372.

and holds that "punctuality is the thief of time."[34] Money determines "price" but has nothing to do with "value." These nonconformist sentiments, of course, could just as easily be reaction as radical. Lord Henry's belief that modern life withholds "strangeness," "romance," and "mysterious or marvelous" experiences might suggest a nostalgia for religious orthodoxy and feudal courtliness.[35] In part because his own prejudices are so "politically double-edged,"[36] Lord Henry declines to adopt conservative, liberal or revolutionary perspectives. He finds all three camps equally guilty of tedium. Rather than propose changes, he is "quite content with philosophic contemplation;" To "approve" or "disapprove" of a policy or position, he declares, is an "absurd attitude."[37]

Of course, Lord Henry frequently lets his companions know what earns his disapproval. His most belabored target is undoubtedly marriage. His petty misogyny ("no woman is a genius") may be halfhearted. And he tolerates his own arrangement with his wife; his marriage, he rationalizes, enhances his privacy, by creating the necessity of "deception."[38] But like Johannes the Seducer, Lord Henry sincerely detests the *proposition* of infringement on his freedom. Marriage presents the ultimate challenge to endless reinvention, because it requires prolonged commitment:

> What they call their loyalty, and their fidelity, I call either the lethargy of custom or their lack of imagination. Faithfulness is to the emotional life what consistency is to the life of the intellect—simply a confession of failure. Faithfulness! I must analyse it some day. The passion for property is in it.[39]

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[34] Wilde, 42, 46.
[35] Wilde., 48, 6.
[36] Eagleton, 372.
[37] Wilde, 42, 76.
[38] Wilde, 49, 6.
[39] Wilde, 51.

Like Kierkegaard, Wilde uses sexual paradigms to discuss intellectual flexibility. He entertains the idea that matrimony is merely a mask for "lethargy" and "failure." The unimaginative Judge Wilhelm boasts of his faithfulness, but Lord Henry sees faithlessness as an emotional and intellectual asset. Like Pater, he despises intellectual consistency, which implies settlement and solidification. Faithfulness connotes ownership and stagnation.

Lord Henry will succeed in extending this attitude to Dorian, the naïve young man who, over the course of the book, becomes a worldly aesthete. At their first encounter, Lord Henry immediately impresses on Dorian the ephemerality of personal constitution. When Dorian protests that he does not want to be called "silly," Henry reassures Dorian that his life has changed:

> "And you know you have been a little silly, Mr. Gray, and that you don't really object to being reminded that you are extremely young."
> "I should have objected very strongly this morning, Lord Henry."
> "Ah! this morning! You have lived since then."[40]

Lord Henry's comment is not merely witty, but a kind of indoctrination. The aesthete changes his perspective from hour to hour, and refuses any obligations made in the morning when it is already past noon. Thus Lord Henry's "words spoken by chance, no doubt, and with willful paradox in them" manage to change Dorian, although he may already be vulnerable to such changes. Lord Henry resonates "some secret chord that had never been touched before" in Dorian; while this language may be one of the novel's covert references to sexuality, it also suggests that Dorian may have an untapped aesthetic orientation.[41]

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[40] Wilde, 30.
[41] Wilde, 21.

Appropriately, Dorian's crucial action after this encounter is to wish that he will never grow old, that he will never bear the evidence of his previous actions. The text, however, insists on a relation between material and ideal. Lord Henry sees a "harmony of soul and body," which European culture, through its myth of dualism, has attempting to erase, thus creating "a realism that is vulgar, an ideality that is void." Wilde, like Huysmans, presents material culture not as a purely earthly and superficial practice, but as a "bridge… between the physical and the ideal."[42] Lord Henry teaches Dorian that clothes, ornamentation, and art objects can reflect one's inner state of mind.

Fashion, in particular, appeals to Dorian. Trends in dress actually represent a privileged way to integrate the "fantastic" and the beautiful into an otherwise contemptible "modernity." Dorian carefully simulates historical costumes, such as Anne de Joyeuse for a costume ball. His outfits are so successful that other men begin to imitate *his* imitations. Yet Dorian's talent for appropriation, because it is tempered by a certain flippancy, is so exceptional as to be inimitable. Other young men onto whom he extends his "marked influence" can never quite "reproduce the accidental charm of his graceful, though to him only half-serious, fopperies."[43] To his social circle, Dorian represents the unprecedented "realization of a type," a combination of "the real culture of the scholar with all the grace and distinction and perfect manner of a citizen of the world."[44] Wilde identifies a need for a "type" between pedant and amateur, an aesthete figure who would combine rigorous intelligence and extensive knowledge with gentlemanly manners.

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[42] Waldrep, xii.
[43] Wilde, 134.
[44] Wilde, 133.

Dorian, however, is not content to be an "*arbiter elegantiarum*;" he hopes to fashion a "scheme of life," with "ordered principles."[45] He takes Lord Henry's skepticism seriously, and combines it with the inconstancy of fashion. Crucial in this effort is his encounter with *Against Nature*. Wilde never mentions Huysmans by name, yet the "poisonous book," introduced as "a novel without a plot and with only one character," is unmistakably *Against Nature* . Wilde calls the novel simply "the yellow book," an epithet which serves two functions. The lack of specificity makes the book seem like a magical talisman. On the other hand, the color yellow would indicate to Wilde's contemporaries that the novel was alarming, and probably French. Books from that country were routinely wrapped in yellow paper, to warn potential purchasers of their scandalous contents.[46]

What strikes Dorian most about *Against Nature* is its anachronisticity. In Wilde's reading, *Against Nature* offers a more extreme version of Lord Henry's struggle to resist modern crudity and tedium: Dorian describes the novel as "a psychological study of a certain young Parisian who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century but his own."[47] Dorian gleefully adopts Des Esseinte's mode of willful eccentricity and excess. For a time, he isolates himself in his own house. Decadence offers Dorian an alternative to Victorian mores, the "harsh uncomely Puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival." Dorian follows Des Esseintes in rejecting the pleasurable, comfortable, and polite, developing a taste for the

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[45] Wilde, 134.
[46] The term also became the title of a prominent journal of Aestheticism, founded in 1894, although there is some debate about whether the periodical took its name from *Dorian Gray*.
[47] Wilde, 128.

grotesque. Indeed, Dorian's aesthetic and mental experiments are almost entirely determined by the pages of *Against Nature*, which are imbued, in his mind, with the "heavy odour of incense."[48] Orientalism predictably permeates his aesthetic choices, but Catholicism also appears exotic. Dorian adores the church's elaborate "ecclesiastical vestments" and immersive rituals[49] (the reader might recall Des Esseintes' efforts to make his bed chamber feel like a monastic cell; similarly, Wilde himself, though raised Protestant, often flirted with Catholicism[50]).

Like Des Esseintes, Dorian is drawn more to the aesthetics of Catholicism than to its teachings; he finds materialist science to be more intellectually intriguing. He interprets Darwinism as an attempt to "trac[e] the thoughts and passions of men to some pearly cell in the brain." In a way, this contradiction betrays the extent to which Dorian is enamoured with Des Esseintes, who, in his view, combines "the romantic and scientific temperaments." He even goes so far as to mimics Des Esseintes' experiments in synaesthesia, seeking the "true relations" among odors, melodies, and psychological moods.[51]

Wilde enacts a similar transformation, suddenly mimicking Huysman's prose ("in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him"). Wilde explicitly calls attention to the unique style of the "Yellow Book," "full of *argot* and archaisms, of technical expressions, and of elaborate paraphrases." The first part of *Dorian Gray* consists predominately of dialogue. But in Chapter 11, the narrative voice grows more prominent, the ever-

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[48] Wilde, 137-139, 129.
[49] Wilde, 143, 136.
[50] Fortunato, Paul L., Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture in the Writings of Oscar Wilde. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 129.
[51] Wilde, 131, 137-38.

lengthening sentences and paragraphs become dense with allusions, and all dialogue is excised. Wilde, like Dorian, briefly abandons his own (carefully constructed) persona to indulge in self-conscious role play, generating "metaphors as monstrous as orchids."[52] Both Dorian and Wilde are engaged in a curious game of influence. Wilde self-consciously models his book after Huysmans' at the same time that Dorian models his life after Des Esseintes.

It is not enough to say that Dorian is influenced by Des Esseintes; he is influenced by Des Esseintes' very notion of influence, the idea that aesthetic consumption could dictate one's behavior, however many sacrifices this requires. Dorian comes to view "the wonderful young Parisian" as "a kind of prefiguring type of himself." The aesthete extracts himself from the family structures of normal life, only to place himself in a lineage of aesthetic precedents. Des Esseintes is an orphan, and distances himself from families. This corresponds to Huysmans' formal innovation; novels traditionally focused on the family, but he focused on one individual. Des Esseintes entered into a fraternity or genealogy of decadence and depravity.[53] Dorian, also an orphan, makes this impulse more explicit:

> one had ancestors in literature as well as in one's own race, nearer perhaps in type and temperament, many of them, and certainly with an influence of which one was more absolutely conscious. There were times when it appeared to Dorian Gray that the whole of history was merely the record of his own life… as his imagination had created it for him… The hero of the wonderful novel that had so influence his life had himself known this curious fancy.[54]

Dorian says of *Against Nature*, "the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it." Huysman's book itself becomes the object of the obsessive attention it describes. Dorian may be "the original of [Basil's]

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[52] Wilde, 128-29.
[53] Mauldon, xiv.
[54] Wilde, 148.

portrait,"[55] but Huysmans' masterwork rivals Basil's magical painting in shaping the young man's destiny.

Dorian's total commitment to certain artworks mirrors Wilde's own aesthetic borrowings. Just as Dorian "could not free himself from the influence of that book," Wilde was profoundly affected by the texts he encountered. In particular, he was indebted to Pater's writings. As I previously noted, the "Yellow Book" evokes not only *Against Nature* but also the "Golden Book" from *Marius the Epicurean*. Even Dorian's borrowings from Huysmans are inflected through Pater: mysticism, for example, is valuable because it "mak[es] common things strange," providing the intensification of experience desired in the "Conclusion."[56] *Dorian Gray* may be an Anglicized version of *Against Nature*, but it is also a sensationalistic re-imagining of *Marius the Epicurean*,

It is also an updated Faust; a masculine version of the novels of Ouida; a modern parable; and a nostalgic fairytale.[57] The novel's sources are countless; As one critic notes, "it is hard to say anything original about *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, largely because there is so little that is original in it."[58] Moers dismisses *Dorian Gray* as "an incoherent amalgam of three different books."[59] Recent scholars, however, have valued *Dorian Gray's* self-consciously derivative nature. Thomas calls Wilde's "refusal of originality" a "sign of his prescience concerning the critique of liberal humanism and romantic creative agency."[60] Wilde's aesthete is defined by his

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[55] Wilde, 31.
[56] Wilde, 131, 137, 129.
[57] Fortunato, 57.
[58] McCormack, 110.
[59] Moers, 302.
[60] Thomas, xii.

consumption of aesthetic modes, and a refusal, on the whole, to participate in their production; as Lord Henry confesses, "I am too fond of reading books to care to write them." The artist Basil comes off as a comparatively quaint, weak figure, rather than a Romantic genius; he is talented and his creations are stimulating, even magical, but he is a "perfectly uninteresting" conversationalist.[61] Wilde's aesthetes, in contrast, are exceptionally attuned to their thoughts, speech, actions, and desires, which they express through a strange connoisseurship of ideas.

Instead of manipulating his own experience of sensation, Dorian adopts, with sufficient ironic distance, foreign and archaic *ideas*: Dorian, no hedonist, never falls into an unreflective intemperance. He shuns both an "asceticism that deadens the senses" and "the vulgar profligacy that dulls them."[62]

> in his search for sensations that… possess that element of strangeness that is so essential to romance, he would often adopt certain modes of thought that he knew to be really alien to his nature… and then, having… caught their colour and satisfied his intellectual curiosity, leave them with that curious indifference that is not incompatible with a real ardour of temperament, and that, indeed, according to certain modern psychologists, is often a condition of it.[63]

Dorian knows how to entertain a combination of "indifference" and "ardour." He readily consumes ideas, cultures, and entire cosmologies, catching their "color" before moving on. Although he may possess an intrinsic "nature," in relation to which certain worldviews are either native or "alien," Dorian's real attitude is one of comprehensive amenability, tempered by knowing reserve. He enjoys an "extraordinary faculty of becoming absolutely absorbed for the moment in whatever he took up." Dorian's openness to irreconcilable beliefs, his mental flexibility or,

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[61] Wilde, 44, 58.
[62] Wilde, 135.
[63] Wilde, 136.

alternately, condescending superficiality. Dorian holds no stable convictions; he "never fell into the error of arresting his intellectual development by any formal acceptance of creed or system, or of mistaking, for a house in which to live, an inn that is but suitable for a sojourn of a night."[64] Dorian views life as an artistic project. His aim is never authenticity, but style.

But Dorian's aesthetic epiphanies and leave him conflicted, confused, and unstable. Dorian also meets a tragic fate. Absorbed in masks and ideas, he loses "the capacity to 'live' earnestly."[65] Wilde, like Kierkegaard, is wary of the disjointedness involved in intellectual promiscuity. Dorian's adoptions are only "means of forgetfulness," "modes" of "escape" from an overwhelming terror which eventually consumes him.[66]

Dorian's destruction, like many aspects of Wilde's work, cannot be taken entirely seriously. Like Kierkegaard, Dorian's aesthetes earn the reader's sympathy in spite of their shortcomings and misdeeds. In part, Dorian's destruction responds to the plot of Huysmans' novel; it would be inconsistent for Wilde to adopt Huysmans' obsessions and vocabularies without his dark perspective. Dorian's destruction could also be yielding to broader literary conventions; for a novel so concerned with life imitating art, it would also be inconsistent for Dorian's behavior to be rewarded. Dorian's destruction could be a concession to public expectations; since Dorian destroys himself, Wilde thwarts the accusation that he is glorifying bad behavior.

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[64] Wilde, 144-50.
[65] Fortunato, 125.
[66] Wilde, 133.

Dorian's downfall may not represent an organic result of aestheticism; Wilde later called Dorian's self-destruction "the only error in the book."[67]

Wilde also provides another clue that the aesthete may not always end in self destruction: while Dorian is destroyed, Lord Henry fairs much better. His playfulness is so ingrained that he appears incapable of the kind of tragic madness that plagues Dorian. Perhaps Dorian is an impressionable soul, too earnest for the risks the aesthete must take. Lord Henry is the true, willfully paradoxical aesthete, empty of essence and conviction.

Some critics have even suggested that the characters who best embody Wilde's aestheticism do not appear in his most famous work. Recently, Paul L. Fortunato proposed that Wilde's most exemplary and successful aesthetes are in fact women. Fortunato points to the *mondaine*, or woman of fashion, who expresses her identity through consumerism, while successfully shaping the surrounding culture.

Of course, this reading of consumerism as a feminist or radical enterprise is controversial. As Eagleton writes, "values such as pleasure, style and serenity are always politically double-edged… The line between a politically scandalous obsession with surfaces and a callow aestheticism the upper class could recognize as its own is always with him fascinatingly difficult to draw."[68] Many readers ignored the reservations expressed in Huysmans' and Wilde's novels, extracting their catalogues of rare and exquisite objects as prescriptive primers for connoisseurs.[69] But Wilde, like the *mondaine*, openly welcomed popularity in the mass market, and

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[67] Fortunato, 113.
[68] Eagleton, 372.
[69] Calloway, Stephen, "Wilde and the Dandyism of the Senses," from The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde, 47.

embraced effeminacy, concepts that were very much intertwined. Fortunato suggests that in some ways Wilde is more radical than the modernists, who often professed to reject feminine "charm." Wilde anticipates the postmodern reevaluation of gender, and the interactions of high and popular culture.[70]

[70] Fortunato, 144.

Conclusion

Even after a close examination of several exemplary aesthetes, I find it extremely difficult to provide a single definition of the category. Representations of the aesthete take on many different forms: thoughtful sensualist (Johannes); introspective skeptic (Marius); perverse invalid (Des Esseintes); subversive gentleman (Lord Henry); and mad connoisseur (Dorian). Any definition of the category must propose an inclusive definition of aesthetics, which leaves which leaves a place for deformity as well as pleasure and beauty. And it should avoid reducing the aesthete to a social role or an ethical misadventure.

In many ways, my project has been a very preliminary step. My focus has been at once excessively broad and embarrassingly specific. My survey of the entire nineteenth century suggests that the aesthete is a trans-historical figure; at the same time, I have been too selective in my choice of texts, and even in my emphasis on certain elements within each individual text. My project thus generates innumerable opportunities for enhancement and elaboration.

A first step would be to consider other works by each respective author. As I indicated in Chapter 1, *Either/Or* prepares the way for Kierkegaard's later writings on religion. Although Pater's "Conclusion" was effectively tacked on to *History of the Renaissance*, my analysis of that essay would be enriched by a comparison with that volume's art criticism. *Marius the Epicurean* is one of a series of "Imaginary

Portraits," which expand further on aesthetic response, and might help to illuminate the devices found in Pater's longest work. Huysmans' late novels follow a protagonist who resembles both Des Esseintes and Huysmans himself, and turns, like Kierkegaard, from aesthetics to religion. A survey of Wilde's prolific output would illuminate his comparatively less refined novel.

Scholars could then turn to the personal and intellectual biographies of of these writers, all of whom would probably qualify as aesthetes. Kierkegaard was notoriously effeminate and reserved; do his apparent sympathies for the aesthete stem from his own lived experience? Did his disdain for the ethical bourgeois lifestyle of the married man have any relation to his rumored homosexuality? How did he manage to pass beyond the aesthetic phase, into the theological? Similar questions arise with Pater. Did he follow the principles espoused in the "Conclusion?" Could *Marius* dramatize his own disappointments? Huysmans, like Kierkegaard, eventually turned to religion. It would be fruitful to follow his path from bourgeois realism to the height of decadence, and then into Catholic ritual. Wilde's life has already been exhaustively charted. But while scholars have catalogued the affinities between Wilde and Nietzsche, I know of no study that compares his intellectual development and personal biography to that of Kierkegaard.

One could then expand these debates to other historical aesthetes. Moers' directory of dandies would provide a good starting place: to what extend do Barbery D'Aurevilly, Baudelaire, and Brummel fit the profile of the aesthete? One could also pursue the classical precedents proposed by Kierkegaard, Pater, and Huysmans. Did stoicism always exclude libertinism? How did the Epicureans differ from the

Aesthetes? Do the Roman Decadents whom Des Esseintes so admires achieve the negations of aestheticism? Kenneth Daley's study of Romanticism in Pater's work suggests a further line of inquiry: are any of the Romantics aesthetes?

Another scholar might correct my most painful oversight: I have not written on any women aesthetes. Early in my project, I wondered why there were no prominent female aesthetes. I conjectured that many of the qualities associated with male aesthetes—inconstancy, an obsession with image, and a concern with material culture—would not be considered unexpected or remarkable in a woman, precisely because these are very qualities associated with femininity. The male aesthetes' ambivalence or open scorn towards women may reflect a desire to discourage such comparisons. Only recently have scholars questioned the idea that aesthetes must always be male. Talia Schaffer's 2000 study *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes* reminds scholars of the crucial contributions women made to British Aestheticism.[1] A future study could examine these women in light of the issues raised by male aesthetes. Furthermore, it might be productive to extend Schaffer's analysis to Continental and American writers. I'm thinking particularly of Edith Wharton's fictions of consumption, in which women are both empowered and persecuted by aesthetics and commodity culture.

Further studies could follow the aesthete into the twentieth century Modernism had a complicated relation to Aestheticism. Like the aesthete, many modernists sought to distance themselves from political and ethical entanglements. Their difficult works attempted to distill aesthetic form, recalling Pater's praise of "art for its own sake." Connoisseurs of modernism followed the aesthetes in

[1] Schaffer, Talia.

embracing the grotesque. On the other hand, modernists often professed a distaste for commercial popularity and a neo-Romantic obsession with originality.

The aesthete may be most relevant to our own era. The aesthetes were among the first to respond with their whole being to the most radical aspects of "modern thought:" atheism and antiessentialism; an aesthetic reaction against beauty and mimesis; a new flexibility of personal identity; and the weakening of traditional gender and family roles. All of these ideas and experiences are no longer marginal. Aesthetes also demonstrate the danger of careless manipulations, and dabbling halfheartedly in foreign belief systems. Finally, like the aesthetes, we surround ourselves with aesthetic texts, and sometimes draw no line between identity and consumption. The aesthete, despite his apparently radical ideas, is perfectly amenable to capitalism and consumerism. Future studies of the aesthete should recognize an opportunity to explore the rewards and costs of intellectual skepticism and aesthetic consumption.

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